

A Romano-British ring bezel in the form of the denarius of Julia Maesa from Ulceby, Lincolnshire

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The Collection has recently acquired an unusual piece of Romano-British jewellery. The item in question is the bezel of a ring made from a Roman coin. Although the hoop of the ring is lost and only the bezel survives, it is nonetheless a most unusual and noteworthy addition to the County's archaeological collections.

The bezel was discovered at Ulceby with Fordington, between Alford and Spilsby in March 2011 and reported as treasure. Although single coin finds are not classed as treasure under the definition in the 1996 Treasure Act, the conversion of this coin into an item of jewellery makes it eligible.

The coin is a silver denarius of Julia Maesa, minted in Rome between AD220 and AD222. The obverse shows the draped bust of Julia Maesa, the reverse the figure of Felicitas, the personification of good fortune, holding a long caduceus whilst sacrificing over an altar. The reverse legend, now almost entirely lost, reads 'SAECVLI FELICITAS' – which optimistically translates as 'the happiness of the age'.

Julia Maesa herself was a member of one of the most interesting of Imperial dynasties, the Severans, and related to a number of Emperors. She was the sister in law of the Emperor Septimius Severus, grandmother of the Emperors Elagabalus and Alexander Severus and the aunt of the Emperor Caracalla and his murdered younger brother Geta. Far from being a passive figure, she actively involved herself in imperial politics, particularly in her successful plot to overthrow the Emperor Macrinus and replace him with Elagabalus.

This type of reuse of a coin is extremely rare in Britain, though the practice is better evidenced on the continent. This example is particularly interesting for the fact that it is the reverse of the coin that was chosen for display in the ring, rather than the portrait. This strongly suggests that it was the fortuitous attributes of Felicitas that were being sought or promoted by the wearer, and the Imperial imagery of decidedly lesser importance. Of course, the conversion from coin to ring may have occurred many years after the death of Juliae Maesa herself and after the coin had ceased to be legal tender.

The Collection is grateful to both the finder and landowner for waiving their rights to a reward and donating the bezel to the museum.

Acknowledgements

The contents of this paper have drawn research from the Coroner's report for this treasure item, produced by the British Museum.

