

**Adorned Hands: Male Identities and Ring Wearing in
the Italian Quattrocento.**

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged. No generative AI was used during my research or in the writing of this thesis.

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Unless otherwise stated, all ring photography is author's own.

Melanie Stephens | 30 June 2025

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Abstract

Focused on the fifteenth century, *Adorned Hands* considers different typologies of historic rings with the purpose of revealing the context in which they were crafted, collected, and gifted in the Italian city-states. Rings are polyvalent carriers of cultural significance that, like other items of sartorial display, were coded with meaning for their contemporary viewers. Religious men's hands were adorned as sites of sacrality, labouring to glorify the Latin church and their deity. However, many men of the church were also sons of elite families, joining the competitive collecting and displaying of luxury wealthy men engaged with to tacitly represent their brilliance: financial and cultural wealth. Such collecting targeted men of lower socio-economic status who elite men sought to dominate and dim. These common men as ring owning or wearing are challenging to find in the historical record. However, through exchanging rings as marriage tokens, or wearing mercantile signet rings, a narrative can be drawn about how men outside of courtly families participated in visual splendour and practice of adorning their hand. Through conducting object-biographies, the histories of the rings can be extracted, which are supplemented with documentary evidence that provide lived examples of fifteenth century men and their rings.

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Introduction

In 1460, the marquis of Mantua received a letter from his agent in Venice. The tone of the letter was harried; Cexus de Florentina (n.d.) had been charged with the task of buying gemstones for his master, Ludovico II Gonzaga (1412-1478). Cexus was trying to press Ludovico to choose which ruby he would like to purchase. Sent separately, the three rubies were assigned different values, though Cexus was confident he could barter down the price of the most expensive. Ludovico was encouraged to consider setting the ruby into a ring, to improve the value and beauty of the stone:

But if your excellency wanted [the ruby] to be set into a ring...
[the ruby would be made] more beautiful than any of the
others and better priced, because when it is set it will be
valued by a knowledgeable person at 90 ducats; perhaps a
hundred.¹

Cexus' letter details not just the price of precious gemstones in the fifteenth century, but also the crucial role goldsmiths played in crafting the magnificent brilliance of the noblemen they served. In this thesis I will argue that the display of male bodies was fundamental to performing masculinity in Quattrocento Italy with this brilliance achieved through clothing and adornment. Sociologist R.W. Connell and her study of modern masculinity contends

¹ «Ma se la I S V volesse ligarlo in anello è migliore zschuno de gl'altri che per tanto quando achade simelcose bixognia ch'io sia avisato che lavoro se n'à a fare; ma come è detto quello di più prexio volendolo in zoiellare è più bello che nessun de gl'altri et miglior merchato, perché quando sarà ligato sarà stimato da zschuno intendente 90 ducati et forse cento»
ASMn, AG, b. 1431, c. 257, 1460, *Cexus de Florentia* a Ludovico II, da Venezia in *Fruscianti vestimenti e scintillanti gioie*, Vol 2, Giancarlo Malacarne, Linea Quattro edizioni srl: Verona, 2012, p. 113

that “everyday life is an arena of gender politics”.² This arena metaphor has been applied to the Quattrocento by literary historian Carolyn Springer, framing the fifteenth century as a politically complex arena where clothes and jewellery were essential to the presentation of self.³ How men publicly presented themselves was done so knowingly, with the intent to project dominance over others, notably women and inferior men. To the pre-modern mind, sexed bodies and gender were indivisible: gender performance was inextricably connected to the body and so what individuals decorated their body with became objects with gendered meaning. Men were defined in the early modern period as performers of power conveyed through their physical, sexed bodies that were central to how men interacted with the social environment in which they lived.⁴ Connell’s seminal study of masculinity underpins subsequent scholarship and the arguments draw throughout this thesis. Ben Griffin’s article *Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem* focalises Connell’s arguments specifically to the study of historical male individuals. Griffin asserts that men likely moved between different forms of masculinity and male identities in the course of daily interactions; that individuals “may have many selves” and that “contextual factors can bring different selves into play”.⁵ Hegemonic masculinity has become the preferred term for scholars of gender as, unlike the male-female dichotomy of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity allows for more nuanced analysis.⁶ Originally used in a Marxists context, hegemony refers to domination embedded within culture rather than domination by brute

² R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (1993; repr., Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005) 3

³ Springer, Carolyn. *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. P.10

⁴ Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe : A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 4

⁵ Griffin, Ben. “Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem.” *Gender & History* 30, 2 (2018): 392.

⁶ See Tosh, John. “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender.” In *Masculinities in Politics and War*, ed. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 45-46

force. As such, hegemonic masculinity “empower[ed] certain groups of men” and thus creating unequal social relationships between men and women, and men and other men, to convince “the generality for men that there is no other way of ‘being a man’ [sic]”.⁷ Connell, Giffin, and Tosh illuminate the historiographical framework for the gendered analyses of how personal items of material culture, such as rings, contributed to the sartorial presentation of these shifting male identities. For scholars to be cognisant of the “lived experience of men, [they] need to study historically the strategies and techniques that men used to appropriate and identify themselves with particular masculinities”.⁸ One such historical strategy is bodily adornment to display the many loyalties, networks, and wealth of the wearer. Asserting masculinity as a multifaced and dynamic identity provides an ideological framework for understanding the contributions of men’s hands and items of adornment made to their male identities.

Clothing and adornment as a means of decorating the human body — based on social parameters of appropriateness, sacrality, beauty, and status — echoes through every human society.⁹ Archaeological, iconographical, documentary, pictorial, and ritualistic evidence conveying a continuous desire for humans to adorn their bodies to denote social power, marital status, economic wealth, personal and professional achievements. The study of material culture provides a unique lens to understand how people of the past understood and presented their own identity. Human identity was socially understood through clothing,

⁷ Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender”, 44.

⁸ Griffin, “Hegemonic Masculinity”, 394.

⁹ Terrance S. Turner, “The Social Skin,” in *Reading the Social Body*, ed. C.B Burroughs and J. Ehrenreich (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 15–39.

being the primary site for policing and performing gender in the early modern period.¹⁰ Sociologist Michael Kimmel defines masculine performance as for the male gaze: “other men watch us, rank us, grant out acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is the other men who evaluate the performance”.¹¹ There is little in the historical record to suggest that men of the Italian peninsula during the quattrocento did not experience a similar pressure to perform their masculinity in the presence of other men. Galeazzo Maria Sforza fatefully refused to wear his protective doublet on the day he was assassinated in 1476 as he believed the garment made him look “too fat”.¹² Being viewed as overweight indicated Galeazzo’s body was ageing and a loss of self-control and thus, a weakening of his masculinity. To be viewed as a man in the early modern world went beyond simply being male; manhood was defined by values of honour, probity, and self-mastery.¹³

Quattrocento Italy is a rich backdrop against which to consider the practice of hand adornment. It was a liminal space, balanced between the medieval Europe of the fourteenth century and the emergent early modern era defined by its Renaissance ideals of humanism, the individual, and classical aesthetics. With Renaissance investments in these pursuits, the individual splendour of princely lords such as Ludovico became important markers of rank and status. Courtly male bodies were ornamented with jewels and radiant clothing to be

¹⁰ Sarah Bendall, *Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body and Women in Early Modern England* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021).

¹¹ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” In *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (United States: SAGE Publication, 1994), 128.

¹² Corio, *Storia di Milano*, 2:1398-99 in McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 27.

¹³ Lewis, Katherine. *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England*. London: Routledge, 2013, 9.

culturally understood as site of signorial authority.¹⁴ Rings set with gemstones were not the only form of sparkling adornment for courtly bodies but they were the primary means of bringing brilliance to a princely hand. This thesis seeks to explore how male hands were adorned through the practice of ring-wearing during the Quattrocento in the central-north of the Italian peninsula. Central to this thesis is establishing the relationship between men and rings, including the context in which they were worn, how men stored and displayed rings, and how rings were used as objects of identity.

The hand is a socially important part of the body, one people use to interact with their physical environment that transects the metaphysical barriers between public and private spaces, and often were the only publicly visible body part below the face. The adornment of the hand is set apart from other bodily adornment due to this public visibility. Hands were not always bare, particularly in later centuries of the early modern era, but fashion choices were made to ensure rings were visible, including rings worn overtop the gloves, or on the bare finger but visible through purposely designed slashes in gloves.¹⁵ For males, ring-wearing transects both secular and spiritual domains. Popes, bishops, and priests were often highly adorned with rings as well as kings, merchants, knights, courtiers, and noblemen to which rings had a variety of meanings. Ring-wearing has a long history that crosses cultures and eras, with material evidence extending from antiquity through to the contemporary present. As such, rings are transtemporal, contribute to transforming culture,

¹⁴ McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 17.

¹⁵ Evelyn Welch, "Art on the Edge: Hair and Hands in Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 3 (June 2009): 260, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.2008.00531.x>.

and tap into broader questions of class, gender, ritual, social structures, and cultural power dynamics.

Historiography

Foundational to this thesis are two lines of scholarship: the history of the body as a site of gender performance, and the history of jewellery. The historical study and cataloguing of rings has developed largely in parallel to efforts to unpack the complexities of early modern gender. This thesis takes up the opportunity to connect the two. Items such as rings are largely ignored in broad publications on both femininity and masculinity, reserved to the work of art historians, or simply framed as objects of aesthetic adornment. Historians Timothy McCall, Sarah Bendall, and Evelyn Welch have done important work in assessing material culture as an avenue for analysing historical gender identities.¹⁶ This thesis addresses itself to that same pursuit.

Analysing the body as a culturally coded object is a task shared by many scholars beyond historians. In 2006, theoretical archaeologist Joanna Sofaer argued for viewing human bodies as a form of material culture, seeing a need for less divisive thinking between a living body and deceased body; to Sofaer, human skeletons continue to be carriers of culture just as their living counterparts do.¹⁷ Similarly, ethnographer Terence Turner has published on the importance of dress in publicly conveying a sense of self. For Turner, bodily adornment is a language, the most specialised aspect of culture for “shaping and communication of

¹⁶ See: Bendall, *Shaping Femininity*, 2021; McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 2022; Welch, “Art on the Edge” 260-263.

¹⁷ Joanna R Sofaer, *The Body as Material Culture: A Theoretical Osteoarchaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

personal and social identity”.¹⁸ Similar conclusions about the connection between body, adornment, and identity can be applied to men of the past and enrich our understanding of male performances of gender.

Historical analysis of masculinity has origins in historians’ investigations of femininity. In his introduction to *The Male Body*, Laurence Goldstein notes that feminist scholarship resulted in a correlated rise in publications on manhood and its history as the study of female experiences led to a need to “rethink [male] nature now that its consequences [had] been examined by the opposite sex with such thoroughness.”¹⁹ Feminist scholarship created a more nuanced understanding of the different roles and spaces women possessed in the early modern world, and scholars perceived a need to consider similar complexity in the experiences of men. Connell formalised a term for the dominant, masculine behaviours as hegemonic masculinity in the first edition of her monograph *Masculinities*. Connell argues the dominant masculine ideal is defined against women and men who are less valorised by the hegemonic masculine ideal — old, impotent, pre-pubescent, poor — arguing in the introduction to the second edition that men were not “permanently committed” to one pattern of masculine behaviour but rather make “situationally specific choices” on how to act masculine.²⁰ In the Quattrocento, hegemonic masculine behaviours and identities were carefully managed by the church and elites. Early modern historians of masculinity, Patricia Simons and Ruth Mazo-Karras are two scholars whose work is foundational to the gendered interpretation of rings offered here. Simons’ *Sex of Men in Premodern Europe* calls for

¹⁸ Turner, “The Social Skin”, 15.

¹⁹ Laurence Goldstein, *The Male Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), vii

²⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, xviii-xix.

scholars to “return to men’s physical bodies” rather than the academic tendency of discussing masculinity and men as disembodied vessels of social and cultural beliefs.²¹ Simons considers men as performers of power, tracing how their physical, sexed bodies were central to premodern men’s understanding of their own gendered space and how they moved through the social environment in which they lived.²² Similarly, Ruth Mazo-Karras’ *From Boys to Men* argues that society defined feminine and masculine norms of body and behaviour for men as interrelated; she defines historic masculinity as being an “extremely vulnerable state, much more fragile than femininity, always threatened by any encroachment by women or anything remotely connected with the feminine.”²³ For Mazo-Karras, the main threat to an individual sense of manliness was not women but other men, as the subordinate status of women was so culturally ingrained they posed little threat to male superiority. Male homosocial relationships are prioritised over male-female relationships, according to sociology, reinforcing this observation by early modernists such as Mazo-Karras.²⁴ Indeed, in the competitive societies of premodern Europe, men sought to dominate and prove their maturity through sexual, economic, and political prowess over other men.²⁵ Public displays of brilliance were one such way of asserting masculine identities in spaces where they were beholden and perceived as men. Adorning their hands with valuable rings that displayed status or sacred symbols — or rings of inferior monetary value that imitated status or sacrality — contributed to the perception of an individual man’s perceived noteworthiness.

²¹ Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe*, 4.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men : Formation of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 8.

²⁴ Lu Ying-Hsiu, “King Arthur: Leadership Masculinity and Homosocial Manhood,” in *Perceiving Power in Early Modern Europe*, ed. K.H. Francis (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 86.

²⁵ Mazo Karras. *From Boys to Men*, 163.

The critical study of jewellery and adornment attracts scholars from a range of fields: those who craft jewellery, fashion historians, art historians, and scholars of material culture. From the 1980s and 1990s, the cultural turn professionalised the study of fashion and clothing, including accessories like rings. Definitionally, rings are unique amongst forms of adornment as “no other article of jewellery is so charged with personal significance or has been used for so many purposes”.²⁶ Traditional historiography of material culture positions objects as either decontextualised in catalogues or as indicators of manufacturing techniques, trade networks, or items of consumption. The uses, significance, and meaning of items such as rings became lost and the materiality of how these objects were used, ignored.²⁷ Such published scholarship on rings aimed at categorising examples of rings into different typologies and defining the stylistic parameters of each. For example, Ormonde Maddock Dalton (1866-1945) curated the British Museum’s department of British and Medieval Antiquities from 1895, and in 1912 published a catalogue of the museum’s collection of 2,532 finger rings donated to the museum by antiquarian Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897).²⁸ Dalton structured his catalogue by typology and has become an authoritative text on historic ring types with most subsequent scholarship on rings referencing Dalton, his ring categories, and assertions of the purpose of each type of ring. The history of jewellery, and especially rings, sits between several scholarly disciplines: art history, archaeology, economic history, and fashion history. Encyclopedias and broad histories on jewellery rarely

²⁶ Anita Mason, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Jewellery* (Reading: Osprey Publishing, 1973), 309.

²⁷ Eleanor R Standley, *Trinkets & Charms : The Use, Meaning and Significance of Dress Accessories, 1300-1700* (Oxford: Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, 2013), 7.

²⁸ O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Finger Rings: Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).

offer more than descriptions of ring typologies or materials.²⁹ Similarly, rings are often overlooked in favour of larger items of jewellery, such as brooches and pendants that can be more easily traced through the archives. Analysis of portraiture and Renaissance art offer discussion on gemstones and jewels rendered in paint, but most often consider these as symbolic in the artwork rather than the physical object.³⁰ Rings as objects of social history are complex to analyse. On the one hand, they are entirely divorced from their original contexts; on the other, the value of rings extend beyond the economic and become significant because of the cultural and social significance attached to them.³¹ Male identities and gender are intangible aspects of culture that rings render visible – historic rings represent fashion, trade connections, ritual exchange and gifting, crafting and commissioning practices that fortified patriarchal power.

Methodology

The early versions of this thesis intended to examine the role of exchanging luxury goods in shaping masculine authority. Initially, I explored the homosocial space of the jousting lists with the hope to understand how the exchange of material goods manifested into cultural authority and social power. Considering the literary representations of jousting, lovers,

²⁹ See:

Joan Evans, *A History of Jewellery, 1100-1870*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1970).

Yvonne Hackenbroch, *Renaissance Jewellery*. (London: Philip Wilson Publishers For Sotheby Park Bernet, 1979).

Marian Campbell, *Medieval Jewellery in Europe 1100 - 1500* (London, Great Britain: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2009).

Ronald W. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery* (London: Victoria & Albert Publications, 1992).

³⁰ Select studies include:

Diana Scarisbrick, "The Story of Jewellery Told by Paintings," in *Jewels in Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 23–37.

