

Ring Money – Fact or Fiction?

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For many years the Seaby Standard Catalogue of British Coins commenced with example of 'Celtic Ring Money', which are pennanular gold rings of either plain, banded or twisted form and generally around 25mm or so in diameter. The idea that such objects had a numismatic function has been around for a long time, but without any basis of fact. Van Arsdell suggested that they were multi-functional (Van Arsdell 1989, 2) but he then went on to list them as numismatic objects (ibid. 61-2). Modern research now attributes them to the Bronze Age rather than the Iron Age and whilst, as with any object with an intrinsic value, they may have been traded, their actual function is most likely to have been decorative rather than numismatic. However, the idea that they served a numismatic purpose still persists and if one inputs the words 'Celtic ring money' into an Internet search engine, one gets many 'hits' relating to a range of annular objects variously described as having a numismatic function. If one inputs the same into the French e-bay site ('rouelles gau-loise') an even greater range of diverse annular objects appear in a variety of materials and forms, all purporting to be numismatic and often priced quite steeply! So how might one explain these objects and did any of them actually have a monetary function?

Starting with the gold pennanular rings (01 & 02), these are Bronze Age and probably had a decorative function. The copper-alloy rings being sold as 'ring money' (03 & 04) are for the most part functional and served as linking rings or suspension rings for various types of object, on occasion being found *in situ* as part of a suspension fitting etc.. Many flat-section rings occur as metal detecting finds (05) and probably served as securing rings for tarpaulins or curtains (e.g. Egan 1998, 62). Most are late or post-medieval in date. This only leaves a body of rings that are either round with side projections (06 & 07) or wheel-like with spokes (08). These last two types of object rarely occur in Britain, but are common in France and have been found in the excavations of Iron Age sites (e.g. Piette & Depeyrot 2008). The ones with side knobs are very similar to spindle whorls of both ancient and medieval date and no doubt some spindle whorls are sold as 'rouelles'. As these types sometimes occur in the same contexts as wheel-like rings, it points

more to some form of ritual object used for votive deposit. Many of the wheel-like ones are cast in strips in the same alloy as the 'potin' coins of the period and on occasion look very coin-like if the casting excess is not removed (9). Some of the wheel-like objects are almost certainly just that - representations of wheels, such as this copper-alloy example (10).

So to conclude, in the absence of any evidence to support a numismatic purpose, the most likely explanation for most of these artefacts must yet again be the much-used one of 'ritual object'. Wheels had a clear and significant cultic function in western European Iron-Age society (e.g. Green 1984) and the nature of the contexts in which they have been excavated supports this, as well as occurring as random single finds. However, it is very unlikely that any such considerations will prevent coin dealers from continuing to sell annular objects as 'ring money', as so much has already been invested in the notion, but few numismatists today give any serious credence to the existence of such a coinage.



References

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