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# For love, healing and protection

## Notes on Medieval finger rings with sapphires and other gemstones in Swedish collections

By Pia Bengtsson Melin

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Like clothing, jewellery is an indicator of taste, status and wealth. In the Middle Ages, the most common item of jewellery was the finger ring. These were often set with gems, which were in turn ascribed magical properties. Their powers, appearance and symbolic importance were described in a book genre called lapidaries. Finger rings are common in museum collections, but have attracted relatively little attention from art historians. The material presented in this paper is part of an art-historical project on the style, function and context of finger rings in Swedish collections, dating between 1250 and 1550.

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Rings are closely linked with magical power, and through history many myths, fairy tales and stories feature rings with magical or allegorical function. The idea of a ring that influences its bearer's fate is very old. Plato, for example, mentions the Ring of Gyges, which allowed the bearer to become invisible. Gyges, king of Lydia, obtained power and wealth by using the ring's magical ability. He seduced the queen, killed the king and assumed the throne for himself. Plato uses the story as a starting point in the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon about morality, justice and their opposites (Plato, *The Republic*, Book II). Do you behave differently if you need not care about the consequences of your actions? Gyges would have lived in the 7th century BC, and the story of how he seized power is told by Herodotus. Only in

Plato's Republic however does the ring appear as an object used for that purpose.

The theme of invisibility is also central to the Medieval romance about Duke Frederick of Normandy, of which only a Swedish translation survives. Here Duke Frederick receives an invisibility ring from the dwarf king Malnrit as thanks for helping the dwarves recover their kingdom (*Hertig Fredrik af Normandie* 1853, pp. 96–99). Aided by the ring, the Duke can sneak into a tower unseen and first seduce and then free his beloved Princess Floria. Nowadays, the most famous magic ring is probably the one in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Finger rings are common archaeological finds and have been found in all kinds of Medieval environment – town, countryside, castle and monas-

tery – indicating that they were worn by virtually all social classes. The rings come in many different designs and materials. Not only gold and silver are common but also bronze and copper. Many designs occur: plain ones, rings with images and inscriptions, or ones with settings of various materials. One such is gemstones. They were popular in all forms of jewellery and had a much wider use than today. Gemstones were not merely decorative elements of a ring, brooch or necklace, but also possessed a magical cachet. The sapphire, for example, was a symbol of loyalty and truth. It was also thought to be able to counteract poisoning and expose hidden toxins. Another precious stone highly regarded in the 14th century was the toadstone. These are actually the button-shaped fossil teeth of the ancient fish *Lepidotes*, but in the Middle Ages they were thought to come from the heads of living toads. What kind of magic suffused these stones and what purpose may they have fulfilled at court and elsewhere?

#### *A brief history of Medieval gemstones*

A gemstone is generally a colourful and translucent material (Schumann 1976, p. 10, 48). They are surrounded by mysticism and have often been ascribed magical properties. The Bible speaks of gemstones on several occasions, e.g. in Exodus 39:10–14, where the artfully woven breastplate of Aaron is fitted with twelve precious stones, including sapphire and ruby. Jewellery with polished stones was made in ancient Egypt, spread to other ancient civilisations and then followed the Romans further north. During the Middle Ages, decorative settings on jewellery and other items was common, including rings fitted with precious stones or polished pieces of glass. The mounted glass imitates gems and is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the real thing. For the common Medieval owner, issues of authenticity and material were less important. Their belief in the power and supposed magical properties of the stone was the central issue.

The use and choice of gemstones were not simply a matter of supply and economy. It was also restricted by regulations and sumptuary laws. Important in this context was the inherent magical and symbolic functions ascribed to the stones. And gemstones were regarded as both rarities

and economic resources. Precious stones and jewellery set with gems were included in royal collections. The French king Charles V the Wise (lived 1338–80) owned several rings mounted with gemstones such as rubies and diamonds of various forms and sizes, but also a large number of loose or non-mounted precious and semi-precious stones (Scarlsbrick 1993, p. 11). Another collector of gemstones and precious jewellery was his brother Jean, the Duke of Berry. He bought many of his gemstones from the reputable merchant Nicolace Pigace of Genoa, a city famous for its trade in gemstones and other luxuries (Cherry 1992, p. 22). Both the gemstones themselves and luxurious objects set with gems were popular gifts among the nobility and royalty throughout the Middle Ages.

