

THE LORD OF THE RING

A Facies Christi Finger Ring from the Crusade Period Cemetery in Taskula, Turku Parish

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a finger ring that was “found again” by the writer. Originally the ring was found almost 80 years ago in the archaeological excavations of the Taskula Iron Age cemetery in Turku parish. The nine-faceted ring with nine picture frames was found in a male grave that was dated after 1135 AD by means of a silver coin. Two frames contain the face of Christ surrounded by a nimbus. The face of Christ portrayed in rings can usually be found in medieval so-called vernicle rings. However, vernicle rings are of a different form than the Taskula ring.

The Taskula inhumation cemetery probably belonged to a village or a single household. Coins from the graves date it mainly to the 11th and 12th centuries.¹ It is located on the west side of the Vähäjoki River, 900 m northwest of the confluence of the Aurajoki and Vähäjoki Rivers. Both the 13th century bishopric of Koroinen and the medieval parish church of Maaria are located less than 1 km away. The Turku cathedral is located about 2 km downstream (Fig. 1).

The cemetery was discovered in May 1938 by workmen digging a sewer ditch across the yard of the chaplain’s house. A total of 20 inhumation graves, one of them possibly a double burial, were excavated the same year.² Most of the graves were oriented from east to west in a parallel line from south to north. Nearly all had coffins made of planks. Graves containing mainly dress ornaments were interpreted as female, whereas graves containing also weapons and tools were interpreted as male. Up to four male burials contained a cross or crucifix pendant of silver and two burials contained a bronze bowl at the foot of the grave.

The custom of burying the dead with grave goods continued in Turku parish into the beginning of the 13th century.³ In Taskula, graves still con-

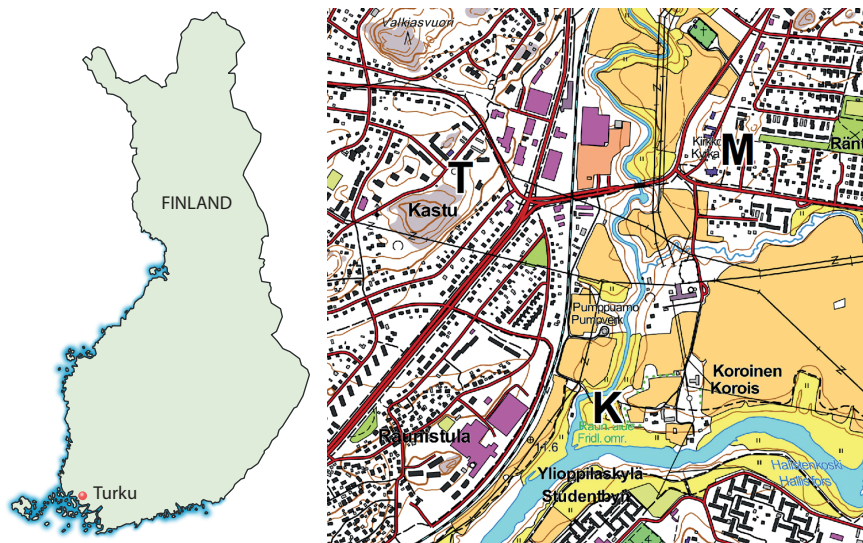


Figure 1. The location of Turku, Taskula cemetery (T), Maaria church (M) and Koroinen bishopric (K).

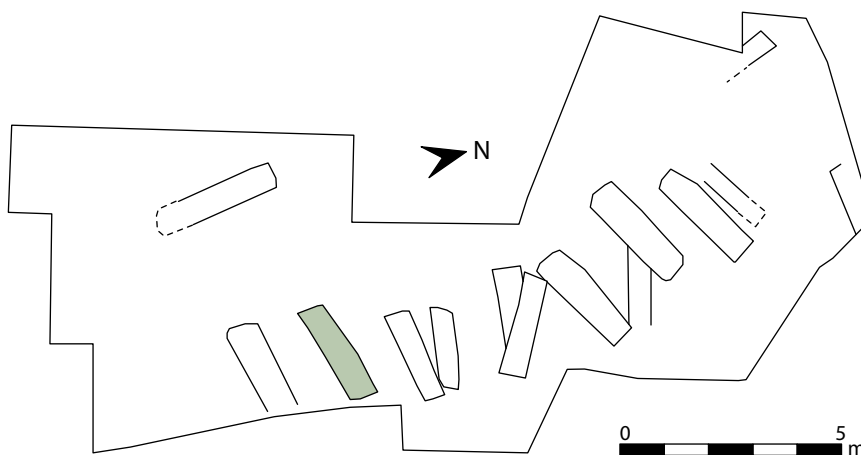


Figure 2. Taskula cemetery. The grave with the ring has been darkened. Drawing by T. Vasko after N. Cleve 1938.

tained weapons and tools, while contemporary graves in the cemeteries of Raisio Ihala and Lieto Ristinpelto contained at most garment items or other personal objects like an ornament or a knife. On the other hand, in Taskula graves were also dug on top of each other like in Ristinpelto and Ihala.⁴ This may indicate that the cemetery was fenced. In addition to fences, also ditches were used to define the area of early Christian burial grounds.⁵

