Romano-British Bracelets and Bangles

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Bracelets and bangles are a relatively common find on Romano-British sites. They were made in a variety of materials. Most common were those of non-ferrous metal and the black shiny materials such as jet and shale. Glass bangles and bracelets of bone, antler and ivory are also known. A general introduction to the full range can be found in Johns 1996, 108-24. Bracelets of all materials are generally most common in Britain during the 4th century. The major exception to this is the glass bangles which, by contrast, is a 1st to early to mid 2nd century form. Glass bangles will be considered here first because of this chronological difference.

Glass bangles

Kilbride-Jones (1937-8) was the first to study the type in detail and divided them into three types. Type 1 stands apart because of the manufacturing method (a core of one colour, capped by another colour and then further decorated), the fact that they were not made as annular rings, and because of their distribution which is limited to Scotland. Types 2 and 3 are annular rings and are found throughout Britain. Subsequent researchers have kept this threefold division. Useful articles to consult which summarise new finds and variants, additional dating information, distribution, views of how they were used etc are Stevenson 1954-6; Stevenson 1974; and Price 1988. The latter is particularly good for Kilbride-Jones Type 2 (the variety with a cable of twisted coloured strands around the apex). Some evidence is starting to emerge that individual variants may have been in use at different times within the 1st to 2nd century timespan of the types as a whole. The plain opaque white bangles (Kilbride-Jones type 3A), for example, may be a 2nd century type (Cool and Price in Cool and Philo 1998, 189). As so many fragments are not found in closely dated contexts, however, it is unlikely that it will be easy to date the variants.

There has been much debate (see for example Stevenson 1974, 50; Price 1988, 353) about what precisely these annular glass rings were used for, and whether all, some or even any were actually worn as arm or leg ornaments. Some are clearly big enough to have been so worn. Given their floruit is so markedly different from the bulk of Romano-British bracelets , it would probably be best to regard them as having a specialised use that was not entirely ornamental. Certainly some of the broken fragments appear to have had a value as amulets of some sort. The best example of this is probably the example that was deposited with a cache of stones, fossils and other coloured glass objects in an empty burial cist in a prehistoric cairn at Cairnhill Aberdeenshire (Stevenson 1967). It is probably useful to examine the contexts of all fragments, especially those found in post mid 2nd century ones, to see if they might be indicative of ritual deposition.

Recently a most unusual penannular bracelet made of very dark glass appearing black was found worn with other bracelets on the wrist of a late Roman inhumation in London (Barber & Bowsher 2000, 148 no. B168.2). This seems at present to be completely different to all other glass bracelets known from Britain in all aspects, colour, shape and date.

Black shiny bracelets of jet and shale

Good places to see a range of the types in use are Lawson 1975, fig. 4-6; Allason-Jones and Miket 1984, 315, and Allason-Jones 1996, 29-35. No formal typology has been proposed but there are four main categories. Plain annular rings, annular rings with decoration, octagonal annular 'rings' and armlets made up of graded beads (see Allason-Jones 1996, 27 nos.26-37; Crummy 1983, 35 nos. 1496-8). Jet bracelets made from two hinged segments are also known but appear much rarer (Allason-Jones 1996, 32 nos. 82-3). It should be noted that some of the decorated black shiny bracelets were further decorated with gold leaf or wire. This can easily be removed by incautious cleaning and it is always wise to inspect such bracelets under a microscope prior to cleaning (Allason-Jones 1999).

Annular shale rings of bracelets size have an ancestry going back into the Iron Age (Lawson 1975, 242 for references). These were plain or decorated by ribbing running longitudinally around the circumference. This style continues into the early Roman period. Lawson (ibid, 248) notes some examples from 2nd century contexts, and there is a large group of 18 plain examples from contexts pre-dating AD 100/10 in the fortress baths at Caerleon (Zienkiewicz 1986, 213). Other examples of plain or lightly ribbed bracelets from later 1st to 2nd century contexts are also present at, for example Castleford (Clarke in Cool & Philo 1998, 254 nos. 2 and 4), Dorchester (Mills in Woodward et al 1993, 139), and Leicester (Cooper in Connor and Buckley 1999, 261). Plain annular rings can also make up a sizeable proportion of late Roman assemblages. Of the 29 shale bracelets from 4th century or later contexts at Caister on Sea, all but six were plain (Darling & Gurney 1993, 84), as were virtually all of the black shiny bracelets from the Lankhills cemetery, Winchester (Clarke 1979, 312). Clearly these plain annular rings were in use throughout the Roman period.

The more intricately decorated rings and the beaded armlets are late Roman forms as indicated by site finds and those found accompanying 4th century inhumations such as at Colchester (Crummy 1983, 36 nos. 1558 & 1568) and York (Allason-Jones 1996, 28 no. 28, 30-1 nos. 53, 60, 71-3). Curiously the beaded types have been found accompanying several individuals who are known to have been males, whereas normally bracelets are a female fashion. In some cases they are part of a set of jewellery and ways of wearing that jewellery that marks out these men as clearly being very unusual, and in the case of one from Catterick possibly being a priest of the goddess Cybele (Cool in Wilson 2002, 41-

2). It is possible therefore, that the beaded armlets had some special meaning that went beyond the purely decorative.

As with the glass bangles, there has been debate about the extent to which the smaller annular rings were used as bracelets. Alternate functions as hair rings, dress fasteners, belt dividers and teething rings are amongst some of the functions suggested (Lawson 1975, 24; Allason-Jones 1996, 35).