Leah Ruth Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court : Objects and Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³¹ Jitske Jasperse, *The Social Lives of Medieval Rings* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2025), 5.

courtly, and hereditary gift exchange, rings were gifted from men to men, and from men to women, across all these social interactions. At first, I considered museum collections of rings as one data set to be used in a broader examination of male gifting; however, I was increasingly drawn to the rings themselves as carriers of complex stories. The thesis turned to theoretical perspectives from gender studies, jewellery and art historians, sociology, anthropology, and archaeology to present rings as part of the semiotics of gender. Situating these artefacts within the long history of body and hand adornment is far beyond the scope of this project, but *Adorned Hands* places rings within Renaissance scholarship and challenges readers to renew their thinking on the socio-cultural importance of these objects. Deceptively simple questions emerged from the project's material corpus that were increasingly complex to address: how and why did men wear rings? Who, in fifteenth-century Italy, was able to purchase rings, and what did the commerce of ring-making entail? How did men store and display their rings – on and off the body? And importantly, what kind of work did they do to perform male identities?³²

Rings are objects that symbolise more than the wearer's economic status. They also indicate loyalties, education, social network, legal identity, and spiritual leadership. Adornment cannot be divorced from the society that crafted, commissioned, wore, and depicted these objects. Considered in this thesis are rings of metal, including imitative metal; those made from organic material such as plant-matter do not survive in the archaeological record. Therefore, the primary parameters for rings to be considered in this thesis were: their era

³² Carolyn Springer's methodology section of her book, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* was helpful in understanding how to articulate approaching historic male identity through the lens of object study.

(fifteenth century), their material (inorganic metals and stones), and their place of origin (Italy, central Europe.) Two methodological approaches were taken for the study of these rings: object-biography and object-driven research. American historian Bernard Herman defines object-driven material studies as taking “the evidence and questions generated by material culture and extend them into a broader inquiry aimed at the interpretation of society and culture.”³³ Aligned with this definition, this thesis strives to analyse gender and masculinity in the fifteenth century as driven by the information derived from the rings themselves. Additionally, I sought to construct an object-biography for each ring, a method borrowed from archaeology and anthropology. Eleanor R. Standley is a British archaeologist and professor at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, who has presented dress accessories as carriers of social information on everyday lived experiences in Medieval England. Standley argues, in her 2013 monograph, that her aim in studying object-biographies is to “re-engage the material world with past individuals; the objects themselves the subject of analysis, not just a prop for wider research.”³⁴ This thesis aims to engage with rings as Standley does her trinkets and charms to understand the connection between such personal possessions and the human experience. The material value of precious metals and gemstones made rings popular items to be traded and inherited; but they were just as easily lost and misidentified through the passage of time and ownership.

Historical rings have been amassed in the display cases of modern art collectors such as Ralph Harari (1893–1969), Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897), and Benjamin Zucker (1940-). Though some were acquired by public institutions such as the British Museum, the

³³ Bernard Herman, *The Stolen House*, (Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1992), 11.

³⁴ Standley, *Trinkets and Charms*, 1.

beneficiary of the Wollaston Franks collection, typically privately owned collections are only accessible through publications by scholars who have been granted permission by the owners. With thanks to pioneering jewellery scholar Diana Scarisbrick, Sandra Hindman, and Yvonne Markowitz, some private collections of rings have been photographed and published with commentary.³⁵ Such jewellery scholars, and corresponding publications, typically focus on a temporally diverse, ahistorical corpus brought together by private collectors. Instead, this thesis considered examples from across several collections of rings that were dated to the fifteenth century. Major collections of historic jewellery considered for this thesis are:

- Alice and Louis Koch Collection – National Museum of Switzerland, Zurich
- The Griffin Collection – privately owned, location unknown
- The Ashmolean Museum collection of Rings – Oxford, England
- The Zucker Collection of Rings – privately owned, New York City, USA
- Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection – New York, USA
- Victoria & Albert Museum Collection – London, England
- British Museum Collection – London, England

The analytical focus offered here is on rings I was able to physically handle and study, rather than rely on the filtered scholarship of others. Jewellery historian Joan Evans outlined the need for gemstones to be handled, as being stored within a museum display case dims the

³⁵ Selected publications include:

Sandra Hindman, *Take This Ring: Medieval and Renaissance Rings from the Griffin Collection* (Brepolis & Publishers, 2015).

Yvonne J Markowitz and Susanne Gänsicke, *Beyond Adornment* (Getty Publications, 2025).

Diana Scarisbrick, *Rings: Jewelry of Power, Love and Loyalty* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).

beauty and radiance of gemstones.³⁶ Photography, even high-resolution modern photographs, cannot substitute physical study of the rings. Physical study enabled me to understand the physicality of the rings in greater depth: how the stones and metal interacted with light, the weight and feel of the ring on my finger, its size relative to both my hand and the other rings studied. Through personal observation, the rings came alive: wear patterns, imperfections, chipped glass, facets of jewels; these details are rarely captured in catalogue photography but are essential in conceptualising how rings interacted with their wearer. To properly understand the visual power and symbolism conveyed by items of adornment, they must be handled to observe interactions with the body and surrounding environment. For this reason, it was imperative to my methodology that I was able to hold, wear, and photograph the rings discussed across the three chapters as such understanding could not be gained through relying on secondary descriptions.

A corpus of 708 rings was studied from digital museums catalogues with high resolution photography and 45 rings were selected for in-person study. Rings housed at the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford form the majority of the corpus; ease of accessing these collections and travel logistics were the main factors in selecting these institutions. The rings studied in person were drawn from diverse typologies and shared similarities in materiality and style with other surviving rings. Each ring was tried on the same finger to appreciate their size, weight, and comfort. Each was then measured, photographed, and first impressions recorded. It was useful to note emotional responses to seeing each ring: at some I gasped in astonishment, others I felt a

³⁶ Evans, *A History of Jewellery*, 9.

disinterest towards, and at one or two I cried in joy at finally seeing in person. Beyond the subjective, haptic revelations and clues about fabrication techniques were observable such as seams in the metal and different methods of securing gemstones. Within the corpus are some truly remarkable examples of fifteenth century ring types.

The goal of *Adorned Hands* is to provide sustained attention to these artefacts that are often sidelined by historians to suggest how they can be understood as gendered items, situated within their historical context. Three social identities are presented in this thesis, each with a dedicated chapter, are broadly characterised as religious, elite, or common. The chapters are led by the typologies of rings studied in this thesis and should not be read as anachronistic delineations rather this structure provides an opportunity to think explicitly about varieties of masculinities in their many overlapping and intertwining realities.

Additionally, this structure creates the opportunity to provide a social context for the rings echoing the methodology of object biography.³⁷ Whilst drafting, alternative structures were considered such as comparisons between geographical polities, centuries, or countries; however, these structures did not work because of scope. Moreover, the structure presented here suited the material culture best: rings are a challenging item to analyse, and conclusions based on geography or chronology are weak due to their imprecise provenances.

³⁷ For further discussion on object-biography methodology, see Standley, *Trinkets and Charms*, 7-8.; Penny Cunningham, and Linda Hurcombe. *The life cycle of structures in experimental archaeology: an object biography approach*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2016, 18.; Jody Joy. "Reinvigorating Object Biography: Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives." *World Archaeology* 41, no. 4 (2009): 540–56.; Carlene E. Stephens. "'The Great Historical Clock of America': An Object Biography." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 46, no. 1 (2024): 171–89.

Masculine identities have both social and psychological aspects.³⁸ Historical distance complicates our ability to understand the psychology of premodern men, but rings provide material means through which to conceptualise the social aspect of male identities in the fifteenth century. What *Adorned Hands* achieves is centralising rings as contributors of masculine presentations; carriers of symbolism and wealth that represent the male owner's visibility and connection within his community.

³⁸ Derek G Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 6.

Sumptuous Scripture: Adorning the Religious Male Hand

Either mid-flight or mid-fall, a grotesquely graceful demon adorns the edges of a fifteenth-century manuscript. Produced in the north of Italy between 1425-1450, such subject matter for manuscript drollery is not unexpected from a devoutly Christian community. The object upon which this serpentine devil hurtles is more surprising. An over-sized gold ring set with a honed, pointed diamond creates a tableau of imminent pain and defeat.



Figure 1: detail from Cecco d'Ascoli, *L'Acerba*, northern Italy, 1425-50. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2608, fol. 37r. Photo: ÖBN, Vienna

The point of the diamond is off-centre from the demon's body, perhaps suggesting the ring to be a ward of protection against unholy evils rather than a killing object. Looking back over its shoulder, the demon's gaze is fixed on the diamond-set ring and creates a vector

between him and the ring (fig. 1). The drollery decorates the opening of the forty-eighth chapter of a Quattrocento copy of the encyclopaedic text, *L'Acerba* by Cecco d'Ascoli (1257-1327). This chapter contains a lapidary that outlines the mystical powers – or 'virtues' – of minerals, including precious stones such as diamonds. The horned head of the demon is alongside the lines of the poem that discuss the powers of the diamond: their resistance to the power of necromancy and the power to poison spirits.³⁹ Evidently, d'Ascoli believed the early modern form of mineral science that blended spiritual mysticism with observable fact. Seemingly, so too did the demon whose trepidatious gaze at the ring the lapidary helps to explain.

L'Acerba states this anti-demonic power of a diamond manifests when tied to the left arm, wherefore wearing a diamond ring on the left hand may be the most practical way to do so.⁴⁰ D'Ascoli's ascription of mystical powers to a diamond merged Christian mysticism with ancient practices of wearing precious protective stones. Whilst not always set in rings, adorning the hand with mystically powerful stones was a popular choice as rings are easily worn against bare skin. Fifteenth-century clothing – both male and female – was a complexity of fabric and layers that made constant contact between skin and stone difficult. Furthermore, for centuries the fourth finger on the left hand was associated with the heart,

³⁹ «Resiste soa natura al negromante; | Li spirit fuga tosseco e paura»

“[the diamond] naturally resists the necromancer; spirits flee, poisoned, and in fear” ÖNB, Cod. 2608, fol. 37r.; this notion is also expressed by Hildegard von Bingen in her discussion of diamonds for healing “Because this stone withstands his power, the devil is hostile to diamond, and so, at night as well as during the day, the devil distains it.” Hildegard and Priscilla Throop. *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica: The Complete English Translation of Her Classic Work on Health and Healing*. (Rochester: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 152

Translation: author's own.

⁴⁰ For further analysis, see: Brigitte Buettner, *The Mineral and the Visual* (Penn State Press, 2022), 120-122.

due to the ancient belief the two were connected by a vein.⁴¹ Sixteenth century English surgeon, Thomas Thayre, composed a treatise that outlined the causes and protections against pestilence. A preventative measure he advised was to:

bear about you precious stones... they be stronger if they be borne upon your naked skin, chiefly upon the fourth finger of the left hand, for that hath great affinity with the heart.⁴²

Thayre asserts direct skin contact was needed for maximum efficacy when wearing stones and references the long-held belief that the left hand contained a vein from the fourth finger (from the thumb) to the heart. For anatomical, cosmic, and practical reasons, a ring was the most effective item of adornment to keep precious stones about the body for talismanic and apotropaic protection.

Protective rings from the fifteenth century evidence a transitioning from classical, ancient symbols of protection to Christian iconography and scripture. Reset into a silver ring during the early Quattrocento, a first- or second-century BCE onyx intaglio attests to the continued belief in the power of stones from the ancients to the early modern (fig. 2). Fitting comfortably on the fourth finger, this ring's purpose was to protect the wearer from misfortune.

⁴¹ Mentioned by Macrobius in *Saturnalia*, VII, 13:8, who attributes the knowledge to Ancient Egyptians

⁴² Thomas Thayre, *A Treatise of the Pestilence*, 1560. As quoted in Standley, *Trinkets & Charms*, 90.



Figure 2: unknown, *Ring*, 1400-1425 (ring), 200BC-100BC (intaglio). Engraved silver with ribbon onyx intaglio, 1.6 x 1.9cm. Victoria&Albert Museum London, 724-1871.

Engraved with a scorpion, these arachnids were considered an apotropaic symbol that could heal or reverse the effects of poison.⁴³ Commissioned by Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574), a medicinal text contains the recipe for *olio di scorpioni* as an antidotal oil.⁴⁴ The oil required scorpions to be fed on fresh basil for fifteen days before being immersed, alive, in cold olive oil.⁴⁵ Perhaps, then, the wearer of this ancient scorpion was invoking its image as defence against poison. The stone itself, onyx, was believed to form in thick clouds, "when the sun is very hot".⁴⁶ The onyx was potent against illnesses such as fever, stomach complaints, cataracts, and heart concerns.⁴⁷ Marbode of Rennes (1035-1123) associated the onyx in his medical lapidary with the power to interpret religious visions.⁴⁸ The wearer of

⁴³ Elizabeth Miller, Marta Ajmar-Wollheim, and Flora Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: V&A, 2006), 187; see also S. Cohen, "Chapter Ten. The Ambivalent Scorpio In Bronzinos London Allegory." In *Animals As Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, (United States: BRILL, 2008), 267-268 about symbolism of scorpions in art.

⁴⁴ Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Palatino 1139, fols 12r-14v in Alessio Assonitis and Henk Th. van Veen. *A Companion to Cosimo I de' Medici*. 1st ed. Vol. 17. (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 560 n170.

⁴⁵ Bellowini, Cristina. *The World of Plants in Renaissance Tuscany : Medicine and Botany*. (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Ashgate, 2016), 40.

⁴⁶ Hildegard, *Physica*, 140

⁴⁷ Hildegard, *Physica*, 140-141

⁴⁸ Transcribed and translated in Marbode, and John M Riddle. *Marbode of Rennes' De Lapidibus : Considered as a Medical Treatise with Text, Commentary, and C.W. King's Translation, Together with Text and Translation of Marbode's Minor Works on Stones*. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977), 128.

this onyx ring may have done so in hopes of greater wisdom in identifying and interpreting moments of divine wisdom. Though now indecipherable, the worn inscription around the bezel suggests this was an item the owner frequently interacted with. Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) throughout her treatise on health recommends rubbing stones or wearing them in contact with the skin to allow the body's warmth to activate the healing properties of the stone.⁴⁹ The wear is predominantly on the east-west axis of the bezel, which could be from the owner rubbing the onyx for comfort or to invoke the stones' healing properties.

Another early Quattrocento ring, made in Venice, blends pre-Christian belief and early modern Catholicism. The tall claw setting loosely holds an engraved amethyst, with the outer hoop inscribed with Lombardic lettering; a verse from John, 1:14, *et verbum caro factum est*, meaning 'and the word became flesh' (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Unknown, *Episcopal Ring*, 14th-15th century. Engraved gold and amethyst, 1.8x0.3cm. Ashmolean Museum Oxford, WA1897.CDEF.F389

⁴⁹ Hildegard, *Physica*: Hildegard suggests setting into a ring of pure gold or silver: a splinter of Linden wood (122), sapphire (143), sardonyx (142), eye of a copprea (167), eye of a vulture (182), and the heart of a woodpecker (194). She specifies to never use brass as the metal is ignoble and will cause ill health (240).

The oval amethyst is elevated by simple prongs almost a full centimetre above the hoop (fig. 4). Such a high setting is unusual and without a definitive purpose. Undoubtedly, the projection of the stone would have made the amethyst prominent and more visible, perhaps to be seen through a slashed or thick-fabric glove. If the figure engraved is that of a classical deity – perhaps Mercury or Juno, associated with wisdom – the tall setting creates space between the holy words and the pre-Christian figure. Further, the setting may have enabled the wearer easier access to touch the stone when seeking its power, similar to the rub pattern on the scorpion ring.⁵⁰ Amethysts are referenced in the Old Testament as one of twelve stones adhered to the gold breastplate of Moses' brother, the High Priest Aaron, and as one of the boulders that support Heavenly Jerusalem.⁵¹ They also conclude Marbode's Christian Symbolic Lapidary; a fitting choice as amethysts represent the "virtue of virtues" which is praying for one's enemy, with the fiery glow of the stone thought a manifestation of the flame of charity in their owners.⁵² The choice of inscription, of holy scripture rendered flesh, alludes to the belief in the power of the tangible. In having the words literally wrap the flesh of the wearer, the holy power of the biblical phrase is given heat and life. This ring brings together the holy Christian text and lithic magic: the long-practiced spiritual belief of precious stones and metals being imbued with virtues.

⁵⁰ Interestingly, Hildegard's discussion of amethyst suggests the stones cure spider bites and spider venom; another antidotal connection between the two rings. See: Hildegard, *Physica*, 150.

⁵¹ Exodus, 28:19 (Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation); Apocalypse, 21:20 (Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation).

⁵² «virtus virtutum»

Marbode and Riddle, *De Lapidibus*, 129.



Figure 4: side-view of Figure 3 to illustrate the height of the setting

Precious stones and rings appear throughout both Old and New Testaments. Rings in the Bible carried significance beyond simple aesthetics: they were exchanged as tools of power, leadership, and command, and a sartorial readiness to be seen as respectable in society. The act of removing the ring from a ruler's finger onto the hand of another was a physical manifestation of authority and legitimacy being transferred from one temporal form to another. Rings acted as portable, wearable symbols of authority that were culturally imbued with authority and indicators of rank and identity. The authority that rings carried was inherently masculine due to the patriarchal society in which they appeared. One of the earliest references to ring-wearing is in Genesis 41:42 within the narrative of Joseph and Pharaoh. Pharaoh removes the ring from his hand to give to Joseph in a symbolic transition of power over Egypt.⁵³ Again, in the Book of Esther, a similar power exchange between two men that was solidified with a ring. King Xerxes of Persia gave his ring to Aman to authorise his destruction of the Jews in the name of the king. Such authority was conveyed through Aman's use of Xerxes' ring to verify letters and missives he wrote.⁵⁴ These two biblical

⁵³ Genesis, 41:42, (Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims translation).

