

A rare fragment of medieval jewellery

– Et sjeldent fragment av et smykke fra middelalderen

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Rings of glass - mostly finger-rings - were in fashion throughout much of Europe between the 10th and 14th centuries. They have been found across a large area stretching from Russia to England, from the Alps to Sweden. Recently, thanks to a lucky find in the stores of the University Museum of Bergen, this town could now be added to the distribution map as the site of the northernmost discovery, and the first in Norway. As the ring fragment from Bergen also represents a rare type of glass ring, it certainly deserves a spotlight.

Medieval glass rings were made of different sorts of glass, either without or with varying levels of lead oxide as a flux, and they came in many colours including shades of green, blue, violet, yellow, brown and black. They could be either annular or polygonal, and could have an integrated (or applied) 'gemstone.' They could be undecorated or decorated with diagonal notches or glass threads in contrasting colours, and occasionally they had small globular applications. The fragmentary ring from Bergen belongs to that last rare group. (Figure 1)

If the size is suitable to fit on the finger of a man, woman or child, these rings will mostly have served as finger-rings. There is plenty of evidence for this – such rings were found in situ in graves, for example. There are, however, other potential functions – for example, they could have been used as ornaments for headdresses or hair ('temple rings'), as toys, or sometimes as a sort of currency. If their inner diameter is less than 1.3 cm, they are classified as ring beads and will have been used for rosaries or necklaces.

Fig. 1 | A selection of glass rings from Berlin and Novgorod. 11th – 13th century. (Photo: after exhibition catalogue 'Russen und Deutsche', Berlin 2012, p. 30)



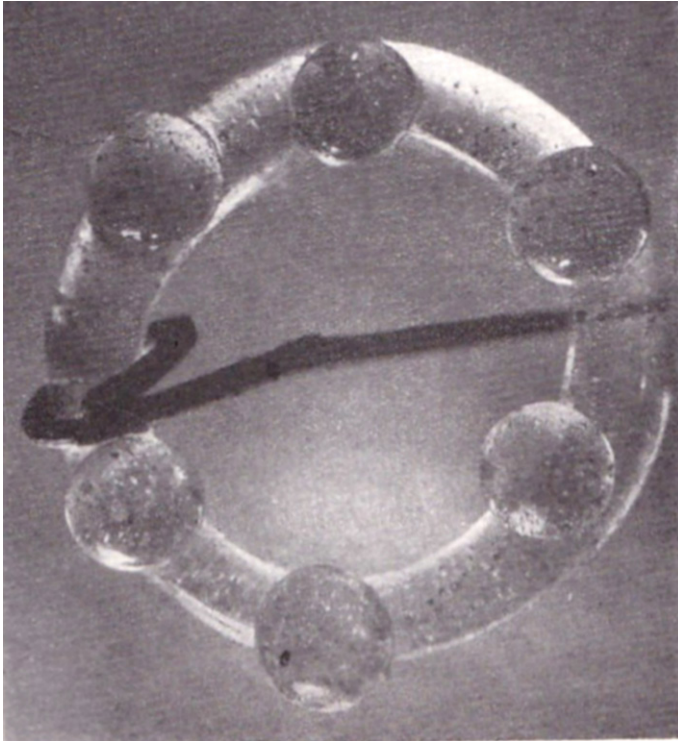


Fig. 2a | Glass brooch, found at Racibórz-Ostróg (Poland, Silesia). Late 12th – early 13th century. Outer diameter 2.2 cm. Formerly Museum Racibórz, inv.no 548 MR-A-1/6. (Photo: after S. Kuźniar-Niedźwiecka et al., *Racibórz w pradziejach i we wczesnym średniowieczu*, in: M. Suboczowa (ed.), *Szkice z dziejów Racibórza*, Katowice 1967, p. 25 – 61, fig. 14)



Fig. 2b | Glass brooch from Racibórz-Ostróg, original size. (Drawing: I. Krueger after photo)

