Some Aspects of the Finger-Rings in the Chalcis Treasure at the British Museum

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This ‘work-in-progress’ focuses on the four finger-rings in the Chalcis Treasure in the British Museum (Pls 1–8). It is a summary of research undertaken for the ‘Intelligible Beauty’ conference in London, May 2008 and two presentations in Greece, January 2009. A forthcoming publication will provide a full analysis of the social, cultural and historical background to the Treasure, with an in-depth study of all the pieces that make up the Treasure.

To summarise, the Chalcis Treasure derives its name from its find spot, the town of Chalcis (modern Halkida) on the island of Negroponte (modern Euboea, Greece). The harbour and fortress town of Chalcis, strategically located between Venice and Constantinople, was one of the most significant trading posts in the Venetian maritime empire during the late 13th and 14th centuries. At this time, the Venetian maritime empire comprised much of the Dalmatian coast, Crete, some of the Aegean islands including Negroponte, as well as the strategic ports of Coron and Modon on the Peleponnese. From a contemporary account of the siege of Chalcis, it would appear that there was a large and diverse population: besides the Venetians who made up the military, government and most of the merchant groups, there was the indigenous Greek population, and a large community of other Italians, Slavs, Albanians and Jews. This mixture would appear to be typical of the polyglot nature of the Venetian maritime empire.

The exact circumstances of the find are also unknown, but research in the archives of the Ashmolean Museum have determined that the Chalcis Treasure was sold by an Athens dealer, P. Lambros, to A.W. Franks in the 1860s. The Treasure came to the British Museum in 1897 with the Franks Bequest. The Treasure, numbering 393 pieces in total, comprises a silver dish, a silver chain and different categories of small items of personal adornment such as jewellery, buttons, and belt fittings such as buckles and decorative mounts. All the items are made of gold, silver or silver gilt, and the applied decoration consists of, variously, gemstones, glass, pearls, niello and enamel. Due to the absence of coins that usually assist in providing a terminus post quem date, it has to be assumed that the deposit of the Chalcis Treasure was made in 1470, when Chalcis was invaded by the Ottoman Turks.

Of the four finger-rings in the collection at the British Museum, one in particular has aroused much comment (Pis 3–5). This is a large ring, 45.50mm in diameter, the hoop 22mm in diameter, and weighing 13.54g. The irregularly-shaped hoop is made up of a broad band of thinly-rolled sheet gold. At the top of each shoulder are two collet settings made of strips of gold framed by granulation; the settings are soldered onto the hoop, the solder concealed by the granulation. The setting below the two garnets is made in the same way but with a small strip of gold rather than the high collet in the settings above, and contains an irregularly-shaped pearl. The two topmost settings contain cabochon garnets. All the garnets are of the pyralspite group. A similar setting below the two garnets contains an irregularly-shaped pearl pierced with a gold pin, the flattened base of the pin soldered to the hoop and the top of the pin flattened over the pearl. One of the garnets is missing; in another setting, the backing paste is missing, causing the garnet to drop to the base of the cell. At the base of the hoop is a similar, single setting containing a cabochon garnet.

The elaborate bezel comprises a spherical bead which has been affixed at each side of the lower sphere to the hoop. Made in two sections, the bead is made from openwork filigree in the form of coiled wire, and granulation. The ends of the wire are soldered to the small discs seen inside the bead at top and bottom. The two hemispherical sections are soldered together at the centre to form the bead, the solder concealed by the granulation. There are losses to the filigree, and the bead is misshapen. At the top of the bead is an irregularly-shaped pearl pierced with a gold pin with a granulated head. The pearl revolves around the pin.

This highly unusual ring appears to have no parallels in western or Venetian rings, but is similar in certain characteristics to those from Islamic lands. The present form of the hoop probably reflects the original design, but it may also be misshapen as a result of damage during deposit, burial or discovery, as one would expect a more evenly-formed or symmetrical hoop. The circumference of the hoop is in fact incomplete, as it is interrupted by the placement of the spherical beaded bezel. Although filigree beaded elements are
Plate 2 Profiles of four finger-rings from the Chalcis Treasure in the British Museum

Plates 3–5 An Islamic finger-ring, 13th–15th centuries, gold, garnet, pearl
not uncommonly used as bezels, they are generally soldered or affixed to a shank which forms a complete hoop, rather than inserted between two ends of the shank that forms an incomplete hoop, as here.

The complexity of form of the spherical filigree bead is extremely similar to those bosses making up ‘basket-shaped’ earrings. Earrings of this type have been dated to the first quarter of the 11th century, and have been attributed to an Islamic production in Greater Syria. The emphasis on the shoulders of this ring, with its rich and highly-accomplished decoration, also has its parallels in Islamic rings of the 11th century. Many such rings with elaborate shoulder decoration are also fitted with a rear setting at the hoop, containing gems, pastes or pearls.