⁵⁴ Book of Ester, 3:10, (Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims translation)

events reflect the political importance of rings as tools of authority that could be transferred from one owner to another.

In the New Testament, the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke, 15:22) records the practice of exchanging rings between father and son, and the use of rings as sartorial markers of social respectability. The father commands his servants to bring the best robe “and put a ring on [the son’s] hand and shoes on his feet”.⁵⁵ Wearing a ring is made akin to putting on shoes before appearing in public. Upon the son’s rediscovery by his father, a ring is one of the final items of dress needed for the son to reappear before his community as readmitted into his father’s household. Another part of the New Testament, General Epistle of James, contains a series of letters with commands on living a faithful life. One letter mandates how religious teacher should conduct themselves and includes hypothetical situations, such as: should a wealthy man “having a gold ring” and a poor man both seek a spiritual education, the teacher should not show preference for the man adorned with gold. James challenges them with a reminder that God favours those rich in faith rather than monies.⁵⁶ The ring is specified as gold – *aureum* – in the letter an indicator of financial wealth and social standing. Men of the Bible establish a precedent for male ring-wearing that likely provided spiritual approval for followers of Christ to similarly adorn their hands. However, the lack of description in the scriptures as to the size, crafting, and value of these rings creates ambiguity as to how lavish men could be with their rings.

⁵⁵ «et date anulum in manum eius», Luke, 15:22, Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims translation)

⁵⁶ «vestrum vir aureum anulum», James 2:2, Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims translation)

Throughout the Bible, dogma emphasises spiritual and religious devotion over worldly goods; most famously with the parable of passing a camel through the eye of a needle being easier than a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven.⁵⁷ Without clear condemnation of overly ostentatious rings, luxury and splendour could seep into religious rings, which soon became integral to the display of spiritual authority by men of the Latin church. As with Xerxes, Aman, and the Prodigal Son, rings were tokens of power that temporal leaders of the church could emulate in their own sartorial presentation of ecclesiastic authority. Herein lies a point of tension that was never fully resolved, even in the fifteenth century, between Christlike virtues of restraint and humbleness with the outward need to honour the divine grandeur of the church. The adoption of princely regalia as part of religious dress is difficult to pinpoint to a precise moment. Like much of fashion history, influences and changes were implemented over the centuries until the austerity of early churchmen was lost amongst the gold, silk, and gemstones.

The medieval and early modern Christian church continued the talismanic belief in powerful gem-set rings established by classical traditions and mirrored the adorned hands of Biblical male figures. Rings were part of the formal ritual investment of bishops, cardinals and popes, though it is unclear which century the practice started. Throughout this chapter, the history of rings as part of the Latin church – including a chronology of practice – will be presented. Though spiritual, the scorpion and amethyst rings are not representative of an institutional typology. Ecclesiastic rings discussed henceforth are ring-types worn by

⁵⁷ Matthew 19:23-24, (Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims translation)

generations of men during the fifteenth century as indicators of their princely rank within the church, and vital parts of the ecclesiastic wardrobe.

The Ecclesiastical Male Wardrobe

Vesting for mass was a ritual of dressing to transition a mortal body into a vessel of godly wisdom and power. Christian reformers in sixteenth century England would critique the Catholic Church's use of elaborate vestments as symbolic of the inequality between the male clergy and the male laity.⁵⁸ To be argued here, this distinction was intentional. Men of the religious order were to be visually distinguished from secular society whilst embodying the glory of Christ's church on earth. The magnificence of heaven outlined in the bible, and referenced above, describes a profusion of precious material adorning God's kingdom and it was the function of his earthly clergy to mirror this wealth and power.

Each garment that formed the vestments in the fifteenth century had a varied history as to when they were adopted by the clergy, with some originating in the late Roman Empire as a legacy of the imperial conversion from Classical polytheism to Christianity.⁵⁹ From the ninth century, vestments and adornments became increasingly lavish, with courtly fashion influencing the church from the tenth.⁶⁰ As the Latin church became established in Europe and increased its role in the lives of people and states, men who held positions of significance took on the trappings of European princes due to the nexus between political

⁵⁸ Maria Hayward, "Reflections on Gender and Status Distinctions: An Analysis of the Liturgical Textiles Recorded in Mid-Sixteenth-Century London," *Gender & History* 14 (2002): 405

⁵⁹ Percy Dearmer, *The Ornaments of the Ministers* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., 1908), 7.

⁶⁰ Maureen Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, C.800-1200* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 39.

influence, material wealth, and social authority in pre-modern Europe. Rings can be traced through the history of clerical dress, but frustratingly the archive lacks detail on the appearance and materials of these early rings. As succinctly highlighted by nineteenth-century biblical archaeologist Robert Macalister, the challenge with studying religious rings is that “their use was universal among both Christian and heathen.”⁶¹ Delineating rings created solely to be worn as religious vestment, with no temporal or pre-Christian symbolism, is nigh impossible from documentary and archaeological records until the early modern church. Even so, written records often focus on the symbolism of the ring rather than how the ring is constructed.

Early Christian writings discuss rings as part of the ritual ordaining of a bishop. Rings were discovered in tombs of bishops from the third century, a date corroborated by documentary evidence from the third to fifth centuries.⁶² Rings also appear in the records from ecclesiastical councils, with the earliest from the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633. St Isidore of Seville, who presided over the council, decreed that rings were to be given to a bishop upon his consecration “to signify pontifical honour, or as a seal for secret things”.⁶³ These stated purposes suggest the design of a bishop’s ring was akin to a seal or signet ring: authentication and confidentiality of written correspondence. Signet rings were used by merchants in ancient Rome, which suggests episcopal rings used to seal secrets may be another item of vestment inherited from antiquity.⁶⁴ Centuries later in 980, a manuscript

⁶¹ Macalister, R.A.S. *Ecclesiastical Vestments: Their Development and History*, London, 1896. Pp. 54-55

⁶² R.A.S Macalister, *Ecclesiastical Vestments* (London, 1896).

⁶³ Isidore of Seville, ca. 637 in Henry J McCloud, *Clerical Dress and Insignia of the Roman Catholic Church* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1948), 131.

⁶⁴ Pliny the Elder, c.24-75 BCE, writes of signet rings in his *Naturalis Historiae*. See Book 33, Chapter 9.

attributed to Abbot Ratold of Corbie (986-1014) provided an early description of the coronation rituals of electing bishops. Section 16 of the *Ratold Ordo* contains a brief outline of the purpose behind giving the man a ring: it signified the religious authority to repel enemies, destroy heretics, gather subjects, and preserve the faith.⁶⁵ The Latin *anulus* is used with no descriptors and so providing no linguistic clue as to the type of ring that symbolised such righteous power in the tenth century. Neither text provides comprehensive detail of the material make of these rings, nor details of the size and shape. Literary tradition denotes sapphires as the jewels associated with bishops, though this is difficult to verify from the material archive.⁶⁶ Bishops and rings appear again in the twelfth century during the ‘Investiture Controversy’, when secular rulers and the church quarrelled over who had the authority to invest a man as a bishop. Pope Paschal II (1099-1118) used the controversy, in conjunction with the death of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV (1084-1105), to empower the papacy by affirming at the 1106 Council of Guastalla that the church forbade “lay investiture of a bishop with ring and staff.”⁶⁷ Paschal’s ban on the secular appointing of bishops suggests these lay nominations had occurred without formal church approval. Bishopric authority and investment, then, could be bestowed through the receiving of a ring and staff; by whom was secondary to the items and ritual itself. This incident exemplifies the political tension that required the pontiff to assert prominence and control beyond the walls of the Vatican, as secular rulers of Europe solidified their geo-political spheres of influence. This tension between secular and sacred authority carried through the late

⁶⁵ Transcribed in Richard A Jackson, *Ordines Coronationis Franciae, Volume 1: Texts and Ordines for the Coronation of Frankish and French Kings and Queens in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 185.

⁶⁶ See the ‘Table of Ecclesiastical Vestments’ in Macalister, *Ecclesiastical Vestments*, 64.

⁶⁷ M. J. Wilks, “Ecclesiastica and Regalia: Papal Investiture Policy from the Council of Guastalla to the First Lateran Council, 1106–23,” *Studies in Church History* 7 (1971): 69–85, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0424208400016466>, 70.

medieval church and culminated in the schism of the sixteenth-century. The need for effective regalia would become increasingly important for the pontiff as the church transitioned from medieval to early modern.

As the bishop of Rome, the pope was the most authoritative bishop and so received a unique ring. First documented in the thirteenth century, the token known as the pope's Fisherman's Ring evidences the expansion of religious rings beyond those of bishops and talismans.



Figure 5: illustrated copies of the annulo piscatoris for Pope Innocent VIII (left) and Pope Alexander VI (right), late 15th-century pontiffs, from the 1787 dissertation of Georg Andreas Will. Photo: München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

The Fisherman's Ring, or *Annulo Piscatoris*, is the primary ring worn by popes to signify their authority and leadership of the church. Made anew for each pope upon his investiture, the ring depicts Saint Peter fishing and directly tied the individual man inhabiting the seat of the Holy See with the legacy of the apostle. The iconography references Matthew 4:18-19, when Jesus met Peter, one of his first disciples. The motif of a fisherman who collects fish into his net is a recurring visual metaphor of Jesus calling the faithful to him, as well as the primary evangelising role of his disciples. According to Matthew, Jesus calls to Peter and his brother

Andrew, claiming that should they follow him, he will make them “fishers of men”.⁶⁸ In the fifteenth century, the Fisherman’s Ring was one of three papal seals and was impressed into red wax.⁶⁹ The other two, the *bullā* and the *signum*, provided papal verification of church official documents, whilst the Fisherman’s Ring seems to have been used for a pope’s personal correspondence. Upon a pope’s death, this ring was ceremonially destroyed by the cardinal Camerlengo as a way of preventing falsified documents and to signify the conclusion of the pope’s temporal power.⁷⁰

The precise origins of the Fisherman’s Ring are unclear with fragmentary documentary evidence. Pope Clement IV (1305-1314) in 1265 described one of his letters as *sub Piscatorio Sigillio* – under the seal of the Fisherman. In a letter to his nephew, Pope Clement IV described the “secrets” of the Roman popes to be “under the Fisherman’s Seal.”⁷¹ Fifteenth-century popes continued to use such phrasing in their own document writing, such as Martin V (1417-1431) and Eugenius IV (1431-1447), both of whom wrote letters under the Fisherman’s Ring.⁷² Georg Andreas Will, an eighteenth-century historian, submitted his dissertation on the diplomacy of the *annulo piscatoris* in 1787. Will evaluated the use and rarity of the ring in the dissertation; he claims the ring was never seen outside of Rome and the papal chambers, with no sketch of the ring nor imprint of the seal existing.⁷³ Given the

⁶⁸ Matthew 4:19, (Vulgate Latin Bible: Douay-Rheims translation).

⁶⁹ Thomas Dudley Fosbroke, *Encyclopedia of Antiquities: And Elements of Archaeology, Classical and Mediæval* (London: M.A. Nattali, 1843), 253.

⁷⁰ René Ostberg, “Fisherman’s Ring,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fishermans-Ring>.

⁷¹ *Sed sub Piscatoris Sigillo quo Romani Pontifices in suis secretis utuntur*.

Edmund Waterton, “XI.—on the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman,” *Archaeologia* 40, no. 1 (1866): 138–42, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261340900004628>, 1.

⁷² Waterton, “on the Annulus Piscatoris”, 139.

⁷³ Georg Andrea Will, “Specimen Inaugurale Sphragistico-Diplomaticum de Annulo Piscatoris” (Dissertation, 1787), 16.

ring's primary use was to authentic private or secret letters, restricted access to the iconography and ring makes sense as a way to obviate forgeries or counterfeit seals. Chapter Ten of Will's dissertation is an account of how he gained access to papal briefs housed in the Nuremberg archives that were sealed with a red wax image of St Peter and papal names. Luckily, Will decided to draw copies of the two most legible examples he found, which he included on the front pages of his thesis (fig. 5).⁷⁴ Will's find in the Nuremberg archives attests to the use of the Fisherman's Ring for sealing his personal Briefs in red wax, and that the impression was ovoidal not circular.⁷⁵ Only a lover of diplomatic arts, to use Will's characterisation, would have recognised the impression as those of the Fisherman's Ring. A signet ring depicting the face of St Paul and St Peter, inscribed on the reverse as belonging to Pope Paul II (1464-1471), was mistakenly described as his Fisherman's Ring when auctioned by Sotheby's in 1940.⁷⁶ Such misattribution reflects the difficulty in studying this genre of ring that is understudied and poorly preserved in the historical record. Recent scholarship is largely silent on the Fisherman's Ring or dismisses it as merely "a memento of Peter's original profession."⁷⁷ Scholars, again, present rings as trinketry and sentimental adornment rather than codified items of status and authority.

Hitherto, the Fisherman's Ring as presented as an archival ghost, existing in references and sketches. Tracing the ring through the historical record is problematic as it was ceremonially destroyed. Upon the death of a pope, the vestments of his office such as the papal bull,

⁷⁴ Will, *Specimen Inaugurale*, 18

⁷⁵ «Brevia Papalia»

Will, *Specimen Inaugurale*, 18.

⁷⁶ Diana Scarisbrick, "A Signet Ring of Pope Paul II," *The Burlington Magazine* 127, no. 986 (May 1985): 292–94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/882067>, 294.

⁷⁷ Miles Pattenden, "The Papal Tiara in Sacred Historiography," *The Catholic Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2024): 630–55, 630.

were secured in a strong canvas bag by the Camerlengo to prevent correspondence being sent fraudulently.⁷⁸ However, the Fisherman's Ring is removed from the deceased pope and broken, in front of the curia of cardinals, to signify the end of his leadership of the church.⁷⁹ At the time of a papal passing, the funerary rituals ensure a distinction between the physical person and intransience of the church.⁸⁰ Only the Fisherman's Ring is destroyed as it is the pope's only semi-personal effect of office. In London's Victoria and Albert Museum, is a ca.1780 bloodstone intaglio set into a gold ring, depicting St Peter drawing in a net (fig. 6).



Figure 6: Unknown, Seal, ca.1780. Bloodstone and Gold, 3x2.3x2.1cm. London, 749-1871. Photo: Victoria&Albert Museum

Dated to the middle of Pope Pius VI (1717-1799)'s reign, perhaps the papal jewellers had unnamed Fisherman's Ring 'on hand', so as not to delay the investiture of a new pope.

Unlike the rings of status of the cardinals and bishops, the Fisherman's Ring was

⁷⁸ Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *The Pope's Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 119.

⁷⁹ Francesco Cancellieri, *Notizie Sopra l'Origine E l'Uso Dell'anello Pescatorio E Degli Alteri Anelli Ecclesiastici* (Rome: Presso Francesco Bourli , 1822), 9.

⁸⁰ Bagliani, *The Pope's Body*, 120.

paradoxical: publicly understood as a symbol of papal authority but shrouded in mystery regarding the specifications of the ring. Wearing it provides the pope, a mortal man, momentary custodianship of the throne of Saint Peter. Unlike other papal vestments that are unchanged from papacy to papacy, the Fisherman's Ring bears the individual man's papal name. The existence of the fisherman intaglio (fig. 6) suggests the pope may also have had choice in the design of his ring, another deviation from the uniformity of his other vestments. This individualism of the ring mirrors the duality of a pope's masculinity. As a temporary holder of the office of Saint Peter, each pope exists in liminality between sacred and secular. Wearing a Fisherman's Ring connects each pope to past bishops of Rome and contributes to the unending inheritance from Saint Peter, whilst also a token of individuality as each Fisherman's Ring is of slightly different design and material.

Religious ring wearing has a gendered significance beyond just representing wealth and power. An essential distinction is to be made, between the man as a vassal of the Lord and the man as a temporal individual. The pope wears his Fisherman's Ring on a bare hand as his body is sacrosanct whilst he holds the position of holy see. For men whose body is in religious service, but is not as sacred as a pope, a material barrier is required. Avoiding bare touch upon the relics and paraphernalia of ritual imbued items with greater sacrality, only to be handled by the most holy and even then, not with the touch of bare flesh. Bishop gloves were worn to indicate the hands performing liturgical rites are blessed, pure, and not a human hand beneath the glove.⁸¹ In 2010, an archbishop's grave in the German cathedral

⁸¹ Annemarieke Willemsen, "The Geoff Egan Memorial Lecture 2013 Taking up the Glove: Finds, Uses and Meanings of Gloves, Mittens and Gauntlets in Western Europe, c. AD 1300-1700," *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 23-27

of Magdeburg was opened. Upon the right hand of the body were the remains of a decorated glove and an episcopal ring.⁸² This burial indicates some religious men wished to be interred with their vestments, of which their ring was a key item. Devotional art provides an important visual record of the wardrobes and adornment of living religious men. A fourteenth-century altar piece from Prague depicts a bishop in the lower-left corner worshipping an immense Madonna and Child (fig. 7).