Gemstones were mined in several parts of Europe including Germany, Britain and France. Throughout the Middle Ages they were also imported from the East. The main regions where gemstones were mined were India, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka, places also mentioned by Marco Polo. The stones came via trade routes to Aleppo and Constantinople and were carried on from there via Venice to southern Germany and then further north. During the Late Middle Ages, Bruges was an important centre for the processing and polishing of precious stones.

#### *Medieval aesthetics and lapidaries*

Gems were frequently used for both decorative and liturgical purposes from the Early Middle Ages on. Mounted on chalices, metal altar frontals, reliquaries and elaborate book covers, their ability to reflect and refract light in a variety of colours contributed to this use. Bright colours and light were essential parts of Medieval aesthetics (Tatarkiewicz 1970). Earthly things such as colourful stones could thus convey the glory of God to the beholder. Jewellery set with gems could also serve religious purposes, linked to the aforementioned Biblical use.

From the 12th century on rings set with stones became more common, due among other things to an increased interest in classical literature at this time. This included *lapidaries*, books on the appearance and characteristics of gem-



stones. They fuelled an interest in gemstone magic. The lapidaries were largely based on ancient writers, particularly Pliny the Elder whose great work *Naturalis Historia* (book 37) contains much information on minerals and their appearance and properties. Lapidaries saw wide use during the Middle Ages but were particularly popular at Western European courts. One of the most popular ones was *Liber de Lapidibus*, written by the archdeacon Marbodius of Rennes (c. 1035–1123). The book explained the appearance of the stones as well as their characteristics and magical properties. Before 1400 it was translated into several languages including French, Italian, and Danish. An important source on the Medieval Scandinavian use of gemstones is the lapidary of Peder Månsson, written in 1519 (Månsson 1913–15, pp. 457–498). It is based largely on Camillus Leonardi's *Speculum lapidum* from 1502, which is in turn based on Pliny. Månsson does not just characterise the stones, but also describes how to polish, mount and use them.

Cabochon was the most common cutting form in the Middle Ages and has remained so since. The stone's underside is flat, while the top is domed and smooth. They are usually round or oval in outline. Facet cutting occurs only on Late Medieval rings, as it was not technically feasible before. As for mountings, there were several technical solutions, and it was also believed to be important that the stone was fixed to the ring at the right time. Ideally this would follow astrological principles. If the stone was mounted when the influence of planets or stars was at its greatest, its magical power would improve (Kunz 1917, p. 291). The stone could be held by a clamped metal edge or vase-like containers of varying depth. The material could also be held by claws. These sometimes take the form of a bird's or beast's claw, or of an animal body where the head and front legs form the bezel. These animal heads or claws were a survival from Viking Period jewellery and occur mainly on rings from the 13th century, although later ones do occur.

A gold ring from Östergötland with a cabochon sapphire (fig. 1; SHM 23651) has a mounting with shoulders shaped like dragon heads and should from my understanding of the design date from around 1300. Claws are especially suitable



Fig. 1. Gold ring with cabochon sapphire from Östergötland. SHM 23651. Photo: Ulf Bruxe, SHM.

when the stone is large or irregular in shape, which is common for both cabochons and raw stones. Sometimes combinations of mounting were used. The stone may be mounted with a metal edge, but retained in the latter by claws. A ring (SHM 2802) from Tjällmo parish in Östergötland is a good example of this. The ring has a combined mounting, where the shoulders turn into animal heads from whose mouths a tongue-like sleeve unites with a red stone, probably a ruby, held in place by four claws.

#### *Rings with sapphires*

The sapphire was one of the most popular gemstones during the Middle Ages. Its name probably originates from Sanskrit *sauriratna*, which means “consecrated to Saturn” (Bank 1970, p. 18). Sapphires were imported from Sri Lanka, as mentioned by Marco Polo. They consist of the mineral corundum, which is colourless when pure. Sapphires can have different colours but the most common one is blue. What colour a sapphire gets depends on what impurities are included (Schumann 1976, p. 102). The blue colour comes from iron and titanium, and the most coveted colour of sapphires is the cornflower blue. This stone was long considered magical and several rings with it are preserved from Sweden and abroad.