A new function for glass rings

Only last year another function for some of the glass rings was introduced: Jakub Sawicki and Sylwia Siemianowska published a specimen that was excavated from the courtyard of the old castle of Racibórz-Ostróg (Poland, Silesia) in a layer dated to the 12th/13th century.¹ Although it was unfortunately lost in later years, the documentation with descriptions, sketches and photographs gives a good idea. It was a ring of transparent bright yellow glass (almost certainly high lead glass), with an outer diameter of 2.2 cm, and with six green globular applications on the upper side and a flat underside. What made this piece unique and exciting was a simple spike formed of thin wire that was wound around the ring frame. By means of that spike, the ring was transformed into an annular brooch. (Figure 2 a, b)

We cannot be sure whether this was an isolated incident that somebody added a spike to a glass ring, or whether this ring with its globular applications was intended to be a brooch from the beginning. I think the latter is more probable for several reasons: the positioning of the applied globules gives the ring a clear upper side; the protruding applications would be impractical and inconvenient on a finger-ring; its size is



Fig. 3 | Fragment of a glass brooch, found at Unterregenbach (Germany, Baden-Württemberg). Probably late 12th – early 13th century. Outer diameter c. 2.0 cm. Rastatt, Zentrales Fundarchiv, inv.no. 1960-0006-0001-0001. (Photo: Matthias Hoffmann)

Fig. 4 | Fragment of a glass brooch, found at Uppsala (Sweden). Late 12th century. Outer diameter c. 2.7 cm. Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, inv.no. 34525: 10408. (Photo: Georg Haggrén)



about the same as that of innumerable small metal brooches of the same period (13th to 14th centuries); and the applied glass globules on the glass brooch resemble the studs (which sometimes contain tiny globular glass inlays) on a special type of metal brooch.

The little glass brooch from Ratibórz-Ostróg may therefore be seen as the key piece for a newly discovered type of medieval glass jewellery. Now that it is known, small fragments of glass rings with globular applications suddenly make sense as parts of similar glass brooches.²

Three small fragments of brooches that will have looked like the one from Ratibórz-Ostróg were found spread over a remarkably large area in Germany and Austria. All of them are made of bright yellow (lead) glass with green applications, of which there were probably originally six. One piece with one remaining blob was among the finds from Heumarkt at Cologne; a slightly larger fragment with two remaining globules came from the church of Saint Veit at Unterregenbach in Baden-Württemberg (southern Germany) (Figure 3); and the last one, with one remaining application, was found at the site of the ruined castle Flaschberg at Kärnten (Austria).

One fragment of a yellow ring with green applications has been found in Sweden (in the Rådhus quarter of Uppsala), but this brooch seems to have been a bit different from the ‘continental type’; the blobs are smaller and placed closer together, so that there were probably about a dozen of them, instead of only six larger ones as on the Ratibórz brooch. (Figure 4)

A preference for many small applications seems to have been characteristic of the ‘Scandinavian type’ of glass brooches, judging from the specimens that are currently known. Except for the fragment from Uppsala, they are all made of bright green glass with yellow blobs. Among many fragments of simple glass rings from Sigtuna, one piece was unique as it was half of a green ring with a flat underside and five (of originally probably ten) yellow applications on the upper side and more of them around the outer side. When this brooch was intact, it would have looked like a tiny green garland with yellow flowers. (Figure 5)

There are two more known fragments of annular glass brooches from Sweden, but these are less well preserved. On a fragment from Nyköping, Åkroken 3, only two of the tiny yellow applications are left. The other one, from Old Lödöse,

is covered with a brownish layer of corrosion, and the position of former applications can only be inferred from regular dents on the upper and outer side.