Figure 7: detail from unknown, *Glatz Madonna*, c. 1350. Poplar wood, 187.8x96.4cm. Gemäldegalerie Berlin, 1624. Photo: Berlin State Museums, Picture Gallery/ Jörg P. Anders

Reverently placed on the structure before him, the bishop's gloves rest with the rings still threaded on the fingers of his episcopal gloves. Removing the gloves with the rings still in place prevents them from coming into contact with the bare, human hands of the bishop and so retaining their religious purity. Fifteenth-century artists such as Gentile da Fabriano and Carlo Crivelli also depicted religious rings worn over gloves (fig. 8, fig. 9).

⁸² Willemsen, "Taking up the Glove", 25.



Figure 8: detail of religious glove with gold symbolic medallion and ruby ring (right hand). Gentile da Fabriano, Coronation of the Virgin with Saints (Valle Romita Polyptych), c.1405. Tempera on Panel, 117.5 x 40 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



Figure 9: detail of Saint Peter's gloved hands with rings; left panel of triptych. Right glove is visible with a gold medallion encrusted with pearls and a ruby. Carlo Crivelli, San Domenico Triptych, 1482. Tempera and Oil on wood, 170x60cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

In both pieces, the saints are wearing gold rings set with gemstones. Bishop rings and gloves were sacred vestments that creates a physical barrier between the human flesh of the man's hand and the divine symbolism of the rings on their fingers. As such, these rings become divorced from the hand and body that wears them: not personal adornment but representative of the glory of God.

A Fifteenth-Century Ecclesiastic Typology

The objects catalogued as ‘papal rings’ constitute a valuable material corpus for analysing the relationship between male hands and Christian authority. Typified by their large gilt-bronze hoop and bezel, these rings are beset with coloured paste gems and decorative elements, often including the names of popes and symbols of the Evangelists. Popular with nineteenth-century collectors, the name has become a misnomer associating the rings with papal ownership or assuming them to be items of papal adornment. While understandable to a point, given the substantial size and weight of ‘papal rings’, the low-value material composition makes them unlikely to have formed part of the pontifical paraphernalia. Yet precisely who owned these rings, and for what purpose, is unclear. Few scholars have written on this typology of ring and so the scholarship has reached no definitive conclusions. Leading jewellery historian Diana Scarisbrick contended these rings had a diplomatic function, suggesting they were worn by representatives of the Pope or secular monarch whose arms are borne by the hoop.⁸³ This attribution likely relies on the similarly loose definition given in the British Museum’s published catalogue of finger rings, whose one paragraph introduction to ecclesiastical papal rings categorises these as “emblems of investiture or as credentials”.⁸⁴ Scholarship on papal rings has become self-referential, as contemporary scholars rely on the same scant descriptors of earlier academics, with most leading back to the work of O.M Dalton, an early curator at the British Museum. Dalton catalogued the rings left to the museum in 1912; his categories and descriptions of ring-types have become authoritative for subsequent scholars. For papal rings particularly, the

⁸³ Diana Scarisbrick, *Historic Rings: Four Thousand Years of Craftsmanship* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2004), 55.

⁸⁴ Dalton, *Catalogue of Finger Rings*, 129.

lack of sustained analysis is exacerbated by a paucity of contemporary evidence in the documentary records.⁸⁵ Without supporting descriptions or paintings to illustrate how these rings were used, worn, and exchanged, papal rings have been relegated to items of ceremony with little further interrogation.

These rings are primarily dated by pontificate, as indicated through the papal names inscribed on their hoops with most surviving examples date to the fifteenth century. Other categories of ring considered in this thesis — signet, bejewelled, wedding — have histories originating before the Quattrocento, whilst papal rings seem to emerge in the fifteenth century. Museums including the Victoria & Albert, London; the British museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence; and the Ashmolean, Oxford have in their collections a combined thirty-two examples of finger rings that have been classified in the various catalogues as a “papal ring”.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ David Chambers, *Renaissance Cardinals and Their Worldly Problems* (Routledge, 1997), 21.

⁸⁶ As of 2025, some museums are beginning to label these rings as ‘papal legate accreditation insignia’ rather than ‘papal rings’, hopefully to address this misleading name.

Other institutions, such as the Musée Cluny du Moyen Âge in Paris, and the Vatican Museum contain examples of papal rings. However, these collections are incomplete online and so need in-person study.

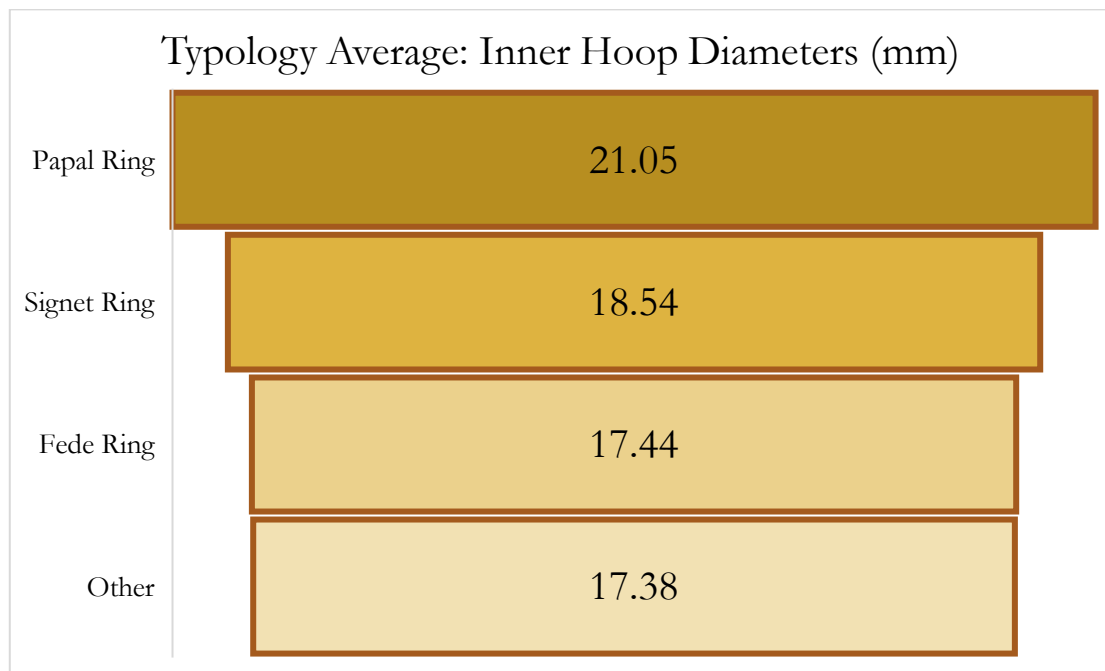


Figure 10: Funnel Graph illustrating the different diameters of the broad categories of rings studied.⁸⁷

Before delving further into these rings’ cultural significance, it is important to establish how unique the physicality and materiality of these rings are in comparison to other examples of fifteenth-century rings. Figure 10 graphs the comparative diameter of the inner hoop of a papal ring to other types studied. The average gram weight of papal rings studied is 168.55g — a few grams shy of the weight of a contemporary smartphone — with the heaviest recorded being a hefty 290 grams.⁸⁸ To illustrate the size of papal rings when worn, figure 9 is a top-down and side-angled view of a papal ring on my hand.⁸⁹ The weighty feel of wearing this type of ring them uncomfortable and I was forced to hold my fingers rigidly parallel to the table, lest they fall off. The wide opening of the hoop made them incredibly loose on my finger; designed for gloves much thicker than the museum latex gloves. Thicker

⁸⁷ The graph was created from data collected on a research trip to Europe in July/August 2024 of fifty-two rings. The category of ‘other’ includes rings set with gemstones, decorative, and posy ring-types.

⁸⁸ The data collected for both the funnel graph and weight averages was gathered during a research trip to England in July 2024.

⁸⁹ My ring size is 19.5mm diameter.

gloves would assist with the looseness, though the high relief details on the outer hoop along with the thickness of the metal meant my fingers were forced into unnaturally wide spacing. With time and regularity of wear I may have grown accustomed to this splaying of my fingers; however, basic manual movement was impacted including bending my fingers, forming a fist, or holding items. Yet, the rings were undoubtedly dazzling and difficult to ignore, visually conveying authority and status.

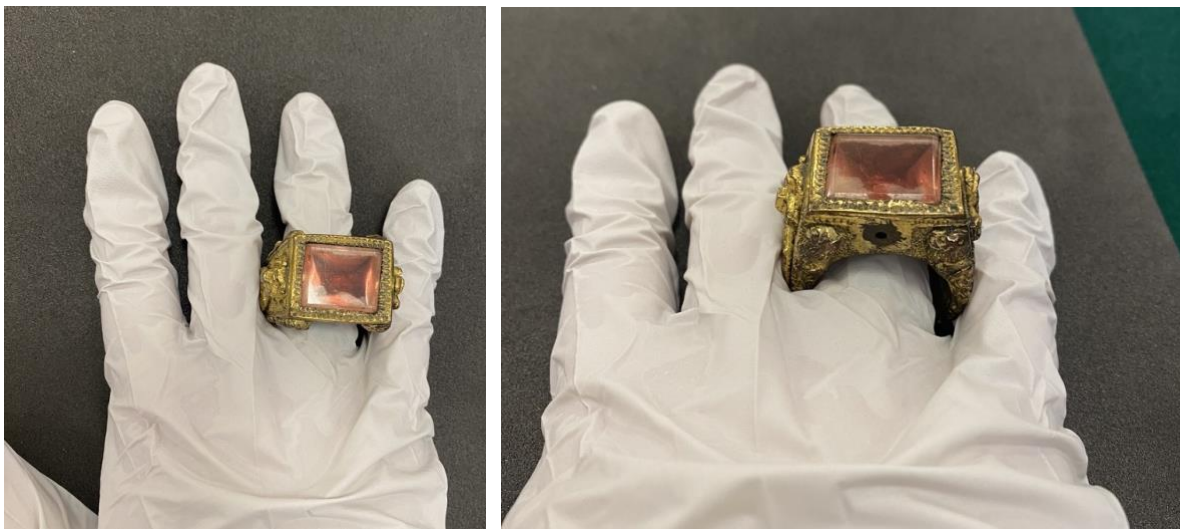


Figure 11: Unknown, *Papal Ring*, 1401-1500. Bronze-gilt, 26cm. Ashmolean, WA1897.CDEF.F429

The sheer size and weight of these rings does support arguments identifying them as ceremonial rather than everyday objects, yet there is scope to consider more deeply how these items of hand adornment were used as tools in male networks of exchange.

The men who adorned their hands with this type of ring would remain conscious of the object as physically heavy, along with the symbolic, weighted significance of what these rings represented. These rings had the power through which to culturally code the hand as sacred with borrowed papal religious authority. In this way, a pope through his representative could project his masculine and Godly authority into public, secular spaces.

By exchanging rings, the pope and his designated clergy echoed and enacted the homosocial practice of ring exchange in the Bible. In mirroring the Fisherman's Ring that the pope received upon consecration, the giving of papal rings created a tangible connection between the pope and representatives of the church. Men who received and wore a papal ring would be lent the credence of the pope while acting under the authority of that ring. Bishop rings, papal rings, and the Fisherman's Ring form a triumvirate of ecclesiastic authority, each contributing to the significance of the other.

Papal rings offer a tantalising window into the jeweller's arts of the fifteenth-century, not least because the pontificate engraved on the ring offers a specific date-range for manufacture than is common for rings, which are usually dated to an approximate century. Of the twenty-eight rings Dalton's catalogued as 'papal', fourteen have been linked to a papal reign. In chronological order: Martin V, Eugenius IV, Nicholas V (1447-1455), Calixtus III (1455-1458), Pius II (1458-1464), Paul II, Sixtus IV (1471-1484), Innocent VIII (1484-1492). Spanning seventy-five years, these rings evidence a practice sustained across multiple papacies, which suggests they were efficacious and thus desirable objects. Evidenced by the surviving examples of papal rings, pontifical rule in the fifteenth century must have required ostentatious and overt pieces of ceremonial propaganda as part of their visual communication of godly authority and temporal power.

This thesis asserts papal rings, their creation, and distribution came as a papal response to a rise in individualism in Italian politics and Christian religion in the Quattrocento. Papal rings adorned with the name of an individual pope promoted the authority of the individual man as pope, speaker of God's truth, rather than the authority of the throne upon which he

sits.⁹⁰ Whilst papal legates had traditionally worn pontifical livery, this had never been emblazoned with the name of the pope as with these rings. Politics on the Italian peninsula demanded popes shed the monkish role of spiritual guide and assert themselves as leaders of the church, and as an unassailable force in western Christendom. The individual identity of the pope became central to the political, cultural, and spiritual success of the papacy as the church transitioned from the papal-hierocratic didacticism of the medieval church to the early modern institution, shaped by humanist thought and increasingly complex global politics. A similar shift to individualism was occurring within the hearts and minds of the Christian community in Europe. Rediscovered classical philosophy presented new complexities that undermined the relatively simplistic medieval Christian narrative of men as either sinful or pious. Wealthy households across Europe increasingly commissioned the building of private chapels and elaborate Book of Hours. Such elite spending on items and spaces of personal worship, signals a transition to greater individual control over spiritual worship, threatening the control of the church.⁹¹ The church was being redefined by novel ideas about individual power, reshaping its role within both its spiritual and political spheres of influence. As leader of the church, the pope embodied this pontifical renewal.

The Schism of 1378-1417 that split the papacy between Avignon and Rome had irrevocably harmed the sacerdotal authority of the papacy, with ambitious Italian polities lobbying for church councils to rule on doctrinal and papal policy, further weakening the position of

⁹⁰ For more on the papacy and individualism, see: Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000), 84-104.

⁹¹ John Van Engen, "Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church," *Church History* 77, no. 2 (June 2008): 257–84, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0009640708000541>.

pope.⁹² Reigning popes sought to counterbalance this eroding of their significance and demand for conciliarism through overt promotion of their name and arms. Historically, papal regalia prioritised the sacrality of the holy see, not the man who temporarily occupied the throne. With the exception of the Fisherman's Ring, pontificalia was a uniformed transition from one mortal body to the next. Papal rings disrupt this chronology.

Popes Eugenius IV and Pius II attended the Council of Basel (1431-1449) whilst cardinals and were deeply critical of the attempted transition of authority from pope to council. Deriding the council as run by low-status individual illuminates this tension between those who called for reform and those dissatisfied with reducing papal power. Both Eugenius IV and Pius II employed papal rings during their reigns, with three surviving examples. Set with blue paste to emulate a sapphire, below which are the high relief symbols of the four Evangelists, the papal ring of Eugenius IV (fig. 12-13) is a subtle, earlier example of self-promotion. Glass paste was undoubtedly a more financially frugal choice than genuine sapphire, but there may also have been supply reasons for this substitution. Venetian traders were early pioneers of supply routes into the Islamic east via Constantinople where Turkish traders and merchants returning from Mecca brought gems with them.⁹³ Yet, even modern mining would struggle to yield a sapphire large enough to cover the roughly two square centimetres of bezel, let alone multiple bezels. Perhaps, then, the choice to use glass paste over natural gemstones was not purely financial but also reflects the limited availability of stones large enough to fit the bezels. Anecdotally, whilst this ring was still huge by modern

⁹² Paul M. Dover, "The Arte and Offitio of the Pope in Italian Diplomatic Correspondence, 1464–1492," *Mediterranean Studies* 24, no. 2 (2016): 139–64.

⁹³ Derek J Content, *Ruby, Sapphire, & Spinel: An Archaeological, Textual and Cultural Study* (Belgium: Brepols, 2016), 49.

standards, this felt more wearable than other examples of papal rings studied. Unlike the heft of Pope Paul II's papal ring (fig. 15) and the closeness of the high relief detailing on the pink-topped papal ring (fig. 11), Eugenius' papal ring sat more comfortably on my finger, so perhaps this early design was made more ostentatious by subsequent popes.



Figure 12: Hoop of papal ring displaying the arms of the Condolmerio family below a papal tiara, and a close crop of the Condolmerio arms. British Museum, 1888,1201.3, museum photograph



Figure 13: Bezel with blue paste, British Museum, London, 1888,1201.3

Papal envoys and diplomacy were a priority for Eugenius IV as he sought to retain the traditional power of the papacy. The papal tiara crowns his family arms, connecting the seat of the holy see and the Condolmer family. Eugenius IV's reign marks a transition point in the history of the holy see, moving away from the piety of Martin V and into an unprecedented

political role where diplomatic relations were essential, and the political astuteness of the elected pope became essential to the survival of the papacy.

The largest papal ring studied for this thesis is inscribed PAVL VS PP | SECVNDVS for Pope Paul II, nephew of Eugenius IV. Weighing a cumbersome 290g, its inner hoop measures 2.07cm and its outer hoop a sizeable 3.90cm to accommodate the numerous high relief decorations and inscriptions. The hoop is ovoidal rather than circular like the other papal rings studied, perhaps to make it possible to fit on the ring finger due to the thickness of the ring.