A 13th century ring found in Visby (fig. 2; Arwidsson 1950, p. 28; Tegnér 1996, p. 484) carries a cabochon cut sapphire and the Latin inscription *DICOR : SAFIRUS : VINCIT : VIRTUS : MEA : UIRUS : OPTO : TUUS : DICI : BIA(NU-*



Fig. 2. Gold ring with sapphire from Visby, Gotland. Gotland County Museum C9605. Photo: author.

*LUS?*) : *QVI* : *FUERAM* : *LODOVICI* – “I am called sapphire. My task is to conquer poison. I will be called yours. Once I was the ring of Louis.” From the inscription we learn one of the magical properties that a sapphire was believed to possess, to counteract and prevent poisoning. Symbolically, the sapphire was associated with truth, sincerity and faithfulness, characteristics that made it attractive for betrothal rings. A sapphire ring from Konungsund in Östergötland (SHM 6466) has the inscription *PAX POSSESORI*, “Peace to the owner”, engraved on the outside. This speaks directly to the stone’s protective power.

The ring from Visby holds a large sapphire and the ring itself is heavy. Such a precious ring cannot have been worn by just anyone. The goldsmith’s work however is not technically advanced, and the lettering is clumsy in parts. Greta Arwidsson (1950, p. 29) discussed who Ludovicus may have been, but felt that it would probably remain a mystery. She mentioned, however, a Brother Ludovicus who appears in the Visby Franciscans’ necrologium. It says that Ludovicus was *gardianus* and that he probably died about 1325 (Lindström 1895, p. 327). A *gardianus* was the director of the convent and thus a person of high rank. He would have had the same right to wear



Fig. 3. Gold filigree prelate ring from Svärta parish, Södermanland. SHM 18461. Photo: Ulf Bruxe, SHM.

such insignia as bishops and abbots. A gold ring set with a gemstone usually belonged to the insignia of a prelate (Stolt 1964, p. 23). On a stylistic basis, the ring can be dated to the late 13th century. One possible scenario is that the ring was made for Ludovicus to be used by him and to be inherited by subsequent guardians. This might explain the inscription. The ring once belonged to Ludovicus, but now shows its loyalty toward his successors.

The Swedish material contains several rings set with sapphires. The aforementioned SHM 23651 was found somewhere in Östergötland province and purchased by the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm from an antique dealer in 1946. It has a large cabochon sapphire. Interestingly, the stone is pierced, which suggests that its use here is secondary. Olle Källström (1947, p. 334) suggested that the sapphire may have been part of a Byzantine or Oriental type necklace with stones of various sizes hanging from thin links. Secondary use of gem stones was common in Western European goldsmith’s work, and many sapphires used between the 7th and 12th centuries in Europe are likely to be reused Byzantine pieces (Ogden 2006, p. 144). For example, a ring that belonged to the Archbishop of Canterbury during the 1360s, Wil-

liam Wytlessey, and was found in his grave, has a sapphire pierced in a similar way (Ogden 2006, p. 147).

Sapphires often occur on rings belonging to bishops and other clergy, which can be linked to the magical and protective properties they were believed to possess. The sapphire's ability to promote its bearer's chastity and piety was common knowledge during the Middle Ages. The link between the sapphire and the clergy ring thus has an obvious explanation. Sapphires were also believed to be able to change colour if their carrier were to behave sinfully or unchastely or lacked in faith (Ogden 2006, p. 146). The precious stone on their finger was thus a public guarantee and proof that the wearer lived as he taught and had nothing to hide. The stone could furthermore be used to bolster intelligence. According to Hildegard of Bingen, an unintelligent person who wanted to become clever should frequently lick a sapphire. The power of the stone combined with the moisture from the saliva would then affect one's intelligence in a positive manner (Schumann 1976, p. 287).

