

GOLD FINGER RING IN THE SHAPE OF AN OIL LAMP



This finger ring from Canopus is of an extraordinarily high quality. It has a pierced-worked hoop and a bezel in the shape of an oil lamp. The pierced work shows an undulating tendril.

No general parallels for the ring are known, but its pierced-worked hoop finds remote parallels in contemporary pierced-worked finger rings from Pantalica in Sicily and Senise in

Italy. In addition, similar pierced-worked tendrils reappear on pieces of jewellery from, for example, Kalaat el-Merkab in Syria, the Assiût hoard from Egypt and Lambousa in Cyprus.

Interregional style of Late Antique world

The pointed, triangular leaves on the Canopus ring find a close parallel on the sides of the settings on a pendant cross from Guarrazar in Spain. This wide geographical distribution of parallels shows that the ring represents the interregional style. It could, therefore, have been made in a workshop in Constantinople or anywhere else in the Late Antique world. A regional attribution would appear impossible.

Detail ties ring to Egypt

However, there is one detail that ties the ring to Egypt: the bezel in the shape of an oil lamp. Oil lamps played important roles at Christian pilgrimage shrines all over the Byzantine world.

Literary sources refer, for example, to oil from the graves of St Andreas, St Menas, St Demetrius, St Martin and from the holy sites in Jerusalem. As stated, the site in Canopus where this ring was found probably belonged to the pilgrimage **shrine of SS Cyrus and John**. Here oil again was of great importance, as reported by Sophronios, a visitor to the shrine and later patriarch of Jerusalem. He states that oil-lamps were suspended from the ceiling above the graves of the saints and that the oil from these lamps was used as a medicine to cure the sick.

Indication of workshop activities

The excavations in Canopus yielded numerous pieces that indicate workshop activity, e.g., splinters of gold sheet, short pieces of wire, undrilled beads and ingots. As known from the Coptic Miracles of St Menas, the pilgrimage shrine of SS Cyrus and John had a gold workshop attached to it. The manuscript with the Coptic miracles is attributed to the 9th century, but the miracle is set

during the reign of the Alexandrian bishop Damian (AD 569–93). Thus, it is likely that a gold workshop existed in the late 6th century. There is, therefore, archaeological and literary evidence for a gold workshop at the pilgrimage shrine of SS Cyrus and John.

Workshop attached to shrine

Since oil lamps played a significant role for the site, it is likely that the gold finger ring with the attachment in the shape of an oil lamp was made in the workshop attached to the shrine. The ring may have served as a eulogium or a souvenir a pilgrim may have filled with oil and taken home. If this was the case, the fully functional lid of the oil lamp could have been fastened onto the lamp's body with an adhesive material such as beeswax. The wick holes must have been closed as well.

Object: Late 6th–early 8th c. AD. Gold. L. 3.81 cm | W. 1.74 cm | Th. 1.08 cm.

Great Library of Alexandria (SCA 198)

Source: Original description by Yvonne Petrina in *Jewellery from Late*

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