Figure 14: size comparison between 1888,1201.3 (above) and 1888,1201.10, with a contemporary ring (d=20mm) both British Museum



Figure 15: 1888,1201.10 worn on my hand

Considering the size and age of the ring, the gilding is remarkably well preserved, lost only on wear-points such as the inner hoop and high-relief Evangelical icons. Rub patterns suggest human wear, dissuading the theory that these rings were unworn and ceremonial. As with most gold artefacts, the gilding reflects the light with a sheen that is uniquely golden and enhances the richness of the crystal set in the gold quatrefoil bezel. Now dulled by a milky-film, the pink-red hue of the ruby substitute was enhanced with a foil underlay that increased the luminescence. Though the papal name would have likely been hidden from public view whilst the ring was worn as it would be facing the palm; the size, high relief decorations, gilding, and rich-coloured bezel attesting to the glory of the papacy.

Paul II's papal ring demonstrates a development in the design of papal rings. Rather than the subtler references to Eugenius' temporal identity, Paul's ring is ostentatious. Originally training to take over the family's successful merchant business, Paul II's mercantile education likely included the importance of splendour. He approved the use of simulant gemstones in the creation of his papal tiara, suggesting an accepted tradition of using imitative material in pontificalia.⁹⁴ A ring made similarly, with replications of precious stones and metals, evidences Paul II's understanding of the sartorial requirements of a late-fifteenth century pope. As European princes called for papal reform, Paul increased the scale of regalia to display papal might through materially projecting his name and authority beyond his own physical body and onto items intended to adorn the hands of other men.

⁹⁴ Timothy McCall, "Material Fictions of Luxury in Sforza Milan," in *Luxury and the Ethics of Greed in Early Modern Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 239–76, 242.

A second papal ring for Pope Paul II is housed at The Bargello Museum in Florence.⁹⁵

Materially and visually, the Bargello and British Museum rings are near-identical (fig. 16, 17).



Figure 16: Left to Right - bezel, evangelical high relief iconography, papal name inscription. Bargello Museum, Florence. Inv. Arredi sacri 2



Figure 17: Comparative images of British Museum ring 1888,1201.10, sister to Figure 16

An imitation ruby of the same hue, matching lettering on the back of the hoop, and complementary evangelical icons of the Eagle of St John and Angel of St Matthew on the visible side. This pair of rings supports the assertion that Pope Paul II used papal rings as visually brilliant, diplomatic tools across Christendom. Not respected by humanist circles of Europe, easily offended, and difficult for ambassadors to discern the will of, it is possible that Paul needed material help to promote his papacy and diplomatic relations with other nations.⁹⁶ The example from the Bargello has an additional high relief on the shoulder of the

⁹⁵ The ring collection at the Bargello Museum has yet to be formally catalogued. The museum information stand describes this ring as “Anello vescovile” or Episcopal Ring from the 17th century. The existence of the British Museum companion ring challenges this dating but more research is needed to confirm.

⁹⁶ For detailed discussion, see Paul M. Dover, “‘Saper La Mente Della Sua Beatitudine’: Pope Paul II and the Ambassadorial Community in Rome (1464-71),” *Renaissance and Reformation* 31, no. 3 (2008): 3–34.

crowned arms of the House of Aragon. Paul had established ties with Princess Isabella of Castille (1451-1504) in 1466 by granting her a concession to have her own altar, with the privilege of hearing private Mass, and so contextualising the Bergello ring and its iconography of the crown of Aragon.⁹⁷ Through her marriage to Ferdinand of Aragon (1452-1516) in 1469, Isabella became the joint monarch of Aragon. This papal ring may have been worn by a legate of Paul at the wedding of these monarch, or by an ambassador in the Aragonese court. While the 'papal' typology of ring still retains mysteries around their precise use, analysis of this ring pair and the other papal rings in this thesis' corpus are beginning to offer some answers.

An ecclesiastic prince: Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483)

Item 586: A ring of golden bronze with an imitation ruby and the arms of Pope Paul.⁹⁸

The post-mortem inventory of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga contains perhaps the only textual reference to a papal ring. The materiality fits the typology of a papal ring, described as gilt ('golden bronze') with the arms of a seated pope and 'imitation' of a ruby, which could be either paste or foiled crystal. In the British Museum is a surviving papal ring that fits the one described here (fig. 17).⁹⁹ Though there is no way of definitively knowing if this

⁹⁷ John Edwards, *Ferdinand and Isabella* (London: Routledge, 2005), 134.

⁹⁸ «586 - Uno anellazo d'otone dorato cum uno rubino contrafatto e arme de papa Paulo.» – Translation: author's own.

⁹⁹ This connection had been made by Diana Scarisbrick also.

is the same ring due to its missing provenance, it does evidence that papal rings were not owned or worn by popes, but by their court and representatives. From a court that was increasingly princely, Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga represented a new masculine identity to emerge from the fifteenth-century church: a princely cardinal.

Dedicated to Francesco's older brother, Federico I (1441-1484), humanist writer Bartolomeo Sacchi (1421-1481) composed an instructional text for princes within which Sacchi offers a description of his patron, Cardinal Francesco:

who alone by this excellent virtue procured for himself name
and glory... He does not know what it is to keep gold... silver...
jewels... rings¹⁰⁰

Sacchi presented Francesco as a saintly man who shuns avarice and worldly goods for the pursuit of Christly virtue. Though the duality of Francesco's identity is referenced in his virtuous acquisition of name and glory, culturally a goal of the secular elite. Upon the death of Francesco, Jacopo Gherardi da Volterra (1434-1516) eulogises the cardinal in his diary with a tone mirroring that of Sacchi. He describes the cardinal as inferior to none in the quality of his council, authority and grace, "being notable for his liberty, his great love for his people, [and] generosity to all."¹⁰¹ Both Gherardi and Sacchi commemorate Francesco as a godly man, benevolent and giving to all. Francesco is fashioned as distinguishing himself as a

¹⁰⁰ «Illustrem fratrem tuum Franciscum Gonzagam cardinalem Mantuanum imitatus, qui unus hac excellenti virtute plus nominis et Gloriam... Quid sit retinere aurum, quid argentum, quid gemmas, quid annulos...»

Bartolomeo Sacchi, *il Patina, De principe*, 1470, in David S. Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal and His Worldly Goods* (London: Warburg Institute, 1992), 1.

¹⁰¹ «Franciscus Gonzaga... quamvis sederet inter ultimos partum, tamen consilio, auctoritate et gratia, vel paucis vel nullis esset inferior, liberalitate insignis, caritate in suos precipua, erga omnes munificus.»

Jacopo Gherardi da Volterra, *Il Diario Romano* (c.1480; repr., Città di Castello, 1904), 124.

Christian cardinal through unfaultable levels of generosity and Christlike piety. His identity as a man of the church was predicated on his ability to embody the teachings of Christ, interpreting holy scripture through deeds and words. Unfortunately for both authors, the will of Francesco survives, along with a post-mortem inventory of the cardinal's goods, which evidence a man who was very aware of the joy it was to own gold, silver, jewels, and rings. Francesco's career as a cardinal began with receiving a ring – a sapphire ring bestowed unto him by the pope at his investiture, estimated to be worth thirty ducats.¹⁰² It is difficult, then, to reach the same conclusion of Francesco's rejection of material culture that Sacchi and Gherardi did. While both authors are likely conforming to the cultural trope of aggrandising their social superiors, it is worth considering it is piety and poverty that accounts attribute to Francesco. Exploring Francesco's role in the dynastic ambitions of the Gonzaga family and his career as a churchman helps to illuminate how two seemingly contrary masculinities could be performed fluidly and interchangeably by one man.

As discussed, the papacy during the latter fifteenth century was characterised by an Italian domination of the papal curia.¹⁰³ The college of Cardinals became a politically instructive body of men into which Italian elite families sought positions for their sons. As a second son, Francesco Gonzaga is emblematic of this strategic positioning of male family members to maximise the influence of a family, both within the Italian peninsula and into other Christian territories. Popes increasingly ruled the Vatican with nepotism and corruption honed by princely courts, which included the promotion of family members to influential positions

¹⁰² Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal*, 37.

¹⁰³ Dover, "The *Arte* and *Offitio* of the Pope", 139–64.

within the papal court.¹⁰⁴ Cardinal princes such as Ascanio Sforza (1455-1505) and Giuliano della Rovere (1443-1513) embodied a new male identity for the fifteenth-century church: the princely cardinal.¹⁰⁵ Francesco Gonzaga was, arguably, the first cardinal to act both princely and clerically over his career.¹⁰⁶ Francesco Gonzaga serves as a case-study to illustrate how the institutional tension between prioritising the soul and spiritual dogma, with the perceived need to honour God through material grandeur infiltrated the lives and social expectations of the individual, ordained man. Cardinals and bishops, as church leaders, were expected to project a Christ-like rejection of the material, which, according to Sacchi and Gherardi, Francesco succeeded in.

The Gonzaga family arose from relative obscurity to rule Mantua. Originally named the Corradi family, in 1433 Gianfrancesco Gonzaga (1395-1444) was elevated to the noble status of Marquis of Mantua, lifting the family from urban military leaders to nobility.¹⁰⁷ Prior to this the Gonzaga family had gained wealth from land ownership and military captaincies.¹⁰⁸ In the same year, Francesco's parents Ludovico and Barbara of Brandenburg (1422-1479) were married. As princess of the Holy Roman Empire, marriage to Barbara provided stability to the newly titled Gonzagas and provided legitimising connections to the courts of Northern Europe.¹⁰⁹ Born in 1444, Francesco Gonzaga was to play an equally significant role in the stabilising and legitimising of his newly elevated family.

¹⁰⁴ Dover, "The *Arte* and *Offitio* of the Pope", 139–64.

¹⁰⁵ Dover, "The *Arte* and *Offitio* of the Pope", 139–64.

¹⁰⁶ Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Jane Martineau and David Chambers, *Splendours of the Gonzaga* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1981), xx.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Christina Antenhofer, "From Local Signori to European High Nobility: The Gonzaga Family Networks in the Fifteenth Century," in *Transregional and Transnational Families in Europe and Beyond* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022), 58-59.

Francesco was ordained a cardinal in 1461, at only 17 years old, and was able to advocate for the Gonzaga family and their political ambitions within the papal court. He acted a flesh-and-blood reminder of Gonzaga hegemony far from Mantua. This cardinalate was significant not just for the age it was granted, but how it established a precedent for other Italian noble families; having a son within the church and papal court proved politically useful.¹¹⁰

Politicking aside, Francesco's religious career involved frequent travel throughout the city-states of Italy to perform both administrative and ecclesiastic tasks for the church.¹¹¹ His travels, interest in collecting antiques, appreciation of art, and participation in princely displays of magnificence define Francesco as the first of the Italian Princely Cardinals. On a journey to Rome in 1472, Francesco wrote to his father requesting the company of his court artist Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506). He claimed the company was beneficial, largely because it would "be a great pleasure to show Andrea my cameos and bronzes and other fine antiques, which we can examine and discuss together".¹¹² Francesco's letter suggests the cardinal to be both collector and scholar of antiques, as he seeks company to help him decipher the gemstones in his collection. Some 144 cameos are listed in Francesco's postmortem inventory. Evidently, the cardinal's interest in collecting antiquities began at a young age, likely facilitated by his required travel for work and encouraged by his friendship with artists such as Mantegna.

¹¹⁰ Martineau, Chambers, *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, xxi.

¹¹¹ Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal*, 25

¹¹² Selwyn Brinton, *The Gonzaga--Lords of Mantua* (London: Methuen & Co, 1927), 87.

Quoted also in Ady, Julia Mary Cartwright. *Isabella d'este, Marchioness of Mantua, 1474-1539; A Study of the Renaissance*. Vol. 1, E. P. Dutton; J. Murray, 1903. 34.

Cameos became an item of cultural authority in the fifteenth century, as they provided a material link between the owner and the ancient past. Early modern jewellers often re-set these into rings or sometimes mounted them onto silver plates to make the stones easier to display. In Francesco's inventory, majority of cameos are simply listed as a collective cluster of cultural wealth with no clear reference to how they were mounted or stored, or who the cameo portrayed. Those cameos that are described provide insight into Francesco's taste. A particularly dazzling example is the cameo head of Pope Paul II set in gilt silver with a cluster of gems: two small rubies, three turquoises, and eight small pearls.¹¹³ It is possible this was commissioned by Pope Pius II but the pope was unable to pay for the piece before his death in 1471, enabling Francesco to buy the cameo on his visit to Rome the following year.¹¹⁴ Acquiring antiquities, including intaglios and cameos, was a secular pursuit that was adopted in the papal court.

In his will, Francesco outlines the division of his goods. One of the first items bequeathed was "a small diamond set in a golden ring which I used to wear on my fingers" to his "most beloved brother".¹¹⁵ The most likely recipient of this ring was his younger brother Ludovico Gonzaga (1460-1511), who was made Apostolic protonotary in 1471 and then Bishop of Mantova (Mantua) in 1483. Francesco's beloved brother acted as his ecclesiastical heir, inheriting the role within the Gonzaga family as their representative in the church. Unable to continue the family dynasty through progeny, this legacy of transferring religious power

¹¹³ «Item 540 - La testa de papa Paulo ligata in cameo col reverso de uno rubino mazoretto e dui picolini, tre turchine e otto perle piccole ligata in ariento dorato.» Translation – author's own.

¹¹⁴ Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal*, 160.

¹¹⁵ «ac diamentem parvus ligatum in anullo aureo que solebam in digitis gestare | fratri meo dilectissimo»

Section 18 in Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal*, 134. Translation – author's own.

through male relatives was just as important in establishing dynastic power. This diamond ring Francesco bequeaths was part of his personal belongings and his secular self; a continuation of the dynastic practice of generational wealth. As a man of the cloth with no children of his own, this precious object was passed on to an alternative male member of the Gonzaga family. This gold ring formed part of Francesco's physical presentation as a wealthy dynastic son, who was also a cardinal. Neither of these identities was at the exclusion of the other, but Francesco successfully navigated embodying both, assisted through his items of hand adornment.

A close reading of Francesco's will and inventory illuminates how he was able to maintain a dual male identity as a fifteenth century princely cardinal. Projecting wealth and intelligence through the collecting and displaying of antiquities is a practice seen throughout fifteenth century elite men. The sentimental choice to pass a diamond ring, literally from his own hand onto the hand of his younger brother is a tactile demonstration of family dynasticism. Francesco as a cardinal was a man of kindness and grace who successfully navigated the tumult of the papal court and its men of lofty ambition. Francesco owned nearly six-hundred items of hand adornment demonstrating a cultural need for this ornamentation that drove markets and craftsmen to provide these items of luxury – even if they were not always quite as valuable as they appeared.

Glittering Display: Elite Collections of Jewelled Rings

when the event of my death arrives, my body will be conveyed
to the city of Mantua and buried, with a ring on the finger in
which is set a certain deep turquoise¹¹⁶

So opens the will of Francesco Gonzaga in which the princely cardinal outlines his wishes for the preparation and interring of his corporeal form. Wealthy, elite, and ecclesiastic, Francesco straddled the secular and sacred worlds of fifteenth century Italy. It was not with his cardinalatial vestments that he wished to be buried, but an object of secular wealth and status. His will lists two gold rings set with turquoises, which could include his burial ring or add to it. In total, Francesco's inventory lists 58 different rings, and tens of loose gemstones.¹¹⁷ This collection of rings mirrors the collecting habits of secular princely men, suggesting a dual masculinity for fifteenth-century churchmen who were both princely and sacred.

The patrician male practice of collecting, displaying, and wearing rings was performance of secular authority. Rather than embodying the glory of an institution, elite men embodied their own magnificence through sartorial display. Through the act of assembling their wardrobe, men in early modern Italy consolidated their social networks and reputation

¹¹⁶ «...adveniente casu obitus mei, corpus meum deferature ad civitatem Mantue et sepelietur cum anullo in digito in quo est ligata quedam turchina» Section 2 in Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal*, 133. Translation – author's own.

¹¹⁷ The Italian of the inventory is unclear if these gemstones are set into jewellery, such as rings, or simply stored loose.

amongst the communities they participated in.¹¹⁸ Patrician authority, derived from landownership and hereditary wealth, was expressed through the man's ability to acquire precious metals, stones, and antiquities in quantities beyond what an individual could conceivably wear. This collecting extended beyond his physical body, into display of these items in his *studiolo, camera* or his treasury. For elite men, prestige and power was derived from rings through wearing rings of quality, owned in large quantities. Vast collections of jewels and jewellery enabled noblemen choice, a signifier of their privilege. Religious men, poor men, and women did not have the political, social, or financial means to choose luxury dress as princely men did.¹¹⁹ Rings were important vessels for preserving and displaying valuable gemstones, intaglios, and antiquities. As such, rings were a fundamental tool for elites across the peninsula to visually demonstrate their wealth, humanist education, and privileged access to trade networks of antiquities and luxury goods. Despite political differences between the city-states of the Italian peninsula, elite families pursued hand adornment and ring collecting in similar ways.

This chapter seeks to understand how princely, noble, and titled families across fifteenth century Italy created and maintained spheres of socio-political influence through male sartorial display. Adorning the patrician male hand contributed to the bodily brilliance that sought to make manifest the interior nobility of a man, and projected authority over those with less brilliance. Materially, rings and other items of adornment contributed to power and drew the gazes of social inferiors due, in part, to their requirement of scarce, costly

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Currie, *Fashion and Masculinity in Renaissance Florence* (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 10.