This single ring demonstrates, both in its form and details of decoration, a strong Islamic influence. It was probably made by a highly-skilled goldsmith in the Islamic lands of Greater Syria or Egypt for a sophisticated market between the 13th and 15th centuries. It is likely to have found its way to Chalcis through mercantile trade, political gift or dynastic inheritance.

By contrast, the other three rings are more typical of finger-rings from the Late Byzantine Empire, and have been described by Dalton as ‘Veneto-Greek’. The first example is a gold ring with a sapphire (Pl. 6), 30mm in diameter and weighing 13.02g. The octagonal hoop is ribbed at the shoulders, and rises to a bezel formed of a calyx of six petals, on which rests an oval plate with an irregular rim to the collet setting which contains a blue corundum (sapphire).

The second example is a gold ring with a pearl of a flattened spherical form (Pl. 7), 32.5mm in diameter, and 14.45g in weight. The hoop is of a rounded triangular section, terminating at each shoulder in a stylized monster head with open jaws that support a high, six-petalled calyx bezel, above which is a beaded circular setting inset with a pearl. At each side of the setting is a prong, or claw, which fits into a drilled hole in the pearl.

The third example is another gold ring with a pearl of a flattened spherical form (Pl. 8), 32.5mm in diameter, and weighing 8.29g. The flat hoop is shaped and engraved on the outer side to represent a twisted cable that supports a high, six-petalled calyx bezel with hexagonal flat plate, the flat plate ornamented with large and small beads. Above this is a circular setting inset with a pearl. At each side of the mount is a prong, or claw, which fits into a drilled hole in the pearl. At one hole the pearl is damaged and fractured; a third drilled hole is visible to the side of the pearl, although there is no indication that the setting was ever fitted with more than two prongs.

The calyx forms on each of these three finger-rings have a number of parallels. A 6th-century example with a similar calyx bezel can be found in the Kanellopoulos Museum, Athens, while another example dating to the 7th century, in the collection of the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, has been attributed to a Constantinopolitan workshop. Other examples of the calyx bezel, again dating to the 6th and 7th centuries, are published as ‘South Italian’. This author knows of no other rings with these calyx forms that dates from the 13th–15th centuries, and therefore would propose that these three rings are earlier in date than the other pieces in the Chalcis treasure and may be ascribed to the 6th – 7th centuries. If these are earlier pieces, they may have formed part of a separate hoard that was buried with the items of a later date, or could have been discovered elsewhere and subsumed into the Chalcis treasure.

The form of the single pearls in the two rings in the Chalcis Treasure is unusual for a supposed medieval date. The uniformity of the flattened spherical shape does not conform to other pearls with a definite medieval provenance, or to the single Islamic example assessed above, or even to those finger-rings with pearls from the Chalcis Treasure in the Ashmolean Museum. These two pearls may well be later replacements, either for lost pearls, or even for lost gems. If the British Museum rings did originally hold gems, they would appear to follow more closely the examples in the Kanellopoulos Museum, Athens, and the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, and the ‘prongs’ now holding the pearls may once have been ‘claw’ settings for gemstones.
The differences between the single Islamic ring and the other three rings epitomises the complexity and challenges in determining the nature of the Chalcis Treasure. It is clear that the Treasure comprises objects from different hoards and different dates, but how and when these came together remains a mystery.

Notes
1 It is based on the publications and generous assistance of Anna Ballian, John Cherry, Anastasia Drandaki, Jannic Durand, Christopher Entwistle, Jeffrey Spier. This author would be grateful to receive comments on these rings from any reader.
3 See: McLeod, Kontoyannis, Georgopoulou and Geroussi-Bendermacher, forthcoming.
6 Ashmolean Archives, Fortnum Papers, F/9/1–14, November 1867–December 1872. I am grateful to Timothy Wilson and Bridget Allen for making these documents available for study, and to Nicoletta Norman for her assistance in the transcription and translation.
7 Reg. nos. AF 1860-1863; 1887,0211.1; AF 2775-2845; OA 10820-10827.
9 The description of the rings is based on the technical analysis carried out by Susan La Niece and Janet Ambers, British Museum, Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, unpublished report AR2008/85.
10 They were identified using Raman spectrometry with a Dilor Infinity spectrometer with a green (532 nm) laser with a power of 4 mw at the sample. The sapphire ring detailed in this article was also identified using the same method.
14 Wenzel (n. 11), no. 253 (12th or 14th century) for a ring with heavily decorated shoulders with applied beads in beaded ring and with similar rear stud.
15 Dalton 1912 (n. 8), nos 1822–24.
16 Reg. no. AF 1862: Dalton 1911 (n. 8), fig. 4; Dalton 1912 (n. 8), no. 1823, 258, pl. XXV.
17 Reg. no. AF 1863: Dalton 1911 (n. 8), fig. 3; Dalton 1912 (n. 8), no. 1822, 258, pl. XXV.
18 Reg. no. AF 1863: Dalton 1911 (n. 8), fig. 2; Dalton 1912 (n. 8), no. 1824, 258, pl. XXV.
19 Papanikola-Bakirtzi (n. 13), no. 653.
20 *Ibid*, no. 582.