The Swedish History Museum holds a few rings interpreted as prelate rings (Andersson 1959, p. 266), including one from Svärta parish in Södermanland (fig. 3; SHM 18461) and one from Gandarve in Vänge, Gotland (SHM 3373). The rings thus classified have in common that they are large, of high quality and fitted with gems, almost always sapphires and/or rubies. Carl af Ugglas interpreted the Svärta ring as a piece of Swedish goldsmith's work from the mid-13th century (af Ugglas 1933, p. 46). The ring is made of gold and decorated with filigree. Several of the sapphires that were presumably once set on the ring are now gone. The ring from Gandarve, dating from about the same time, is made in similar techniques, and is set with both sapphires and rubies.

#### *Rings with rubies*

Like the sapphire, the ruby belongs to the corundum family, but instead of titanium and iron, it contains chromium that gives it a red colour (Schumann 1976, p. 98). The word comes from Latin *ruber*, meaning red. In ancient times, rubies were often referred to as carbuncles. The ruby has traditionally been seen as symbolically valuable, and



Fig. 4. Gold ring with ruby from Amunde in Burs, Gotland. SHM 2485:10. Photo: Christer Åhlén, SHM.

considered the noblest and most valuable of the twelve gemstones that God created. In the Middle Ages they were regarded as generally salubrious, but they were also believed to curb lust (Campbell 2009, p. 96). This is probably one of the reasons why rubies were considered suitable in both betrothal rings and prelate rings. They were rare and expensive. In William Langland's (c. 1330–93) poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, a personification of wealth named Lady Meed is adorned with "Rings also with rubies and rich things many" (Langland 1959, Passus III, p. 19). This suggests that rubies were considered a sign of luxury and wealth. A ring set with rubies (fig. 4; SHM 2485:10) formed part of a hoard from Amunde in Burs parish on Gotland. The type was common on Gotland in the early 14th century: a ring with rectangular shoulders and a square bezel with high, slanted sides decorated with palmettos. Mounted in this is an oval ruby.

#### *Toadstones: myth, fact and use*

During the Middle Ages many gems and minerals were not only thought to have magical properties, but were also ascribed a magical origin. One of the most fabled stones was the toadstone, also known as bufonite. These shimmery brown,





Fig. 5. Extracting a toadstone. Woodcut from the *Hortus Sanitatis*, “The Garden of Health”, published in German 1485 and later in Latin in several editions. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

button-shaped objects are actually fossil of teeth from the extinct prehistoric fish *Lepidotes* (Campbell 2003, p. 13). The Victoria and Albert Museum and British Museum in London hold a few rings mounted with toadstones. Most date from the Late Middle Ages or the Renaissance.

The earliest mention of toadstones is to my knowledge in Pliny’s aforementioned *Naturalis Historia* (book 37, chapter 55), where he calls them *batrachites*, “frog stones”. Today, however, that word denotes a different type of fossil. Both the colour and shape of a toadstone can recall the appearance of a frog or a toad. The stones were considered to have magical properties and to act as a cure and relief for numerous ailments and diseases including kidney problems, dropsy, intestinal disorders, epilepsy, fever and all kinds of wounds (Scarisbrick & Henry 2003, p. 27; Campbell 2009, p. 13). They were also believed to relieve labour pains and insect bites. A common belief during the Middle Ages was that toadstones grew in the heads of old toads.

In Johannes de Cuba’s botanical work *Hortus Sanitatis*, a handbook on herbs, animals and stones published in 1498, he describes how to get the coveted stone from the toad’s head (fig. 5). The trick was to put the captured toad on a piece of red woollen fabric. At the sight of the red fabric the animal would become excited and distracted, and then voluntarily throw up the stone. Since the clever toad would quickly swallow it again, you had to have a secret hole in the fabric where the stone could fall through. If the stone then fell into a container of water, the toad would not dare to take the stone back. If this method did not succeed, one could instead bury the toad alive in a pit with some ants. The ants would eat the toad, but leave the bones and stone. It was important that the toad give away the stone while it was still alive. If the toad was dead, the stone was considered to be without power and useless. The belief that the stones lost their magical properties if the animal died was common to many magical things captured from animals. Pliny, for instance, mentions

the magical draconite. If you cut the head off a sleeping snake, a substance in its head would turn into a gemstone. However, it was important to act fast, because if the snake woke up during the beheading it would understand right away what was going on and use its remaining powers to counter the transformation (*Naturalis Historia*, book 37, chapter 57).