¹¹⁹ Noble women likely did have choice around their clothing and dress; however, as men were culturally in control of household finance, how liberal wives and daughters were varied between households.

resources.¹²⁰ *Adorned Hands* is in dialogue with the oeuvre by early modern art historian Timothy McCall, who analyses how brilliance derived from opulent fabrics, precious metals, and gemstones contributed to the masculine authority of patrician men. McCall outlines that the “Symbolic meaning perceived in noble bodies were augmented by the literal wealth that embellished them, and certain jewels were both marvellous and valuable because they originated in distant lands: Arabia, Persia, India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia”.¹²¹ Where *Adorned Hands* seeks to contribute to the scholarly work by historians such as McCall is through analysing the geo-politics of the spaces noble men stored and displayed their rings.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Medici family of Florence gained the title Grand Duke of Tuscany, marking a political shift away from the republican rule of the fifteenth century.¹²² A Venetian ambassador wrote of Duke Cosimo I (1519-1574), that he did not “live like a true prince with those great refinements enjoyed by other princes or dukes, instead he lives like a very great head of a family.”¹²³ This nuanced distinction by the ambassador between prince and paterfamilias highlights the historiographical challenge of this chapter: how to categorise the wealthy ruling families of the Quattrocento across the Italian peninsula. Neighbouring nations such as France, ruled by a monarchical family had a defined socio-political hierarchy that is difficult to transpose upon the city-states of the Italian peninsula. The Sforza of Milan were established as ducal rulers during the Quattrocento; the Medici were ‘new money’ bankers that emerged during the late fourteenth century; similarly, the

¹²⁰ McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 55.

¹²¹ McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 57.

¹²² See Litchfield, R. Burr. *Emergence of a Bureaucracy : The Florentine Patricians, 1530-1790*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987, Part II for a detailed analysis of Florentine ducal politics.

¹²³ As quoted in Currie, *Fashion and Masculinity*, 2016, 3.

Gonzaga controlled Mantua from the mid fourteenth century. These families, without multigenerational lineage, relied on princely presentation to establish themselves as equal to those European counterparts who did. The extraordinary wealth and power of the men from these families create the parameters for those considered elite or patrician in the context of this thesis. They enacted their masculine performance of power in ways comparable to those with more established titles; men such as Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492) and Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1444-1476) likely conceived of themselves as elite, patrician men. Certainly, their ownership and collecting of rings indicates this self-perception as men of power and elite status.

Rings in the Home

Elite men perceived the domestic space as a microcosm of their worldly authority. The construction of gender was indivisible from space as gender was performed differently in accordance with the space the body inhabited.¹²⁴ Situating the collections of rings owned by elite men within their domestic spaces is possible through an analysis of inventories. Scribes mostly focused on the monetary value of the goods they were inventorying and so focused on the materials of the rings themselves. In the 1465 inventory of Pietro di Cosimo de' Medici (1416-1469) illustrates this scarcity of detail. In a list of 42 rings, they are described as "one pointed diamond set in an enamelled hoop" or "one table-cut sapphire on a plain hoop".¹²⁵ Whilst the scribe does cite if the hoop of the ring is decorative or plain, there is no

¹²⁴ See: Roberta Gilchrist, "Medieval Bodies in the Material World: Gender, Stigma and the Body," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 43–61.

¹²⁵ «uno diamante punta legato in gambo smaltato» «uno zaffiro tavola in gambo pulito» Transcribed in: Marco Spallanzani, *Inventari Medicej, 1417-1465* (Firenze: Associazione Amici del Bargello, 1996), 140.

suggestion as to the metal, colour, complexity, or extent of this decoration around the band. However, the inventories do provide a comprehensive overview of the amassed wealth noble men accrued through collecting. Inventories allow us to piece together the relationships and interactions between objects, people, and spaces.¹²⁶ Modern scholars can restore these moments of interaction between man and material through considering inventories beyond mere lists, but to correlate the location of objects within a building and to each other as contributing to a larger image of material history.¹²⁷ Understanding how men stored rings, and how these rings interacted with people and spaces, enable conclusions to be drawn about how early modern Italian men used such glittering displays to enhance their *virtù* (virtues). Inventories evidence the quantity of rings owned by the wealthiest families in Europe. A privilege of elite men was their freedom of choice over their clothing and adornment, the agency to decorate their bodies from wardrobe laden with brocades, silks, metals, and gemstones.

Early modern monarchical France was politically distinct from the city-states of the Italian peninsula, yet parallels can be drawn between the king's inventory and those of ruling Italian families. The differences between monarchical and Italian display is as illuminating for Quattrocento masculinity. Understanding how rings were stored and displayed in a monarchy that was geographically and politically united underscores the unique role collections of rings had for Italian elites. The 1400 inventory of the royal possessions of King Charles VI (1368-1422), introduces noble male ring ownership at the beginning of the

Translation: author's own

¹²⁶ Gerhard Jaritz, "The Stories Inventories Tell," in *The Charm of a List: From the Sumerians to Computerised Data Processing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 160–66.

¹²⁷ Richard Stapleford, *Lorenzo De' Medici at Home: The Inventory of the Palazzo Medici in 1492* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), xi.

fifteenth century.¹²⁸ The king's rings were inventoried across three main spaces: the Tower of Jewels, the king's main bedroom, and at the château at Melun, South-East of Paris. Each space housed distinct categories of rings, not in typology but in quality and sentimentality. The Tower of Jewels at the royal Louvre palace in Paris housed the most valuable precious stones: rubies, emeralds, spinels, and diamonds.¹²⁹ Stored in a square, silver box were several gem-set rings including amethyst, garnet, ruby, sapphire, and emerald.¹³⁰ The scribe simply used the pluralised form of 'ring', '*anneaux*', making the total rings contained in this box uncertain. The King's Great Bedroom, a room deep inside the Louvre, housed several gold rings with cameos, signets, and intaglios that suggest these rings were used to identify and authenticate documents. Two gold signets rings were contained within a small leather-writing box, suggesting Charles used rings to seal his personal correspondence.¹³¹ Two examples include "A signet of a small ruby set in a ring whose inside is engraved with a crowned rose, and inside is written *Charles*, and has a thick band" and the complex ruby signet set into a large gold ring, on which "the king is engraved fully armed, holding a sword in one hand and a shield with three fleur-de-lys in the other, with an angel crowning him, with four crescents surrounding the culet".¹³² Outside of Paris, at the Château de Melun, the inventoried rings were ascribed provenances, unlike the Louvre rings. The Melun rings offer

¹²⁸ Philippe Henwood, *Les Collections Du Trésor Royal Sous Le Règne de Charles vi (1380-1422)* (Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques - CTHS, 2004)

¹²⁹ Spinel is a type of red stone, often conflated with rubies but minerally distinct.

¹³⁰ Henwood, *Les Collections*, 59.

¹³¹ «Escrinet petit de cuir ferré de laiton...Signez (no750 et no751)»

Henwood, *Les collections*, 60.

Translation: author's own

¹³² «350 - Un signet d'or d'un gros balay en un anel ouquel est taillé le roy tout armé, tenant une espée en une main et un escu à trois fleurs de lys en l'autre, avec un angre qui le couronne, à quatre croissans entour le culet; 353 - Item un signet d'un petit ruby assis en un anel où dedans est gravée une roze couronnée, et dedans escript Charles, et est la verge grosse.» in Henwood, *Les collections*, 120.

Translation: author's own.

a tantalising glimpse at the lives these objects had, as goods exchanged as part of the power and politics of the French court. A fifteenth-century copy of King Charles V (1338-1380) inventory included a ring set with fine rubies that belonged to the Duke of Berry.¹³³ Similarly, in Charles IV's inventory, lists a ruby given to the King by the Duke of Berry that had been repurpose from a ring; the scribe noted this ruby as being recorded in a previous inventory.¹³⁴ A ruby of the same provenance but owned by two consecutive monarchs may indicate the royal jewels belonged to the crown, not the king, of France. The Melun rings were politicised objects that were exchange through courtly networks of obligation and gifting, whereas the Louvre rings were items of monarchical authority and kingly regalia. The hereditary passing of rings between father and son in France is mirrored in the princely households of Italy, as in Medici-ruled Quattrocento Florence. However, King Charles VI had the storage space many Italian princes did not; Charles had courtly locations across France, whilst inventories indicate the nobility of Italy typically stored their collections of rings in one room of their primary dwelling.

To provide an overview of ring ownership amongst Italian patriarchs, this thesis tabulated sixteen inventories from the fifteenth century. To be discussed first is the prevalence of owning jewellery, by men, as evidenced in these inventories. After which, consideration of

¹³³ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS2705, fol. 60v Gallica digitised manuscript, fol. 60v: *Inventoire general de tous les joyaulx...tant d'or comme d'argent...du roy Charles le Quint...commancé le XXI^{me} jour de Janvier l'an mil troys cens soixante dix neuf...1401-1500*

¹³⁴ «autre annelou est petit tresfus ruby sux le plat longuet sux dux mons. De Berry». Charles V, transcribed from the Gallica digitised manuscript, fol. 60v as item 490. «Item un annel où il a un gros ruby à perfonde culate et tirant sur couleur violet, et le donna Monseigneur de Berry au roy, et est le culet à feuillage. Duquel annel le ruby a esté prins et baillé à Jehan Compère pour mettre en un cerf volant, comme contenu est au précédent inventoire.» Henwood, *Les collections*, 110.

Translation: author's own.

where and how men stored their jewellery will be analysed. Half of the inventories (Table 1) are men of the nobility, with the remaining half of either unclear socio-economic status or working men: the topic of chapter three.

Year	Name	Profession - if known	Location	Ring total	Unset Gemstones
1404	Johannes Bartoli Stecchuto	Silk-worker	Florence	0	0
1406	Abram Marracho		Messina (Sicily)	5	0
1417	Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici	Founder of the Medici Bank	Florence	33	0
1420	Bernardo di Simone Gemetani		Florence	1	1
1421	Churrado Giovanni	Shoemaker (?)	Florence	59	0
1425	Francesco de Messer Palla di Strozi	Strozi family member	Florence	2	0
1425	Lionardo di Nicchola Falorni da Pescia	Apothecary (?)	Florence	1	1
1425	Niccholo di Messer Guccio		Florence	0	0
1429	Albizo del Toso da Fortuna family	Toso family	Florence	15	0
1437	Filippo Vanni degli Onesti	Onesti family member	Udine (Venice)	1	0
1449	Puccio Pucci family	Pucci family	Florence	6	22
1456	Piero di Cosmio de' Medici	Medici paterfamilia/Statesman	Florence	6	14
1464	Jacobus de Consule	Surgeon	Messina (Sicily)	10	0
1465	Piero di Cosmio de' Medici	Medici paterfamilia/Statesman	Florence	44	52*
1483	Francesco Gonzaga	Cardinal	Rome	56	222
1492	Lorenzo de' Medici	Medici paterfamilia/Statesman	Florence	51	82

Table 1: summary of sixteen, fifteenth-century inventories from Italy¹³⁵.

Upon the death of the head of the household, widows or eldest sons often commissioned inventories, likely as a tool to clarify inheritances or tax.¹³⁶ Table 1 is an indicative rather than a definitive dataset of male ring ownership due to the archival bias of Florentine manuscripts that have been digitised and transcribed. Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360-1429), founder of the Medici bank owned 33 rings and no unset gemstones; forty-eight years later, his grandson Piero di Cosimo de' Medici is recorded as owning 44 rings and an approximated 52 unset gemstones.¹³⁷ Piero's son, Lorenzo, increased the Medici collection

¹³⁵ Data from this table is derived from several sources: Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF) Magistrato dei Pupilli avanti il Principato (MPAP) 152, fol. 214v; MPAP 17 fol. 270r-277r; MPAP 152 fol. 141v; ASF MPAP 159 fol. 140v; ASF MPAP 159 fol. 87r; Ferdinando Gabotto, "Inventari messinesi inediti del Quattrocento," *Archivio storico per la Sicilia orientale* 3, no. 1 (1906): 261-263, 270-271 251-76; Stapleford, *Lorenzo de' Medici*, 96-119;

Carlo Merkel, *Miscellanea Nuziale Rossi-Teiss* (Bergamo: Officine dell'Instuto Italiano d'arti grafiche, 1857), 170-205; Carole Collier Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Spallanzani, *Inventari Medicei*.

¹³⁶ Jaritz, "The Stories", 166.

¹³⁷ This number is approximate as the Italian is unclear regarding the setting of a gemstone.

again as the Medici family practiced hereditary transferral of ownership, akin to that of Kings Charles V and Charles VI. Material wealth accrued along with socio-political success of the family. Across four generations of Medici the cumulative wealth that underpinned intergenerational privilege of ruling families is traced through the growth in their ring collection.

Political allies of the Medici family, the Pucci family had their goods inventoried in 1449 upon the death of Puccio Pucci (1389-1449).¹³⁸ Five rings are listed, two belonging to the eldest son Antonio Pucci (1418-1484), and three to his younger brother Francesco (n.d.). The rings themselves were valued at four and three florins respectively, simply described as *anelluza* (large rings) the scribe gives no detail on their materiality or design. Of greater value were the gemstones owned by each brother (table 2).

Stone	Number	Value (Fl.)	Stone	Number	Value (Fl.)
Diamond	1	17	Diamond	1	13
Spinel ruby	1	15	Spinel ruby	2	14
Sapphire	1	15	Sapphire	5	21
Emerald	1	5	Garnet	2	6
Ruby	1	10	Pearl	1	8
Total	5	62	Total	11	62

Table 2: Number and Value of the two Pucci son's gemstone collections; Antonio - Left, Francesco - Right

Perhaps in the interest of brotherly accord, scribe estimation, or sheer serendipity, each brother's collections of gemstones totalled sixty-two florins. Antonio owned higher-quality and so more valuable stones. He also owned a single pearl estimated between fourteen and nineteen ounces, valued at 125 florins. Though not gemstones, pearls were extremely

¹³⁸ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 110.

valuable in the early modern world and were a symbol of purity, popular in portraits of young boys and brides.¹³⁹ Steeped in mythology, pearls were said to have come from molluscs that surfaced, early morning, to collect drops of dew that became pearls; the brightness and lustre were thought to directly correlate to the quality of the original dew drop.¹⁴⁰ Contrasted to the cold hardness of diamonds as alive and warm, pearls were also conceptualised as tokens of love.¹⁴¹ Perhaps Antonio intended the pearl in his inventory as a gift to his wife, Lena.

Of similar economic status, the 1429 inventory of Albizo del Toso da Fortuna (d.1429), records a totalled the value of Albizo's six rings at 95 florins, 18% of the total value of his personal effects. A secondary collection of rings had a combined value of 70 florins for ten rings and 12% of the tallied total value of the wardrobe.¹⁴² Statistically, six items in a wardrobe totalling almost twenty percent of its value illuminates the income some men allocated to trading and collecting rings. Historian Thomas V. Cohen argues that premodern masculinity was based in the perception of competency whilst living in a world of scarce resources.¹⁴³ Competency equated control: over finances, trade connections, and those who did not have either. Cohen's framework for premodern masculinity supports the conclusion that owning numerous rings went beyond aesthetics and shine; rings represented masculine control. As high-value but non-essential items, rings indicated the owner had financial

¹³⁹ McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 57.

¹⁴⁰ Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 180.

¹⁴¹ Albano Bochatay, "The Pearl" in Autin et al., *Jewels in Painting*, 13.

¹⁴² Carole Frick, "Dressing a Renaissance City: Society, Economics and Gender in the Clothing of Fifteenth-Century Florence" (Dissertation, 1995), Appendix VII.

¹⁴³ Thomas V. Cohen, "Masculinity as Competence," in *Premodern Masculinities in Transition*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2024), 37.

stability and control. The Toso da Fortuna and Albizo family inventories represent elite Florentine wealth more typical than the Medici.

As self-appointed rulers of Quattrocento Florence, the Medici men had a collection of rings unparalleled in Florence. Piero de' Medici's collection of gemstones and rings was estimated at a value of 27,170 florins. In 1475, one florin was worth 110 soldi with 10 soldi the daily wage of an unskilled construction worker.¹⁴⁴ By this exchange rate, it would have taken a labourer approximately 298,870 days, or 819 years, to earn the value in soldi of Piero's collection. It is debatable how well an average labourer in 1475 would have been cognisant of the precise numbers associated with the wealth difference between him and Piero de' Medici. Yet, should he have spied Piero and his glittering body across the River Arno or outside the Palazzo Pitti, there is little doubt that the labourer would understand the difference in their station. Elite male dominance over women, poorer men, and younger men, was predicated on his ability to distinguish himself from others.¹⁴⁵ As McCall argues, and the patrician inventories evidence, Italian lords' expenditure on courtly accessories extended far beyond what they could physically wear with more spent on adornment of the body than adornment of their homes: frescoes or household paintings.¹⁴⁶ Where elite men stored this excess of magnificence becomes significant. In the Florentine Republic, men such as the Medici, did not have a domestic courtly class to compete with and display their brilliance to. Lorenzo de' Medici had to look beyond the borders of Florence for his competition and male audiences for his glittering display.