The find from Bergen

Then Georg Haggren, who had published most of the pieces from Sweden,³ unexpectedly came across an additional fragment of this rare type of medieval glass jewellery in the stores of the University Museum of Bergen. This represents, as far as we know today, the first medieval glass ring found in Norway (although, of course, there may be some more hidden in tonnes of material from excavations or still under ground). (Figure 6 a – c)

The fragment from Bergen was found during excavations at the Bryggen quarter, in a layer dated to the early 14th century (Pers. com professor Gitte Hansen, University Museum of Bergen), but, like the parallels from Sweden, it will be an older piece from the later 12th or 13th century. It is a fragment of another green ring with a flat underside, decorated with yellow globular applications. Originally there were probably a dozen on the upper side and as many on the outer side, of which four in each row are preserved on the fragment. The outer diameter of this brooch would have been around 3.2 cm, and the irregular inner diameter around 2.2 to 2.8 cm. This brooch from Bergen can be regarded as the 'big brother' of the one from Sigtuna, the outer diameter of which was only 2.8 cm. The badly preserved fragment from Lödöse belonged to a ring of the same size as the one from Bergen, so it may have been an even closer parallel.

Fragments of glass rings that were intended to be made into brooches by adding a spike are still very rare. Although this

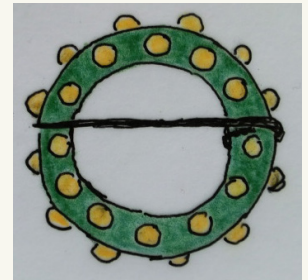


Fig. 5 | Fragment of a glass brooch, found at Sigtuna (Sweden). Probably late 12th century. Outer diameter c. 2.8 cm. Sigtuna, Sigtuna Museum, inv. no. 47403. (Photo: Sigtuna Museum/ CC BY 4.0)

Fig. 6a, b | Fragment of a glass brooch, found at Bergen (Norway), upper side and underside. Typological date probably late 12th/13th century. Outer diameter c. 3.2 cm. Bergen, University Museum of Bergen, inv.no. BRM 0/74594. (Photos: Georg Haggren)

Fig. 6c | Reconstruction of the glass brooch from Bergen, original size. (Drawing: I. Krueger)

Fig. 6a, b og c



impression may be partly due to the state of the research, it is evident that they must have been a very small minority within the enormous quantities of medieval glass rings with other functions. It seems that there were two different types of such glass brooches: the ‘continental type’ of yellow rings with few (probably mostly six) green applications on the upper side, which is found in Central European countries, and the ‘Scandinavian type’ of mostly green rings with many more applications in two rows, as found in Sweden and Norway.

So far there is no clue as to where these widely spread glass brooches were produced – whether they were made in several places ‘on demand’, by some travelling glass worker(s), or whether they were made in one or two specialised workshops and then distributed by merchants. There are many questions that remain unanswered – but then all research is ‘a work in progress’.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Docent Dr. Georg Haggrén, University of Helsinki, for bringing to my attention the find from Bergen, and Professor Dr. Gitte Hansen for providing stratigraphic date for the Bergen object.

Et sjeldent fragment av et smykke fra middelalderen

Ringer av glass, for det meste fingerring, var moderne i store deler av Europa i perioden fra det 10. til det 14. århundre. De finnes i store deler av et område som strekker seg fra Russland til England, fra Alpene til Sverige. Nylig kunne enda et arkeologisk funnsted – Bergen – komme på kartet takket være en gjennomgang av glassobjekter i Universitetsmuseets samlinger fra middelalderen. Glassringen fra Bergen er grønn med påsatte knopper av gult glass. Den har flat bakside og en ytre diameter på 3,2 cm. Basert på liknende funn fra middelalderbyer i Sverige foreslås det at Bergens-ringen ikke er en fingerring, men derimot en brosjé. Glassbrosjén fra Bergen er den første av sitt slag i Norge og utgjør det nordligste funnet av slike smykker så langt. (Norsk sammendrag ved Gitte Hansen)

1. Sawicki, Siemianowska 2020.
2. Krueger 2020.

3. Haggrén 2017.