Toadstones were also believed to protect the bearer from poison and to warn against poisoning. When the stone came near toxic matter it was commonly believed that it could change colour and possibly heat up (Kunz 1917, p. 341; Kennedy 1976, p. 42). And as noted, the notion that toadstones could neutralize toxins made them useful as a protection against insect stings. In the early 20th century, Scottish farmers still rubbed their cows with small brown stones to protect them from insect stings in a manner that was clearly Medieval. These were probably not toadstones, just ordinary pebbles that by colour and appearance could be associated with the rare fossils, and were because of this considered magical.

The toad itself was also of great interest to Early Modern physicians. Dried and pulverized toads tucked into amulets were regarded as effective against the bubonic plague (Baldwin 1993, p. 227). Several examples of this are known from the 17th century, but there are also many indications of the custom being current already in the Middle Ages. The reason was probably the toad's warty skin, resembling the scarred appearance of plague survivors. This is an example of the old belief that anything can be cured with the help of something similar in nature or appearance. Toadstones are frequently mentioned in Renaissance literature, including Ben Jonson's *Volpone The Fox* and William Shakespeare's *As you like it*.

#### *A Swedish toadstone ring?*

At least one toadstone is mentioned in the written Swedish sources from the Middle Ages. The inventory written for the Swedish King Magnus Eriksson's treasury at Bohus in 1346 mentions a golden finger ring with a toadstone. *Item vnum annulum aureum cum uno paddosten* (DS 3484). That King Magnus kept a ring with a toadstone is not particularly surprising, since his reign was turbulent and he was periodically contested as ruler.



Fig. 6. Gold ring with possible toadstone from Kalmar, Småland. SHM 15176. Photo: Ulf Bruxe, SHM.

Financial crises were the rule rather than the exception. For instance, the redemption of Scania required large loans from the Church and in addition pledges of several castles and counties, including Kalmar, which was strategically important. This in turn meant that the Crown no longer earned the same income as before from these lands.

Magnus's relationship with the Privy Council and aristocracy were periodically also very poor, and it was not improved by the sons he appointed as successors: Erik in Sweden and Håkan in Norway. One of Magnus's sharpest critics was St. Bridget. During the 1340s the king made several attempts to improve relations with the aristocracy. For example, he apologised in a public letter for the extra taxes that he had collected. The turbulent developments around King Magnus would have been a constant threat and he very likely lived in permanent fear of being poisoned or killed. Wearing a toadstone ring could be a way to seek magical protection from enemies.

No rings with certainly identified toadstones are preserved in Swedish collections. However, there is one possible candidate from Kalmar (fig. 6; SHM 15176). This gold ring dates from 1250–1300 and has a large brown speckled stone that has to date not been examined by a gemmologist. But even if it is not a real toadstone it may still very well have been seen as one. Stones that were



not of the right kind, but looked like them, were used and considered to possess similar properties as the genuine article. As so often during the Middle Ages, it was the visual approach and the belief in the object's power that was important, not what material it actually consisted of.

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### Summary

Jewellery is probably the most personal of all the decorative arts and has several levels of importance and value: monetary, fashionable and, probably most of all, emotional and symbolical value. Like clothing, it is an indicator of the wearer's taste, social status and wealth. In the Middle Ages, the most common item of jewellery was the finger ring. These were often set with various gems, which were ascribed magical properties. Sapphires and rubies were popular and regarded as particularly powerful, as they were mentioned in the Bible. Both gems were used in jewellery of

great symbolic value, like prelate rings and betrothal rings. The toadstone is less known, but was afforded great importance during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance because of its supposed ability to detect poison. A finger ring with a toadstone was owned by the Swedish king Magnus Eriksson and probably used as a protective amulet. Another ring, found in Kalmar and kept in the collections of the Museum of Swedish History in Stockholm, may be such a toadstone ring or at least have been used as one.