

ON THE RING-MONEY OF ANCIENT IRELAND.

No. I.

BY ROBERT CANE, ESQ., M.D.

[*Read at the Meeting of March 5th.*]

Kilkenny, in an antiquarian point of view, is not merely rich in historical recollections of the deepest interest, and in architectural remains evidencing the noble taste and spirit of ages of by-gone feudal and ecclesiastical greatness, but its earth is equally rich in the production of metallic and coinage illustrations of our past history. Old coins, principally copper, and occasionally silver, are continually turned up in excavating old or creating new foundations, in cleansing and making sewers, and in the removal of old buildings; these coins are principally English, or Anglo-Irish, in the neighbourhood of the City—while in the County, and upon its borders, Irish and Celtic remains are not unfrequently found.

One source furnished in a remarkable degree a large amount of local coin within the last few years. I allude to the cleansing of the river Bregach, which materially enriched the cabinets of our City collectors with Kilkenny tokens and Confederate or Patrick's half-pence, the latter being a coin about the mintage or history of which there is some diversity of opinion.

The object of the present paper is to call the attention of the Society to the specimens of metallic antiquity which I have obtained, as found either in the City, the County, or upon its borders, and which are now laid before the meeting. They consist of three specimens of the gold rings found in Ireland, whose rough and unfinished appearance proclaim them to have been wrought in early and unartistic times, and which have been described by Betham and Lindsay as Irish ring-money.

The next are, a short sword of antique bronze; a bronze clasp of peculiar construction; and the coin, consisting of specimens of what I believe to be the Confederate mintage; specimens of merchants' tokens of the 17th century, struck in Kilkenny; specimens of James the Second's genuine, and of his base or brass money; an ancient spur; some silver and brass spoons, and some brass ear-rings. I propose to consider these *seriatim*, and at future meetings, commencing now with the consideration of the gold rings.

Of these specimens, now exhibited, one weighs 77 grs., another 100 grs., and the third 214 grs.,—the larger and the finest was found in a field at Grange, near Ballyragget, upon the borders of a locality which appears to have been the most distinguished portion of Kilkenny in ancient times, known in Ireland as Rathbeagh, and marked Argatros in O'Connor's map of Ireland in the second century, after Ptolemy. Those desirous to inquire after the antiquity of Rathbeagh may consult

Tighe's *Survey*, page 629, and Vallancey's *Collectanea*, vol. iii. page 281; but it is sufficient for present purposes to recognise it as a place of antiquarian repute, and suited for the discovery of this piece of ring-money. Of the other two specimens, one was found in the Queen's County, and the other at Old Leighlin, County of Carlow, both near the borders of the County of Kilkenny, and in districts where the struggles of the mere Irish with the barons of the Pale and their followers, in earlier days, gathered princes and armies together.

Sir William Betham, in the *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. xvii., has, in a most interesting paper, promulgated the opinion that these rings were the money of the Celtæ before the establishment of a mint, and that they are all weighted so as to be multiples of 12 grs., or of half a penny-weight; and in a subsequent paper in the same volume, he illustrates the subject by statements to the effect that similarly formed gold and iron rings still circulate as money in Nubia and other parts of Africa. Ireland is indebted to Sir William for the zeal with which he has prosecuted this inquiry and sought to set at rest the query in the second volume of Harris' *Ware*, p. 204, and which neither Ware nor Harris have answered, "whether the Irish before the Arrival of the English had the Use of Money, or only of Gold, Silver, Brass or Rings adjusted to a certain Weight?" Lindsay, in his valuable essay on the Coinage of Ireland, espouses the views of Sir William Betham, and adduces additional arguments in favour of those rings being money.

Sir William argues that money by weight, cut into mere pieces of length, would for convenience' sake be twisted into ring shape. He quotes from the Annals of Ulster—In the year 1009, Brian Boru made an offering of a *ring* of twenty ounces of gold, upon the altar of St. Patrick in the cathedral of Armagh. I have italicised the word "ring," because Ware, who quotes the same, mentions the weight, but not the word *ring*.

1151—Cooly O'Flynn presented a ring, weighing two ounces, to the corb of Columbkil.

1153—Another of one ounce.

Lindsay quotes further, that Baden, in his History of Norway, mentions that gold and silver pieces of a certain weight served for money, which neither in Norway nor any northern country was coined until a considerable time after the establishment of Christianity; and that "gold rings also, worn as ornaments of different size and weight, passed in ancient times from man to man like our money now."

988—Malachy, king of Ireland, stipulates with the Danes that they should pay him one ounce of gold for every cultivated garden.