THE MAN AND THE RING

Grave number 5 contained a rectangular coffin made of planks (Fig. 2). The grave has been interpreted as a male grave based on its artefacts. The deceased had a leather belt in Gotlandic style with animal fittings, a knife with silver thread on the handle, four weights, bridle bits, a padlock, and a key. Also silver coins were found near the waistline: one German (tpq 1056-84) and one English (tpq 1135-54) coin. A fragmented silver finger ring was found at the western end of the grave, (THM 13150:29). The ring was found near the chest of the deceased, and therefore it can be assumed that at least one hand had been lying on the chest. Even though the ring has been published earlier, it was only partially described, since only five motifs had been detected on the ring. This article shows that there are actually more motifs to be found on the ring.⁶

The outer hoop of the ring is flat and has nine facets (Fig. 3). The ring is round on the inside. The width in the middle is 8 mm and in the rear 7 mm, and the diameter is 22 mm. Each facet of the hoop has an engraved figure inside the frame. The figures are engraved in outline, and the lines are filled with what may be niello (the precise analysis of the materials is forthcoming). The polygonal shape of the hoop resembles the seven-, eight-, and nine-faceted silver or gold rings with magical inscriptions also found in Scandinavia. These so-called *thebal* rings bear the text THEBALGUTGUTTANI, the meaning of which is unknown. These rings are dated from the end of the 11th century to the 12th century.⁷ Rings with religious pictures and sentences were common in the Byzantine Empire, but the peak of their popularity was in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁸ The polygonal shape and division of the hoop into frames are also typical features of Byzantine rings⁹, as well as the use of niello.¹⁰ The Gundslevmagle hoard from Denmark included a nine-faceted *thebal* ring together with a Byzantine reliquary cross.¹¹



Figure 3. The silver finger ring from Taskula. The drawing below shows the frames on the hoop. Photo and drawing by Tiina Vasko.



Figure 4. Face of Christ in frames 4 and 5. Photo and drawing by Tiina Vasko.

A microscopic survey of the figures in the widest part of the hoop reveals that they represent two human faces (Fig. 4., frames 4 and 5). The faces are arranged lengthwise in the middle of the hoop, crowns against each other, looking both ways. The eyes are large and almond-shaped and the nose is strongly shaped. The figure has also a beard. A nimbus with three rays reveals that the face belongs to Christ.

The Byzantine Mandyliion tradition pictured Christ's suffering face on shrouds already in the 3rd century AD. A picture deriving from this same tradition is also known closer to Finland, namely from Gotland. A Mandyliion picture probably made by a Russian or Byzantine mural painter in the Garda Church dates from the end of the 12th century.¹² In Western tradition, this motif is based on the vernicle or the representation of the suffering face of Christ impressed upon the veil of St. Veronica. The first legends of St. Veronica were written at the end of the 12th century. In the Nordic countries, the legend of St. Veronica was well known by the 15th century. The Corpus Christi tradition had a significant position in the devotional life of medieval Finland.¹³

The face of Christ in the Taskula ring is of the same type as that in the broadly dispersed so-called vernicle rings (Fig. 5). On the other hand, it has the same kind of features as the Scandinavian face and mask pendants from the 10th century (Fig. 6).¹⁴ Seven vernicle rings are known from Finland so far: two each from Ulvila and Keminmaa and one each from Eura, Köyliö, and Turku. A bezel of a vernicle ring was found in Espoo in 2012.¹⁵ However, the form of vernicle rings is completely different than that of the Taskula ring. Silver and gold vernicle rings have a round hoop with a circular collet. The vernicle was engraved on a disc that was then mounted on the collet. The vernicle from Valmariniemi in Keminmaa (grave 77) is an exception that seems

to have been cast as one piece.¹⁶ In Scandinavia, vernicle rings date to the 13th century, but in Finland, the oldest rings with the motif are from the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries.¹⁷

MAGIC IN NUMBERS AND NETS

The number nine in the Taskula ring (nine facets) probably indicates numeral magic as part of Christianity: the holy trinity, the three magi and the resurrection of Christ on the third day. The names of the three magi, CASPAR MELCHIOR BALTHAZAR, have been found inside the hoop of some vernicle rings in Scandinavia.¹⁸ In folklore, the face of Christ was thought to protect against accidents and to stop the flow of blood.¹⁹

The net figures in five facets are at the same time both crosses and nets. These nets are rooted in Christian symbolism. In the New Testament, in the gospel of Matthew, heaven is compared to a fishnet and people to fish.²⁰ In the gospel of Mark, the disciples were seen as fishermen fishing for people.²¹ St. Peter with his fishnet is depicted on the so-called Ring of the Fisherman (*Anulus Piscatoris*), which is given to the Pope on his annunciation.²² Another ring type known to feature nets is the so-called Sarvas type, which has a net figure as one of the motifs on the bezel. However, these rings date as late as the end of the 16th century.²³

In the nets, there are two kinds of crosses. A finger ring with a cross formed by a rhombus (Fig. 3., frames 2 and 7) is also known from a male grave in the Köyliönsaari C cemetery and from the Vilusenharju cemetery in Tampere as a stray find.²⁴ The nets inside frames 1 and 8 form a Celtic cross with a



Figure 5. Vernicle ring from Ulvila Isokartano. Picture by Pentti Pere, Satakunta Museum.



