

Rings, Kings, Saints and Toads

Protective and Healing Functions of Late Medieval Amulet Rings in England

In 1441, Margaret Paston was expecting her first child. Anxiously, she wrote to her husband John in London: 'I pray that you will wear the ring with the image of Saint Margaret that I sent you for a remembrance until you come home.'¹ In asking her husband to wear a ring emblazoned with the patron saint of childbirth to support her in her time of need (e.g. Fig. 1), Margaret Paston was engaging with a culture of healing and devotion in late medieval England that was centred around the amuletic use of rings.



(Fig. 1, a St Margaret ring which bears similarities to the Paston Ring, 15thc, British Museum, AF.910)

This use of rings was part of a wider practice of employing jewellery as amulets in medicine. Pendants, brooches, bracelets, diadems, belts and hair pins were emblazoned with holy figures, sacred inscriptions and precious stones, all of which conveyed the wearer's wealth and piety, but also afforded a variety of protective functions through expressing their devotion. Illness or misfortune was often linked to punishment and sin in the middle ages and adorning the body with holy words and images was considered an effective method of devotional healing. These accessories could provide a range of protections, such as shielding against plague, dampening fevers, staunching blood or even protecting from occult practices. However, to consider these amulets as simply products of folk beliefs and superstitions is to underestimate their position in late medieval medicine and devotion. The amuletic use of jewellery was generally accepted by ecclesiastical and medical authorities as a powerful form of healing. Names and images of saints and biblical figures as well as inscribed blessings

¹ *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Norman Davis, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I, p218, (my translation).

or prayers were considered as effective methods of protection that were acceptable to laypeople, physicians and the church.

Rings were the most popular form of apotropaic jewellery. Their small size and range in quality meant that they were available to a wider social stratum and the large number of extant rings provides evidence of their popularity. Rings as signifiers of romance and betrothal were becoming more prevalent, and the 'posy ring' (a gold ring with a romantic inscription) was a popular courtship gift. However, the craftsmanship and ornamental appearance of rings are almost impossible to separate from their amuletic functions. The power of the amulet ring is often directly connected to the medicinal use of precious stones. This tradition, formed in antiquity, was transmitted into the middle ages through lapidaries, texts that detailed the physical appearance and properties of precious stones. Certain stones were considered to possess intrinsic natural powers that could provide healing and protection for different ailments and misfortunes, depending on the stone. Sapphire, for instance, could protect against envy and witchcraft and was, therefore, often worn on the fingers of kings. Other stones could help with less grievous dangers. Amethyst was believed to help aid recovery from drunkenness or melancholy, while alabaster helped with pains in the foot and knee. There is documentary evidence of these healing jewels. For example, in 1542, the imprisoned Catherine Howard returned a ring, which was reported to be set with a powerful gem (probably a ruby) that prevented fits, to Henry VIII.

Toadstones were particularly popular materials for amulet rings. These stones were believed to be carried in the head of a toad, but were, in fact, lepidotes, or fossilised fish teeth. They were considered to be efficacious against kidney disease, preventing poisoning and protecting new-born infants. Surviving toadstone rings indicate their interaction with the wearer, such as a fine example from the British Museum (Fig. 2). The stone is open set, that is, the back of the bezel (the setting which holds the stone in place) is open. This allows the stone's beneficial properties to come into direct contact with the wearer's skin. Therefore, the ring was a conduit for the stone, allowing the wearer to avail of its healing qualities in the most potent and direct manner. The legacy of this practice can still be seen in the open-backed bezels of rings today.



(Fig. 2, Toadstone amulet ring, 16thc, found in Harwich, Essex. British Museum, 1858,0628.1)

Sometimes, we can see the workings of this open-back tradition through amulet rings which have lost their stones, as in the case of an unusual example from the British Museum (Fig. 3), which was dug up at Hatfield. Like Margaret Paston's St Margaret ring, this ring is also emblazoned with the figures of the Trinity, the Virgin and Child, St George and St Christopher, all of whom were powerful intercessors on the wearer's behalf. The ring also has an oval bezel with a pierced trefoil aperture for a precious stone that has long since been lost. Without the stone, it is possible to see how its material might have interacted with the wearer's skin – through the small pierced trefoil.



(Fig. 3, gold amulet ring, late 15thc, found in Hornsea, Yorkshire, British Museum, AF.1009)

This ring also has interior inscriptions, another feature found in some amulet rings. Like precious stones, these sacred words were activated through direct contact with the skin and were considered more potent because of this contact. The interior of the hoop is emblazoned with the words *Gut+got+hunuyu+ananizapta*. 'Ananizapata' is a common word found in amulet rings inscriptions. Probably of Babylonian derivation,² the original meaning of the word has not been definitively settled, but during the late middle ages it appears to have been perceived a holy name of God, associated with

² John Cherry, 'Healing Through Faith: The Continuation of Medieval Attitudes to Jewellery into the Renaissance', *Renaissance Studies*, 15.2 (2001), 154–71, p160.