Anlaf, king of Dublin, pays ransom to Matthew O'Riargon, cattle, a sword, and three ounces of gold.

1151—O'Connor receives, for the ransom of a chief, sixty ounces of gold.

1157—The kings O'Loughlin and O'Carroll, and the unfortunate Dervorgilla, gave sixty ounces of gold each to the monks of Mellifont.

1161—Fratertach O'Brolcan had 420 ounces of silver collected for him in the diocese of Ossory.

Moriertach O'Lochlin granted lands to the monastery of Ardraccan at a yearly rent of three ounces of gold.

1206—The hospital of St. Mary de Urso, Drogheda, was to pay, as yearly rent to the king, half an ounce of gold.

In Iceland, in 993, a fine of twelve ounces of silver was levied for the death of a domestic.

In the poem of "Rigs Mal," a note on the gold rings is as follows:—"Many of these massy rings of gold are preserved in the North, some of them having smaller rings hanging on them; these were used as money and given, either whole or in parts, as presents or for other purposes." And in the poem of "Lady Grimild's Wrack," there is mention of a gold ring weighing fifteen pounds.

I have quoted these, all the authorities of Betham and Lindsay, because the subject is one of great interest and yet needing further illustration, and because, since the publication of their essays, the works of other antiquaries and the translations published by the Archæological and Celtic Societies at Dublin, are shedding additional light on the question of how far these rings were used as money, or whether used at all commonly as money; and having directed some attention to the subject, I will now give such further historic evidences in relation to these rings as have come within the scope of my limited reading.

Petrie, in his truly magnificent book upon the Round Towers of Ireland, published eight years after Betham's essay, and six after Lindsay's, informs us that it appears from innumerable passages in our ancient authorities that the precious metals were valued by weight as a circulating medium, sometimes as ingots, more frequently as rings; and that hence the frequent use of the epithet "exactors of rings," as applied to the Northern invaders of the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries; and he quotes from an ancient manuscript on the Brehon Laws, in Trinity College, Dublin, that the wife of Nuada was used to have her hand or arm covered with rings of gold for bestowing them on poets; and that the monarch O'Loughlin presented the abbot of Derry with a ring of five ounces.—page 213.

In the Ordnance Survey of Londonderry, parish of Templemore, published also in 1837, reference is made to gold and silver rings frequently found in Ireland of graduated weights, from half a penny-weight to a pound troy; but that rings were more commonly found in Ireland of bronze, jet, or stone; and the writer of that admirable volume remarks, "ring-money must be of great antiquity, and is probably of eastern origin."—page 19.

The Irish scholar, Hugh M'Curtin, in his "Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland," published one hundred and

thirty-three years ago, makes numerous extracts from Irish authorities to the effect of gold being used by weight in the early ages in Ireland in payment of tribute ; but I do not quote these passages, because they are put more fully in the *Book of Rights*. However, he informs us, at page 296, that “ Muineamhon ordered that all princes of Ireland should wear golden chains about their necks, and this custom of wearing golden chains turning out after to be only peculiar to certain champions, who were called in the Irish language Niadh-Nasg, Aildergoid ordered that all the nobles should wear gold rings on their fingers.” And in O’Donovan’s translation of the *Circuit of Ireland*, published by the Irish Archæological Society, in 1841, we read of a noble prisoner taken in the 10th century—

“ _____ Callaghan the just,
Who received his due honour,
Namely, a ring of fifteen ounces on his hand,
And a chain of iron on his stout leg.”

And the translator in a note considers that a ring of gold may have been put on him as a mark of distinction (page 43).

But the book wherein most frequent allusion is found to rings, as articles of value in Ireland, is the *Book of Rights*, published by the Celtic Society, in 1847, and translated by that able Irish scholar, O’Donovan. Amongst the list of tributes made to Irish princes, I find the payment of rings mentioned about twenty times, and the tribute varies from two to thirty rings. The other articles of tribute were coats of mail, shields, swords, drinking cups, cloaks, mattals, tunics, drinking horns, chess boards and men, steeds, cows, sheep, pigs, hounds, plough-yokes, chariots, ships, and bond men and women ; amongst them the rings appear mostly a prominent matter and frequently bearing a strange proportion to articles of great value, for example, two rings and ten ships from one district. In two places the rings are named as gold, but generally it is left rather as matter of conjecture, and but in two other places is gold mentioned without reference to rings, or as money by weight, namely, at page 243—

“ The full breadth of his face, of gold,
To the great matchless king.”

And at page 229—

“ Hereupon the host brought to him
A screapall for each man, an ounce of gold—
An ounce for each nose besides—
And a screapall of gold for each man.”