Figure 6. Mask pendant. Trelleborg, Sweden. Outline drawing by Tiina Vasko

ring in the middle behind the cross. The cross in frame 9 is also formed by a rhombus-shaped cross with curling side bars. On two of the facets, on both sides of the faces of Christ, there are unrecognizable figures (Fig. 3., frames 3 and 6). The last-mentioned looks like a bird. If so, it could be a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

THOUGHTS

The polygonal shape of the ring, the pictures on the facets, and the possible use of niello seem to point to the Byzantine world. On the other hand, the ring has similarities with Viking Age pictures representing Man. In Scandinavia, the face of Christ is depicted much later on rings. So far, the origin of the ring remains a mystery, because it remains unique. As a symbol of Christian faith, the ring is equal to the four cross and crucifix pendants found in other male graves from Taskula. According to Jörn Staecker, a Swedish archaeologist specializing in crosses, we can interpret cross pendants as Christian symbols or syncretistic amulets, but not as ornaments completely without symbolic meaning.²⁵ This also stands for the ring found at Taskula. The faces in the hoop are looking in opposite directions, maybe because the ring is also supposed to protect its owner this way.

In Iron Age artefacts, the cross can be seen either as an ornament or as a reference to Christianity. Depictions of Christ are less ambiguous: we can assume that a person who carried the picture knew its meaning. Medieval vernicle rings and their find contexts have raised the question of their bearers being clerical persons. This is problematic, because Christian motifs were also used in secular objects.²⁶ However, vernicle rings probably represented a mark of faith to their bearers.²⁷ Also the two cabochon rock crystal lenses once in silver frames (maybe worn as pendants) that were discovered as stray finds from Taskula may represent their owner's faith. A similar interpretation has been made concerning numerous crystals found in graves in Iron Age cemeteries and medieval churchyards on Gotland, Sweden.²⁸ In the Middle Ages, rock crystal was compared to purity, strong faith, and baptism. According to Finnish finds, crystals date from the 11th to the 13th century.²⁹

The establishment of the local parish was already close when the burial of the "Lord of the Ring" took place. The younger silver coin dates the burial not earlier than 1135 AD. The grave may also well date to the 13th century because the rotation time of the coins was often very long. Maybe the community who buried their dead at the Taskula cemetery had an early church of their own, like at Ristimäki in Kaarina.³⁰ Unfortunately, no signs of an older

church at the site could be detected because of the later building activities and the small size of the excavated area. It was only in the 13th century that a church was required in connection with a cemetery.³¹ The first common wooden church of the Maaria parish was probably built in the first half of the 13th century. We can at least assume that after this, people were buried beside the new church. The era of wooden churches lasted about 200 years, until the present-day stone church was built in the 1440s.³²

FINALLY

The pictures could be seen only when the author studied the ring through a microscope. This indicates that microscopic survey of smaller objects is highly recommendable, not only during conservation but also in other research contexts. As a ring type, the Taskula ring is unique so far. It is the earliest Facies Christi finger ring in Finland, and possibly also in Scandinavia.

NOTES

- 1 Talvio 2002, 176.
- 2 Cleve 1938, Kivikoski 1938,.
- 3 Riikonen 2003, 19; Jäkärä 2006, 42.
- 4 Cleve 1952, 167; Hirviluoto 1987, 9.
- 5 Nilsson 1989, 126–127; Kieffer-Olsen 1990, 95; Ruohonen 2013, 439.
- 6 Kivikoski 1939, 186; Luoto 1984, 72; Purhonen 1998, 55.
- 7 Lindahl 2003, 192, 203.
- 8 Oman 1930, 23.
- 9 Dalton 1912, 8–9, no. 46.
- 10 Dalton 1912, xxi.
- 11 Lindahl 2003, 14.
- 12 Piltz 1989, 65; Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991, 142.
- 13 Immonen 2004, 110–112.
- 14 Helmbrecht 2011, 223, 228.
- 15 Immonen 2013, 158.
- 16 Paavola et al. 2013, 49.
- 17 Hammervold 1996, 61; Immonen 2009a, 277; Immonen 2009b, 133–135.
- 18 Lindahl 2003, 16, 117.
- 19 Riska 1978, 240; Immonen 2009a, 299.

- ²⁰ Matt. 13: 47-50.
²¹ Mark. 1: 17.
²² Oman 1930, 33.
²³ Sarvas 1973, 55.
²⁴ Purhonen 1998, 55.
²⁵ Staecker 1999, 399.
²⁶ Immonen 2009a, 316.
²⁷ Paavola et al. 2013, 64.
²⁸ Thunmark-Nylén 2006, 216.
²⁹ Jäkärä 2010, 94; Vasko 2015.
³⁰ kts. Ruohonen 2013.
³¹ Nilsson 1989, 50.
³² Hiekkänen 2007, 88.

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