Metal bracelets

Precious metal bracelets had been in use amongst the Romano-British elite during the early Roman period, but the habit of wearing copper alloy bracelets did not spread widely until the 4th century. At that time the fashion seems to have been for several to have been worn on each wrist. Groups of half a dozen are not unusual in 4th century graves, and a woman of about 35 buried in Rochester was wearing 16 (Cool in Harrison 1981, 125-31). The circumstances of the burial led the excavator to suggest this may not have been a formal burial, but rather the victim of foul play bundled unceremoniously into a shallow grave (ibid 101). It this is correct it could give an insight into the number worn in life rather than the more formal deposition of a group during a funeral. Clearly the habit of wearing several together explains the large volume of broken fragments found on domestic sites during the late Roman period.

Currently there is no easily accessible typology of all metal bracelets, although one does exist in my unpublished PhD thesis which you may occasionally see referred to, including by people other than myself (Cool 1983). As so many metal bracelets do belong to the 4th century, the systems based on those from the Lankhills School cemetery proposed by Clarke (1979, 301) and the Colchester finds (Crummy 1983, 37) can generally be referred to with profit; though contrary to what Clarke (1979, 302) suggests there are many types which are not represented in the Lankhills cemetery. Ellen Swift also has a useful chapter on them in her study of regionality in dress accessories, providing a typology and showing their distribution across the western Empire (Swift 2000)

Effectively in the 4th century bracelets can be divided between those made of two or three strands of wire twisted to form a cable (see for example Crummy 1983, fig. 41 nos. 1611, 1613, 1628), and those which may summarised as light bangles where a rectangular strip, worn widest or narrowest to the wrist, is decorated by a variety of patterns and fastened by hook and eye or butt joints (see for examples Crummy 1983, fig. 43 excluding no. 1656, fig. 44 excluding 1683-4, 1693). An aggrandised, more massive, version of the latter with multiple decorative motifs is also known (see for examples ibid 1983, fig 47). Penannular bracelets are not particularly common during the 4th century. Those that do exist are generally either massive cable twist bracelets or snake bracelets. The two commonest 4th century varieties of the latter are illustrated in Cool 1979, fig. 2. Only the cable twist variety has yet been recorded in gold, and other patterns

appear to have been preferred in this more expensive metal (see Johns and Potter 1983, 95 nos. 24-7; Johns 1996, colour plates 7 and 11).

Metal bracelets are much less common in 1st to 3rd century contexts and a disproportionate number appear to be of precious metals, probably suggesting that it was the upper echelons of Romano-British society who adopted this fashion in the main. Penannular bracelets appear to have been proportionately more popular than they were to be later, and seem to have been especially popular in the south-west (Cool forthcoming). Over the country as a whole, the commonest penannulars were probably the ones with snake-headed terminals where the head was modelled in relief as in the ones from the Snettisham hoard (Johns 1996, 111 fig. 5.23; Johns 1997, 111 nos. 312-6). This is a 2nd century form, and I have proposed that this may not have been been just an items of jewellery but could have been connected with cult practices (Cool 2000b). Other forms of snake bracelets and finger rings that can be expected in Roman Britain are illustrated in Johns 1996, fig. 3.3).

Other forms of penannular bracelets in copper alloy tend to be far more disparate, though a wide cuff form of the mid to late 1st century was particularly common in the south-east (see for example, Crummy 1983, 37 nos. 1586-7, fig. 40; Stead and Rigby 1986, 125 163-6, fig 52).

It should also be noted that though cable twist bracelets were very common in the 4th century, they had been in use since the 2nd century, if not the late 1st century. An example from a context that can be closely dated to AD 104-5 has been recovered at Carlisle (McCarthy 1991, fig. 22 no. 32 = Padley 1991, 108 no. 32), and there is also one in an early to mid 2nd century cremation burial at Guilden Morden (Cool 1983, 686 no. 208). Others have been found as site finds in early to mid 2nd contexts at, for example, Jewry Wall, Leicester (Kenyon 1948, fig. 83.7), Scole (Rogerson 1977, fig. 56.181), and Springhead (Penn 1964, fig. 4.15). The majority of cable twist bracelets are made of 2 or 3 strands of wire fastened with hook and eye terminals (if slender) or formed into a penannular form (if massive). It is, therefore, interesting to note that the ones from early contexts often differ from this pattern. The example from Guilden Morden is made of copper alloy and iron strands and is fastened with an expanding joint. That from Carlisle is also made of copper alloy and iron strands and, though slender, is penannular with sheet covered terminals. The Springhead bracelet is made of 5 strands and has sheet covered hook and eye terminals. There is a hint here, therefore, that non-standard combinations of alloys and terminals may be early examples.

It should also be noted that iron was used to make bracelets (Manning 1985, 78; Clarke 1979, 311). These are probably under-represented in the archaeological record because being relatively slight there is a need for favourable depositional conditions for them to survive, and careful X-radiography and conservation for them to be recognised if they do. It is possible that even allowing for this, they

might not have been that common. In a decade or more of regularly scanning X-radiographs in an imaginative way AND being bracelet-aware, I cannot honestly say I've not often seen candidates, certainly not as often as I've come across bracelets in other materials.

Bracelets of bone and other skeletal material

Bracelets made of strips of bone, antler or, more rarely, ivory are a 4th century phenomenon and do not appear to have been used earlier. The strips were formed into rings and fastened by means of metal clasps or rivets. They were normally plain but were occasionally decorated by motifs seen on multiple unit metal bracelets (MacGregor 1985, 112). On the basis of the relative occurrence of bone bracelets at the Lankhills cemetery, Clarke (1979, 301) suggested they might have been more common in the earlier 4th century. Although this might be true of this area of south central England, there are hints that elsewhere bone bracelets may have been proportionately more common in the later 4th century and into the 5th century (Cool 2000a, 49). Recently during a re-assessment of all the evidence from Lankhills including the new excavations there, it has been possible to show that Clarke' dating is not secure and that bone bracelets are a good indicator of very late 4th or 5th century occupation.

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