Again—

“ The three ounces which were imposed yonder,
As tribute in the courts of the Galls”—

The screapall was an Irish coin of twenty-four grains, value three-pence, according to Petrie.

Now, from the nature of these tributes, and from the small amount of rings in relation to the great quantities of cattle, and works of art

and labour, it would seem as if money was a scarce article; if at all in existence to any extent, it would appear to be used principally as tribute to the foreigner, and that rings were rather as a commodity solely for some royal or aristocratic purpose than for general convenience or public circulation, a fact deducible in some degree from the manner they are alluded to in the *Book of Rights**—from the circumstance of Nuada's wife carrying them on her wrist specially for poets, from the ring placed on Callaghan's hand as a badge of honour, and from the royal order about wearing rings quoted by Hugh M'Curtin, before referred to; and that while these rings were of specific relative weight, they are yet not so described, when mentioned, as to warrant the positive declaration that they were ordinary money. And this view would appear to be still further supported by the following extracts from Laing's interesting translation of the Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, rendered from the Icelandic of Snorro Thurluson, who lived in the twelfth century. It should be remembered that these *Saga* were of times and men in constant intercourse with Ireland, upon whose coast they made plundering descents, and had settled as colonies in various eastern ports:—

“While Olaf was in Ireland, he was once upon an expedition which went by sea. As they required to make a foray for provisions on the coast, some of his men landed and drove down a large herd of cattle to the strand. Now a peasant came up and entreated Olaf to give him back the cows which belonged to him. Olaf told him to take his cows if he could distinguish them, ‘but don't delay our march;’ the peasant had with him a large house dog, which he put in among the herd of cattle, in which many hundred head of beasts were driven together. The dog ran into the herd, and drove out exactly the number the peasant had said he wanted; and all were marked with the same mark, which showed that the dog knew the right beasts and was very sagacious. Olaf then asked the peasant if he would sell him the dog. ‘I would rather give him to you,’ said the peasant. Olaf immediately presented him with a gold ring in return and promised him his friendship in future”—(*Saga* vi. page 400, vol. 1).

This prettily told anecdote shows that the ring was not strictly purchase money, but kingly reward and pledge of friendship. Again at

* The passages in this, decidedly the most valuable contribution to ancient Irish literature issued by the Celtic Society, are exceedingly curious: we are tempted to refer to a few of those not quoted in Dr. Cane's essay:—“The kings of the provinces used to purchase their seats at Uisneach, and the purchase and price they paid was this, i.e., the ‘hero's ring’ of red gold which each prince wore on his hand, which he used to leave on his drinking seat” (p. 7). That rings were frequently ornamented we find, for there were due “ten carved rings to the king of Raelinn” (p. 211); and Cathaer Mor ordered Ros Failghe to give to his brothers, amongst other things, “five rings of gold ten times melted” (p. 195. *n*). References to rings bestowed as stipends, or paid as tribute, will be found at pp. 31, 33, 35, 69, 82, 111, 155, &c.—EDS.

page 423, Karker tells a dream—"I was at Lade and Olaf Tryggvesson was laying a gold ring about my neck;" and again as a reward for kind services—"Thormod took a gold ring from his hand and gave it to the nurse woman, and told her to do with it what she liked, 'It is a good man's gift,' said he, 'King Olaf gave it to me this morning'"—(*Saga* viii. page 339, vol. ii). In the ixth *Saga*, page 29, vol. iii. king Magnus said, "I have no more gold in my possession than this ring," and he took the ring off his finger and gave it to Harold. Harold doubts his owning the ring, and he replies, "My father, king Olaf the saint gave me this ring at our last parting;" Harold replies, "Thy father gave thee this ring, but he took it from my father for some trifling cause." In both these cases it was obvious the ring was a mark of distinction, a royal and a kingly gift, and not viewed as mere money, though the following extract shows that rings were estimated by money value. At page 25, we find that "the bowl was filled with money of pure silver; with that came also two gold rings which together stood for a mark." It is put more explicitly at page 113, *Saga* x., "King Olaf was not niggardly in giving presents, so says Stuff the Scald—

‘The man at arms a golden ring
Boasts as the present of his king.’”

But the contempt for mere money by one who would not refuse rings, is well put in *Saga* xii. page 159, vol. iii. When the Norman king, Sigurd, entered Constantinople, the emperor sent pieces of gold and silver to king Sigurd; but without looking at them, he told his men to divide them amongst themselves. The emperor remarked that this king must be rich and powerful not to care for such things; he then sent chests of gold which shared the same fate. The emperor sent further treasure and two gold rings; then king Sigurd "stood up and took the rings and put them on his hand." At page 193, same *Saga*, a ring is staked against human life. King Magnus wagers with the Irishman, Harold—"stake thy head if thou canst not run as fast as I ride upon my horse, and I shall stake my gold ring."