Christ's resurrection and a powerful healing charm.³ It provided protection against a range of ailments, particularly epilepsy, plague and sudden death by poisoning. It is often found alongside the word 'Tetragrammaton', which is the oldest and most powerful coded reference to the four Hebrew letters that made up the name of God. The word is often presented in medieval prayers and charms as a nullifying factor – it dampens fevers, it helps arrows to be pulled out, it even settles quarrels. The pairing of these two terms created a powerful form of protection and was a popular formula emblazoned on some of England's most famous amulet jewellery, such as the Middleham Jewel.

The ananizapata tetragrammaton formula rarely appeared on the exterior of a ring and this practice of interior inscription conveyed a sense of intimacy and secrecy that was important in private devotion. Like a silent prayer, these rings contained a constant source of confidential blessing. This secret blessing is perhaps best demonstrated in a fifteenth-century ring in the Museum of London, found at London Bridge (Fig. 4). It is a thick gold ring, entirely plain on the outside. However, on there is an array of engraved figures on the interior of the hoop - St Thomas Becket in archbishop's robes, the Virgin and Child, the Holy Trinity, St Anne with the Virgin and St Antony with his T-shaped cross. The plainness of the ring offsets the cast of holy figures hidden in its confines. While these images were not actual relics of the saints, they evoked their images and could, therefore, convey the saints' inherent sacred qualities. The image of a saint worn on the body was not simply a reminder to inspire devotion; these were secondary relics.⁴ And like relics, to touch them was to avail of their power and intercession in the most direct and potent way.



(Fig. 4, gold amulet ring, 15thc, found at London Bridge, London, Museum of London, 83.514)

³ Peter Murray Jones and Lea T. Olsan, "Middleham Jewel: Ritual, Power, and Devotion", *Viator*, 31 (2000), 249–290, p262-8.

⁴ Peter Murray Jones, 'Amulets: Prescriptions and Surviving Objects from Late Medieval England', in *Beyond Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges: Essays in Honour of Brian Spencer*, by Sarah Blick (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), pp. 92–107, p93.

One of the most well-known of these popular iconographic amulet rings from late medieval England is the so-called Coventry Ring (Fig. 5). This impressive heavy gold ring, dating to the later years of the fifteenth century, was dug up near Coventry in 1802. It depicts Christ as the Man of Sorrows being resurrected from the tomb with the Instruments of the Passion behind him. Alongside this figure are the Five Wounds of Christ, which are described on the ring as 'The well of pitty, the well of merci, the well of confort, the well of gracy, the well of ewerlastingh lyffe.' The Five Wounds of Christ were considered to have powerful protective qualities, and a popular cult of devotion had grown around the iconography. The interior of the ring reads '*Wulnera quinq dei sunt medicina mei pia / crux et passio Cri sunt medicina michi jasper / melchior baltasar ananyzapta tetragrammaton*' ('The five wounds of God are my medicine, the holy cross and passion of Christ are my medicine, Caspar Melchior Baltazar ananyzapta tetragrammaton'). As with some of some of the rings discussed above, the Coventry Ring uses the anazipata tetragrammaton formula. It also displays the names of the Magi, or the Three Kings, a popular charm that guarded against various forms of sickness and found in many amulet rings. Alongside its elaborate programme of iconography, the Coventry ring is significant in that it explicitly announces its purpose as a 'medicine' for the wearer, both spiritually and physically.



(Fig. 5, the Coventry ring, late 15thc, found in Coventry, West Midlands, British Museum, AF.897)

Not all amulet rings were quite as elaborate as the Coventry Ring. Sometimes the sacred value of the amulet ring was not held in its inscriptions or materials, but the actions performed upon it. Cramp rings became popular in England between the reigns of Edward III (1308) and Mary I (1558). These rings could be made from gold, silver or even a cheap metal such as a surviving example from the Science Museum (Fig. 6). The objects were blessed by the reigning monarch and distributed every Good Friday after the veneration of the cross at the altar of the Chapel Royal in the Tower of London. Cramp rings were considered efficacious for a range of ailments including, predictably, cramps, as well

as childbirth and epilepsy. The sacred healing afforded by these rings was derived from the purported holiness of the 'royal touch', derived from the Holy Oil of the coronation.



(Fig. 6, iron cramp ring, dated between 1308 and 1558, England, Science Museum, A641034)

All these rings, from the grandest to the plainest, served as important objects in the late medieval imagination. As Peter Jones has pointed out, jewellery such as these amulet rings were multivalent;⁵ they could serve variety of purposes for the wearer. These objects were fashionable and valuable, expressing propriety and wealth. But they were also deeply personal, part of the individual experience of late medieval devotion that was rooted in a culture of healing and protection.

Further Reading:

Cherry, John, "Healing Through Faith: The Continuation of Medieval Attitudes to Jewellery into the Renaissance", *Renaissance Studies*, 15.2 (2001), 154–71

Davis, Norman, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I

Jones, Peter Murray, 'Amulets: Prescriptions and Surviving Objects from Late Medieval England', in *Beyond Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges: Essays in Honour of Brian Spencer*, by Sarah Blick (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), pp. 92–107

Jones, Peter Murray, and Lea T. Olsan, "Middleham Jewel: Ritual, Power, and Devotion", *Viator*, 31 (2000), 249–290

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⁵ Jones, p99.