¹⁴⁴ Table A.1 in Richard A Goldthwaite, *Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 613.

¹⁴⁵ McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ McCall, *Brilliant Bodies*, 57.

In August of 1480, Lorenzo de' Medici led a tour of his treasures for Cardinal Giovanni of Aragon (1456-1485). Recorded in a letter from Antonio da Montecatini to his ducal master, Ercole I d'Este of Ferrara (1431-1505), the correspondence details the luxury and largesse of the Medici palace:

Then he [Lorenzo] entered the studio, the chamber that had belonged to Piero... he had brought his jewels [out of the *studiolo*]... a crystal beaker...studded with pearls, rubies, diamonds and other stones... then a little case with many jewels, rings, and engraved stones.¹⁴⁷

The social network alluded to in this account demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Italian nobility: both sacred and secular. The ruler of Florence performed a display of glittering, elite wealth and cultural authority to a Cardinal in view of diplomatic envoys from other northern regions. As the Medici were bankers of the papal court, this demonstration of wealth may have had a dual function of celebrating the success of the Medici family in hoarding culturally significant gemstones and other items of treasure, whilst simultaneously reassuring the cardinal of the fiscal viability of the Medici bank. Upon the death of Pope Paul II, Lorenzo was in Rome and negotiated an exchange: Lorenzo received the majority share of the late pontiff's gems as payment for monies owed to the bank by the pope.¹⁴⁸ The

¹⁴⁷ Cardinal Giovanni of Aragon to Ercole I d'Este, August 1480 in Luke Syson, "The Medici Study," in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 288–93, 288.

¹⁴⁸ Clifford M. Brown, Laune Fusco, and Gino Corti, "Lorenzo De' Medici and the Dispersal of the Antiquarian Collections of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga," *Arte Lombarda* 90/91, no. 3–4 (1989): 86.

epistolary archive details the competition Lorenzo faced from other noble Italian families, including Alfonso of Aragon; Giovanni Francesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua; Lucrezia Gonzaga; and Mathias Corvinus, King of Hungary. In the *studiolo* tour of 1480, Lorenzo may have displayed some of the stones he acquired from Rome to the cardinal to demonstrate the close ties between the Papal States and the Medici family, and Lorenzo's tenacity to beat his rival bidders.

A *studiolo* in the early modern home was both office and library, and was a space for elite men to study, read, and meet with associates. For the Medici's in Florence, this space became a highly decorated room, more akin to a treasury than to a place of business. It was a space that, according to Luke Syson, "could proclaim a whole set of messages about the Medici, the head of the family, his wealth and his cultural interests".¹⁴⁹ Before the opulent splendour of Lorenzo's study, the inventories from earlier in the Medici history recall the humbler origins of the family. In 1415, an inventory of the possessions of the founder of the Medici bank, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici was compiled. Hardly a pauper, Giovanni's collection of jewels was minute in comparison to his great-grandson Lorenzo. Stored in a chest in the bedroom (*camera*) of Giovanni was a fingerstall — an object for storing and displaying rings (fig. 18) — of red cloth that displayed five rings: two rings set with a spinel ruby, two sapphire rings, and one diamond ring.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Syson, "The Medici Study", 288.

¹⁵⁰ «Uno ditale di drappo rosso, entrovi due balasci, due zafiri e uno diamante in v anella» Spallanzani, *Inventari medicej, 1417–1465*, 7. Translation: author's own.



Figure 18: Fingerstall from Quentin Metsys, *The Moneylender and his Wife*, 1514. Oil on wood, 70.5x67cm. Louvre Paris, MR821

Five rings on a fingerstall in Giovanni's bedroom is, clearly, a fraction of the overflowing cases of rings later owned by Lorenzo. Giovanni's choice to store these rings in his *camera* rather than his *studiolo* reflects the incremental power of the Medici. In the fifteenth century, *camere* were not secluded like modern bedrooms, but instead were multipurpose spaces such as sleeping, simple mealtimes, music performances, and sometimes wakes for the dead.¹⁵¹ Guests outside of the immediate family would have access to the room and its contents, meaning they were a semi-public space to display items of magnificence like rings and antiques. In 1480/90s Milan, Ludovico Sforza's spectacular family fresco adorning the walls of his *camera* attested to the primary bedroom as a space for displaying brilliance. Within the bedroom, small storage chests were likely used to store clothing and small items, such as rings. The fingerstall of Giovanni is described as housed within a lockable wooden chest (*forziere*); the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice houses a late-fourteenth century

¹⁵¹ Brenda Preyer, "The Florentine Casa," in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 34–49, 45.

example of a lockable wooden and ivory box that may have housed a similar collection of precious rings (fig.19).



Figure 19: Embriachi Workshop, *Cofanetto nuziale*, late 14th century. Inlaid wood, bone, and carved and engraved ivory, 18x24x14cm. Galleria dell'Accademia di Venezia Venice, Cl. XVIII n. 1. Photo: author's own

Lorenzo's 1492 inventory records his *studiolo* as the room that contained his impressive collection of gemstones, cameos, and rings. The scribe required 12 pages to list his collection in the inventory, with an additional three pages to record the gems in the *studiolo* of Piero, Lorenzo's father. Epistolary accounts such as Montecatini's letter to Ercole contextualise the inventoried rings and elucidates how the Medici stored rings and precious stones stored in the *studiolo*, along with how they used ring collections in such spaces. Held in cases that were then selected to be shown to various visitors, the Medici men could curate their guests' experience to, perhaps, an appropriate level of grandeur depending on the visitor or his purpose. When hosting visitors from regions that were controlled through court structures, such as Cardinal Giovanni who represented his ducal lord, the Medici used their collection of gemstones to compete with their cultural and political rivals to illustrate their knowledge, wealth, and political affinities. The *studiolo* was the intellectual centre of

the house where scholarship was physically enacted and visually communicated through the objects housed there.¹⁵² Rings, and rings set with ancient intaglio gemstones, overtly evidenced the intelligence, magnificence, and virtue of the elite scholar. Lorenzo and his excess of rings and gems successfully rendered his intellect and virtue tangible and visible to his guests. Luca Landucci (1436-1516), a diarist and contemporary of Lorenzo, characterised him as, “the most illustrious, the richest, the most stately and the most renowned among men... of great wisdom”.¹⁵³ Contributing to the perception of Lorenzo as a wise, illustrious, stately man were these virtues reflected in his collecting and displaying of rings.

To contextualise the value of the Medici collection, in fifteenth-century Florence, most merchants and bankers earned a net income of 9,234 florins per year.¹⁵⁴ This figure contextualises the enormity of Lorenzo’s collection stored in the Medici *studiolo*. The total estimated value of its contents is 60,866 florins – more than the total value of the remaining Medici possessions.¹⁵⁵ Lorenzo’s inventory estimated his rings and gemstones at 15,627 florin, or 26% of the *studiolo*’s total value. Rather than items of diplomacy and symbolism like papal rings made from imitative materials, these rings served as wearable carriers for staggeringly expensive gemstones. An enamel ring with table-cut sapphire was estimated at 400-florins; a table-cut ruby ring at 500; a gold ring with enamel leaves on an enamelled hoop, with a flat diamond, at 600. The Medici collection of gem-set rings had expanded by tenfold in only four generations; having the financial and cultural capital to do so ensured the Medici men were able to elevate their status within the Florentine Republic. Medici

¹⁵² Luke Syson and Dora Thornton, *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 82.

¹⁵³ Luca Landucci in Stapleford, *Lorenzo de' Medici at Home*, 7.

¹⁵⁴ Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, Table 7.5, 566.

¹⁵⁵ Syson, “The Medici Study”, 292.

investment into owning rings correlates to the family's need to legitimise and stabilise their control over the city. Rings acted as tools of personal display and splendour through which the Medici male body was decorated as a princely body.

Political allies, collaborators, rivals, and maybe even friends: Florence's Medici and Milan's Sforza families are complementary case studies in elite masculinity. Collecting antiquities, including gemstones and cameos, became a fervent pursuit during the fifteenth century. Rings set with ancient stones reached astronomical prices and ownership was highly competitive. The Milanese and Venetians in the north of Italy began to revive the practice of gemstone engraving in these market conditions.¹⁵⁶ Though less lucrative than their ancient counterparts, the dukes of Milan seem to have capitalised on the cultural status of classical intaglio to promote their own image and political rulership of Milan. Once again, inventories provide accounts of this male network of exchange: Piero de' Medici owned a gemstone engraved with the head of the Duke of Milan in 1454, the Sforza's chancellor Francesco Ciocco Simonetta (1410-1480)'s inventory of 1479 lists two large cameos of Francesco and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, and an undated Sforza document records a ruby valued at a thousand ducats with the effigy of 'the Most Illustrious Lord Lodovico'.¹⁵⁷ These fifteenth-century stone engravings, however, did not replace the collecting and utilising of images and classical symbolism. Ludovico 'il Moro' Sforza (1452-1508) used a cameo of Julius Caesar as a seal for important personal documents.¹⁵⁸ Cultural capital derived from using the likeness of one of the greatest rulers of the ancient world elevated Ludovico's nobility

¹⁵⁶ McCall, "Material Fictions", 242.

¹⁵⁷ Syson and Thornston, *Objects of Virtue*, 85.

¹⁵⁸ Syson and Thornston, *Objects of Virtue*, 85.

through showcasing his knowledge of the classical past and his ability to acquire such a cameo.

Ludovico's brother, Galeazzo Maria Sforza ruled Milan as duke from 1466, until his assassination in 1476. Galeazzo had a rushed burial with the only grandeur being 300 ducats worth of rings and other jewellery Bona, his wife, summoned to adorn the duke.¹⁵⁹

Requesting these rings suggests they were not part of Galeazzo's daily attire – perhaps these were favoured rings, or particularly fine examples of gem-set rings, which from the inventories were stored off-body. In the budget for 1476, mere months before the duke's assassination, lists a debt of 46,380 ducats for jewels.¹⁶⁰ Galeazzo's ambitions of establishing a court in Milan was predicated on amassing of beautiful objects of wealth and mirrored the collecting of the Medici family. As in Florence, collecting and replicating items laden with cultural capital contributed to the status and standing of the court Galeazzo was seeking to create. After his death, this opulent collection came to be stored in a treasure room, in the *Rocchetta* or small keep of the Sforza castle. The *Rocchetta* was a 1450 addition by Francesco Sforza (1401-1466) to the existing Visconti structures and accessible only by drawbridge over a dry moat.¹⁶¹ Unlike the Florentine *studiolo* storage, the Sforza treasury was secured within the nucleus of the castle. The dry moat and single access point provided greater security and seclusion for the Sforza gold, and the choice echoes the kingly storage of Charles VI's Tower of Jewels, or Melun château. The treasury was further protected by

¹⁵⁹ Gregory Lubkin, *A Renaissance Court: Milan under Galeazzo Maria Sforza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 257.

¹⁶⁰ Lubkin, *A Renaissance Court*, 221.

¹⁶¹ Scotti "The Sforza Castle", 143.

the frescoed guardian, the multi-eyed giant from classical mythology Argos Panoptes.¹⁶² Epitheted as ‘all-seeing’ and ‘myriad-eyed’, Argos personified vigilance.¹⁶³ Given humanist teaching of classical mythology, this fresco was an opportunity to demonstrate the Sforza education and understanding of classical works by authors such as Ovid, Hesiod, and Aeschylus.

The Sforza treasury was thus guarded with a dry moat, single entrance, and the vigilance of Argos. By the final decade of the fifteenth century, the Sforza’s were offering tours of the treasury for visiting ambassadors, with one account stating the ambassadors were shown numerous items of gold and coins, and apparently gold medallions of 10,000 ducats each.¹⁶⁴ While both the Sforza and Medici offered visiting dignitaries curated glimpses of their treasures and wealth, the storage of these collections illuminate characteristics of the different political roles of each family. The Sforza treasury mirrored the regal storage of monarchs such as King Charles VI, with a space dedicated to the storage of luxury and precious items. Milan under Sforza rule was a duchy, allowing the dukes of Milan to act kingly, in ways the Medici of republican Florence could not. Lorenzo’s acquiring and presenting his collection of rings to guests at his home, stored in his *studiolo*, characterises Medici masculinity as a balance between princely splendour and Republican equity. For both families, this visible display of amassed wealth needed to be seen by those who could

¹⁶² For details: Alexander Nikolaev, “Ten Thousand Eyes: The Story of”Αργος Μυριωπός,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 55, no. 4 (August 16, 2015): 812–31.

¹⁶³ Πανόπτην (all-seeing)

Hesoid, *The Shield. Catalogue of Women. Other Fragments.*, trans. Glen W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 503 (Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 2018), 231.

μυριωπὸν (myriad-eyed)

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound.*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, Loeb Classical Library 145 (Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 2009), 567.

¹⁶⁴ Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*, 81.

contest a family's legitimacy and authority. An inter-regional network of exchange and competition speaks broadly to the edifice of masculinity in fifteenth century Italy, where comparing the jewels and rings acquired by patrician men transcended regional differences to communicate intelligibly to men of the authority and prowess of the other. Even the papal and bishop rings in chapter one contributes to this communication of masculine power through the collecting and displaying of rings. Displaying education and sophistication was not always conducted on the body of the elite man but in the collecting and exhibiting of collected items of masculine virtue. Critically, this meant the rings owned by Piero de' Medici and Galeazzo Sforza were not tied to the man's individual masculine authority but rather associated with the family name. Therefore, patrician masculinity and hand adornment spoke to the political and cultural authority of the family. With the rings stored in a location physically separate from the individual's body, they were more transferable between generations of men. This transferability ensured the rings' representation of classically educated, culturally enriched, *virtù* and *magnificentia* did not stagnate to represent a single family member but rather translated across decades.

Gonzaga, Sforza, de' Medici: through material wealth and display these men were in a competition of consumption. These elite men did not adhere to quality over quantity; they needed quality *and* quantity to outwardly project their magnificence to operate within broader socio-political spaces. Fear of imitation gemstones attests to this need for quality. In July 1516, Isabella d'Este wrote to the local authority in Mantua regarding a jeweller suspected of forging a false diamond, valued at fifty ducats. Isabella acknowledged the arrested jeweller "may be put to torture" if he does not confess, but with the desire for the

“truth to come out”, she commands him to “Bring about strict justice”.¹⁶⁵ Isabella’s harshness towards the accused is linked to the cited worth of the diamond but also speaks more broadly to the importance of gems. As they functioned as liquid assets for the nobility, as well as indicators of cultural superiority, the trade had to be rigorously protected from false stones as this would undermine the value. Milan was known for its crafting and trading in imitation gemstones and goldsmiths from the mid-fifteenth century were regulated to not encase simulate or counterfeit gems in gold.¹⁶⁶ Isabella’s rough justice may stem from the patrician attempt to control imitation stones both to secure the value of their real stones and to reduce the ability for the lower classes to access and display imitative forms of adornment, thus preserving the elite’s sartorial power. Preservation of this cultural power through precious, virtue-imbued objects was also achieved through the emerging art genre of the portrait.

Rings in Paint

Ivory, gems, and all precious things of this kind in the painters’
hand become more precious.¹⁶⁷

Jewels presented an opportunity for Quattrocento artists to demonstrate their skill at capturing light, shape, colour, and three-dimensionality in pigment. This in turn had significance for the conveying of social status and masculine ideals as painting presented a

¹⁶⁵ AG 2997 libro 33c. 38r in Isabella d’Este, *Selected Letters*, trans. Deanna Shemek (Iter Press, 2017), 409.

¹⁶⁶ Specifically, 1468, 1479, and 1492. See McCall, “Material Fictions”, 240, 245.

¹⁶⁷ «Ebur, gemmae, et istiusmodi cara omnia, pictoris manu sunt preciosiora.». Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura Praestantissima*, trans. Thomas Venatorius (Portland: Collegium Graphicum, 1972), 45.

new medium for elite men to display their personal magnificence. Capturing the brilliance, richness of colour, quality of cut, and setting was a true test of artisanal skill and expressed a painter's panoply of virtues. Portraiture is a vital record of how men engaged in ring-wearing during the fifteenth century. Analysis of how sitters, or their painters, chose to include rings within the frame indicated how men deliberately sought to immortalise their ownership and wearing of rings. As a genre, the Quattrocento portrait became dually coded to express both the real and idealised nature of the sitter, which the artist had to balance in their composition.¹⁶⁸ The choice to include rings either on the hand of the sitter or his surrounds may be iconographical instead of depicting a specific ring owned by the sitter to achieve this balance between realism and idealism. Jewelled rings indicated cultural capital, powerful homosocial networks of exchange, and monetary wealth. The power of paint to preserve this real or idealised ownership is of interest here; portraits of male sitters wearing rings are tangible records of ownership and status. Men, their status, and their possession of valuable gemstones are made present through skilful portraiture.