There can be but little doubt from the intercourse existing between Norway and Ireland in those ages, that the estimation of these things, the notions about them, and the value attachable to them, was not very dissimilar amongst the two people; and though it may be argued that many of the rings are too small to be worn as the Norwegian rings appear to be, yet let it be remembered that they were hung upon each other, a mode of connexion easy in consequence of the rings being open at one point. That these rings had specific weight and value is proved to satisfaction, but I am not so satisfied that they were used as common money, or as an article of reward or exchange, except from kings and princes and their connexions, and as royal favour. The subject is one of much interest, and I sincerely hope it will be taken up by some antiquary whose knowledge of the Irish, Norse,

and Icelandic languages will enable him to consult the originals, so rich in reference to the subject.

In connexion with the subject of this ring-money, I exhibit a remarkable stone ring—though I do not consider it as ring-money, but as an abbatial or official ring. It was found in Jerpoint abbey, an interesting ruin in the neighbourhood of Thomastown, now fast falling to decay, a state of things but little creditable to the County, and to those in charge of the property.

[EXPLANATION OF PLATE.—Nos. 1. 2. and 3. gold ring-money; No. 6. stone ring found at Jerpoint abbey, County of Kilkenny; No. 4. specimen of counterfeit gold ring-money, evidently the work of the early ages and coeval with the genuine gold rings. This beautiful specimen was given to me by Mr. Lawless, of this City, who purchased it from a person by whom it had been turned up in a field near Kilkenny. It is made of a thin gold plate admirably fitted upon a core of bronze, evincing great artistic and mechanical adaptation of the gold to the bronze. Professor Barker, of the Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland, tested it for me, and has pronounced it to be antique bronze, which stamps the age of this able counterfeit. The shell of gold is loaded with bronze, which has been not unlikely cast into it, filling it pretty much as lead is found in false jewellery now. No. 5. is a cross-section of the same specimen to show the arrangement of gold and bronze at the place of severance. I obtained this specimen subsequently to reading the foregoing paper, and I have added it to the engraving, partly for the information of collectors, but still more because of its own historic importance, and as an evidence of able early art.]

ON THE RING-MONEY OF ANCIENT IRELAND.

No. II.

BY JOHN WINDELE, ESQ.

[*Read at the Meeting of May 7th.*]

The subject of the original metallic currency of Ireland is one of rather recent date in Irish archæology. Previous to the second quarter of the present century it was the generally received opinion that the Irish traded merely by barter; that they paid their mulcts and fines in cattle, and their tributes in arms, ships, and articles fabricated out of different metals for personal ornament, or in the ingot shape. It is due to the much discredited Vallancey to say, that he was the first to suggest the use of the open rings, theretofore denominated *fibulæ*, and *pateræ*, for the purpose of exchange and circulation as money. His brief paper on this subject may be seen at page 98, of the third

CORRIGENDA.

- p. 290, line 32, for "See Fionn," read "See Finn," and for "*Suidhe Fionn*," read "*Suidhe Finn*".
- p. 291, line 17, after "wide," dele " , ".
- p. 292, line 18, for "covering stone," read "covering-stone".
Ib. line 41, after "Gaul," insert " , ".
- p. 293, line 4, for "Συθε Fionn," read "Συθε Fionn," and for "*Suidhe Fionn*," read "*Suidhe Finn*".
- p. 322, line 3, from bottom, for "Argatros," read "Argetros".
- p. 323, line 9, for "Acadamy," read "Academy".
- p. 324, line 3, for "Fratertach," read "Flahertach".
- p. 387, line 14, for "centre," read "cavern".
- p. 400, line 28, after "what" insert "we".
Ib. line 40, after "survey," insert " , ".
- p. 407, line 38, *note*, after "custody," dele ") ".
- p. 410, line 4, from bottom, *note*, for "ΤΗΟΚΡΑΤΗ," read "ΤΗΟΚΡΑΤΗ".
- p. 412, line 25, for "sight," read "site".
- p. 413, line 3, for "HORE," read "HOARE".
- p. 433, line 28, for "for," read "but".
- p. 442, line 2, for "RSQ.," read "ESQ".
- p. 446, line 15, after "lordship," dele " , ".
- p. 483, line 13, for "earls of Saxon," read "Saxon earls".
- p. 492, line 3, from bottom, after "*Kilkenny*," insert ") ".