To investigate the role of rings in masculine portraiture, a corpus of eighty-nine portraits for this thesis was drawn from galleries across Europe and England, across the early modern period (appendix 1). Quantitative data was collated from male portraits with dates between the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries to contextualise Quattrocento portraits (that included the sitter's hand or hands) within the broader early modern era of painting. Summarised in the graph below is the relational percentages of early modern portraits found that did not depict men with rings to those that did; followed by a breakdown of the

¹⁶⁸ Miguel Falomir, "The Court Portrait," in *Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian*, ed. Lorne Campbell and Philip Attwood (National Gallery, 2008), 68.

century they were painted in. Most commonly, the portraits were completed by Italian or Germanic artists, which attests to the history of portraiture as developing in the fifteenth century in these regions. From this representative data, the general trend in early modern male portraiture was to have unadorned hands, at 64% of portraits. Therefore, choice by Quattrocento men who did choose to depict themselves with rings was highly deliberate, rather than a genre convention. Considering the symbolism of these rings in portraits illuminate the social importance of these objects to the sitter and intended viewer.

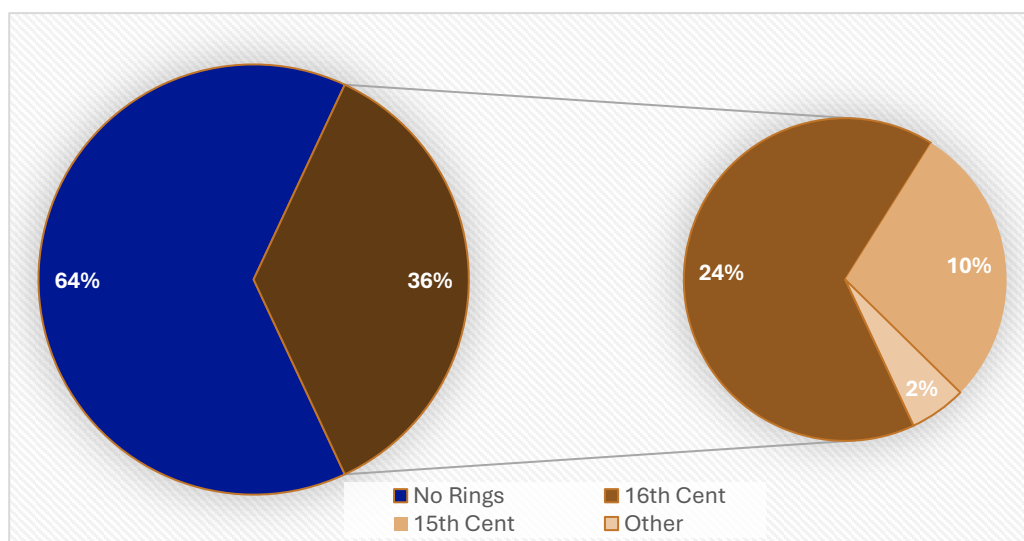


Figure 20: pie-chart of male portraiture – with or without a ring(L), percentage comparison by century(R)¹⁶⁹

In the context of this thesis, a portrait was defined on the following criteria: a secular purpose, subject matter is an individual figure, who was the central focus of the artwork. Paintings with the term portrait (*ritratto*) as part of the title were prioritised for study here.

Portraiture became increasingly popular during the Quattrocento, with most in this corpus dating between the 1440s to 1490s. The uptake of commissioning artworks of men and

¹⁶⁹ Data drawn from online and printed catalogues, as well as in-person research visits to England and Italy. These figures are not intended to indicate a definitive number of portraits from each century, nor location, but rather illustrate the rise in popularity of male portraits containing rings.

women by the elite and wealthy merchant families is useful in understanding the differences between male and female ring wearing and collecting. Men tended to be depicted with fewer rings than women and wore them at the base of the finger. Most commonly adorned were their right index, fourth, and little fingers. Women were typically depicted with stacks of rings, on all fingers of either hand, some even with rings sitting across all three knuckles.¹⁷⁰ In a society that offered little financial security for women, rings were a convenient form of wealth that could be carried on their person and could thus be pawned by women at their own discretion.¹⁷¹ Male hegemonic power was reinforced through depictions of ring-wearing as portraits belie the number of rings we know wealthy men owned from inventories. Thus, unlike women who wore and were depicted wearing copious rings, socially elite men had the luxury of owning rings en masse and the choice to be depicted with few rings from his collection; perhaps the most sentimental, ornate, or pertinent to his sense of self.

Artistically, the emerging secular portraiture of the fifteenth century was heavily influenced by ancient busts of classical emperors. Piero de' Medici is recorded as displaying "effigies and images of all the emperors and worthies that there ever were" with their cultural value being "that to look at these portraits...fills his soul with delight and pleasure".¹⁷² Unlike the

¹⁷⁰ From the corpus of paintings, only one male portrait depicted the sitter wearing a ring above the second knuckle: Master of Flemalle, *Portrait of Barthélemy Alatruye*, after 1562. Oak, 44.5x31.5cm. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Inv.406

¹⁷¹ Surviving female letters, such as those of Alessandra Strozzi and Isabella d'Este make several references to their jewels being pawned or held as collateral. Also, the nuptial practice of gifting a woman multiple rings as part of the wedding ceremony along with common dowry inclusions all suggest that rings were objects of financial wealth and security. Therefore, women wore multiple rings to show their financial security, but also to keep them – literally – on hand.

¹⁷² Antonio Averlino on the *studiolo* of Piero de' Medici, c.1464 in Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*, 89.

naturalistic style of van Eyck and Memling across the Alps, Italian portraits were composed in profile to emulate the busts and numismatic portraits from Ancient Rome.¹⁷³ Pisanello's 1444 portrait of Leonello d'Este (1407-1450) typifies this style: in side-profile, canvas dominated by the head and face, highly adorned upper-chest, and set against an imagined background.¹⁷⁴ Italian Quattrocento portraiture, therefore, rarely included the hands – but this does not necessarily mean rings were not immortalised in paint.

Antonio Leonelli de Crevalore's half-portrait of a man (1475-1480) illustrates how some artists included rings in male portraits without the need to include the sitter's hands (fig. 21). Akin to the display of finery in a *studiolo*, the sitter is surrounded by luxury, from the marbled border, pearl and gem-crusted drapery, and a part-concealed view out of the window casement of a coastline. Between two tantalising clues to the sitter's identity — the letters A.F.P and a hanging heraldic crest — is a small book, atop which sits a single pearl and ruby ring.

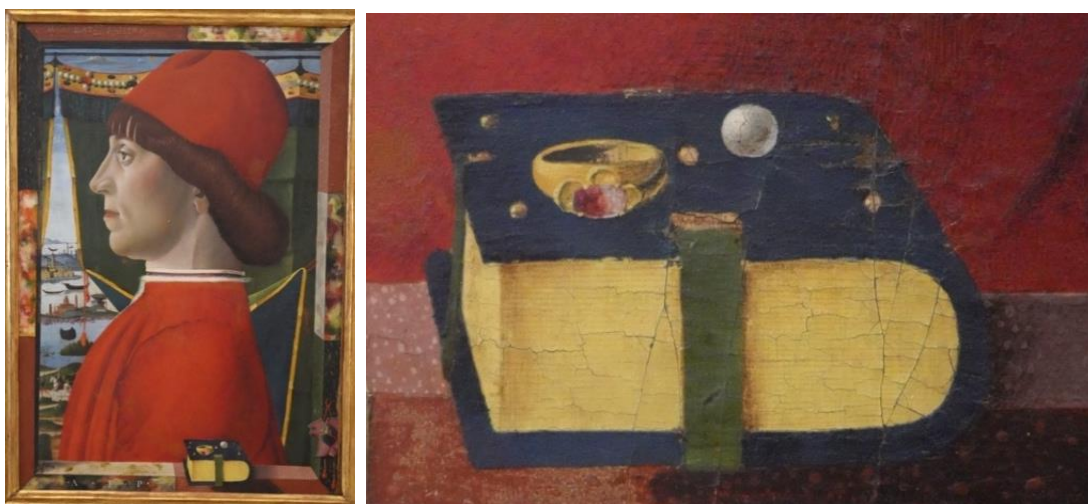


Figure 21: Antonio Leonelli da Crevalcore, *Ritratto d'uomo*, 1475-1480. Tempera on panel, 51 x 43cm. Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, inv. Cl. I n. 53. R: detail of ring

¹⁷³ Keith Christiansen et al., *The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini* (New York: Metropolitan Museum Of Art, 2011), ix.

¹⁷⁴ Pisanello, *Leonello d'Este*, 1444. Tempera on panel, 29.4x19.4cm. Accademia Carrara, 58 MR 00010.

With its sapphire binding, emerald straps, and gold pieces, the gilt-edged book is reminiscent of a jewelled ring itself. Only seven centimetres long, it could be easily lost within the grandeur of the painting; however, the contrast with the scarlet of the sitter's clothing and its location at the base of the image ensures it does not visually compete with the detailed work of the portrait's background. The trio align with the sitters left arm, as though he placed them there before sitting for his portrait, to rest against his side. The viewer could almost reach out and take the items, an effect Leonelli used to link the sitter, beholder, and objects. From the size and shape, the small tome could be the sitter's Book of Hours, an increasingly popular devotional item in the early modern, or a breviary. Books held a similar duality in the fifteenth century as gemstones; that is, they held cultural as well as monetary value to those who owned them.¹⁷⁵ Likewise, pearls in the Quattrocento were the most valuable precious 'stone' according to lapidaries and inventories, being worth more than diamonds. A single pearl could cost upwards of 100 florins; Piero de' Medici's inventoried collection of pearls was valued at 3,512 florins.¹⁷⁶ For Leonelli's sitter, the single pearl is likely representative of his financial wealth and may connect him with the maritime trade in the distant background, just visible through the pulled-back drapes. Wealthy, spiritual, and socio-economically connected, this pair of objects begin to reveal the virtuous attributes of the unnamed subject. The gold ring speaks to these two luxury items to form a communicative trio of objects.

The ring is comprised of a thick, gold band that is reasonably plain, but set with a stone that shifts from rich red to pale pink. Surrounding the stone are three visible 'petals' of a

¹⁷⁵ Clark, *Collecting Art*, 84.

¹⁷⁶ Spallanzani, *Inventari Medicej*, 141.

quatrefoil bezel with small brackets securing the stone. Quatrefoil was a popular choice for rings as the setting permitted a maximum amount of light to reach the gemstone, allowing for luminosity without compromising the security of the setting. Technologically it was also a reasonably simple setting to construct. From the painting alone it is difficult to discern which gem is set into the ring, particularly given its two tones. Possibly, the ring is set with two jewels, but the setting indicates the stone is more likely a singular red jewel: a ruby or spinel.



Figure 22: unknown jeweller, *finger-ring*, 15th century. Gold, niello, emerald, 2.3cm dia. British Museum London, AD.1093. Photo: British Museum

A French fifteenth century ring, set with an emerald, suggests what the ring in Leonelli's portrait may have looked like as a physical object (fig. 22). The stone does reflect light from the face of the gem that is maximised by the quatrefoil with the security of the closed-back setting. The concaved gold around the stone would similarly glint in sunlight or artificial light and compensate for the smallness and cabochon cut of the jewel.

Leonelli's trio of objects are a curious tableau, possibly matrimonial objects as the ring aligns with descriptions from the sixteenth century of wedding rings.¹⁷⁷ Another interpretation though reads the objects through the lens of wealth and learning, two key tenets of humanist elite masculinity. Pre-modern conceptions of geology understood stones to have agency and precious ones had divinely implanted virtue.¹⁷⁸ Gemstones set in rings, especially intaglios and cameos from antiquity (or contemporary copies) were carriers of social, economic, and cultural wealth that was transmuted from the item to the man. As justification for the money spent by Piero de' Medici on his collection of precious stones, Florentine architect Filarete (1400-1469) asserted that they bore "a certain grace to them that I cannot explain, but when a man begins to enjoy them, he understands them and derives great pleasure from them".¹⁷⁹ Articulated here is a correlation between ownership and a learned dignity, which is more valuable than the coin spent. This man whose identity has been lost to history, through Leonelli's skill and the medium of paint, is forever recorded as owning this ring. Just as rings enabled ecclesiastical men to inhabit both sacred and secular roles, rings provided elite men with a tactile representation of both material and cultural wealth. In secular circles, a man did not necessarily need to wear a ring for him to reap the cultural benefits of ownership. Lorenzo de' Medici's guided *studiolo* tours mirrored this painted display of culture. The elite male curated a performance of masculinity through displaying his collection of rings, gems, and antiquities for those who needed to see. Female portraiture of the fifteenth century differs from male in that their rings are recorded on the body, rather than on the parapet of their portrait. Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of*

¹⁷⁷ Christiansen et al., *The Renaissance Portrait*, 276.

¹⁷⁸ Buettner, *Mineral and The Visual*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Filarete, *Trattato di Architettura*, c. 1464 in Clark, *Collecting Art*, 109.

Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni (1489-1490) depicts Giovanna sat in front of a book and jewelled brooch; however, this is not typical.¹⁸⁰ Ecclesiastical men adorned their hands to convey divine authority that was understood by a broader, pan-European audience; elite masculinity was actively performed within competitive noble circles. Non-elite men were barred from accessing rings of a quality that bespoke princely magnificence because of the financial cost. Presenting an abundance of high-value items such as a personally commissioned Book of Hours, single pearl, and gold ring, enabled noble men to project authority and magnificence, and to overshadow men with smaller hoards, as a sartorial tool to solidify their social and cultural dominance.

Leonelli's use of the parapet in his portrait to create three-dimensional depth was used by other artists, including Francesco del Cossa. The sitter in Cossa's male portrait appears to reach out to the viewer to offer a gold ring, set with precious stone (fig. 23). Though unverified, art scholars such as Keith Christiansen theorise the sitter to be Florentine goldsmith, Carlo Faucci, by his presentation of a ring.¹⁸¹



Figure 23: Francesco del Cossa, *Portrait of a Young Man with a Ring*, ca. 1472-74. Tempera on wood, 38.5x 27.2cm. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Madrid, 1956.14 [105].

¹⁸⁰ Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni*, 1489-1490. Mixed media on panel, 77x49cm. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 158(1935.6)

¹⁸¹ Christiansen et al., *The Renaissance Portrait*, 275.

Compositionally, the sitter's arm has been foreshortened to allow the illusion of the hand and ring reaching beyond the parapet to focus the gaze of the viewer. Cossa's sitter is distinguished from the others in this corpus as he appears to be giving the ring away. The hands of men in other portraits (fig. 24.1-9) are active and imply motion, but not to the degree of Cossa's. Rogier van der Weyden's portrait (fig. 24.8) has Francesco d'Este hold the ring close to his body. In the context of elite competition to collect, hoard, and display their precious stones on their bodies, this sitter's liberalness with his ring is unusual. It would be reasonable to speculate that the man depicted was a goldsmith as he could be offering the ring as a sample of his craftsmanship and placing his viewer in the role of potential client.

Italian artists such as Andrea del Castagno (1421-1457), Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), and Giovanni Boltraffio (1466/67-1510) depicted their sitter's hands in their compositions, most often by shifting from half-portraits to three-quarter portraits. Hands enabled artists to express characteristics, occupations, lineages, and virtues of a sitter outside of the conventional ocular or written means of communication.¹⁸² Most commonly, male hands were rendered purposeful – in prayer, presenting objects, gathering clothing. As objects of wealth, status, and learning, rings in portraits emphasised the civility of the hand. Long, clean, pale, and unmarred, the fingers depicted are graceful but not passive. Hands conveyed agency of the sitter to the viewer. Even those resting on the parapet of the painting imply motion, to be lifted into view.

¹⁸² Adrian W B Randolph, *Touching Objects: Intimate Experiences of Italian Fifteenth Century Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 67.



Figure 24: 1 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Man*, 1475. Oil on Panel, 38x27cm. Uffizi Gallery Florence, no.1102; 2 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of Benedetto Portinari*, 1487. Oil on Wood, 45x34cm. Uffizi Gallery Florence, no.1090; 3 – Giovanni Boltraffio, *Portrait of a Young Man*, 1491. Oil on Panel, 52x43cm. Pinacoteca di Brera Milan, 1242; 4 – Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Young Man with a Medal*, c.1475. Tempera of wood, gilded stucco, 51.5 x 44cm. Uffizi Gallery Florence, no. 1488; 5 – Andrea del Castagno, *Portrait of a Man*, ca. 1450. Tempera on Panel, 54.2 x 40.4 cm. National Gallery of Art Washington DC, 1937.1.17; 6 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Man*, 1490. Oil Paint, 35x25cm. Uffizi Gallery Florence, no.1101; 7 – Unknown Artist, *Portrait of a Young Man with a Red Rose*, 1440-1460. Oak Wood, 19.1x13.2 cm, Gemäldegalerie, 523D; 8 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Francesco d'Este*, c.1460. Oil on Wood, 31.8 x 22.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 32.100.43.; 9 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Young Man*, c.1472-75. Oil on Oak Panel, 40x29cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975.1.112.

Boltraffio (fig. 24.3) has his sitters hand rest atop a strip of poetry suggesting erudition; Weyden (fig. 24.8) conveys the skill of his sitter through the tools of goldsmithing; Botticelli (fig. 24.4) has his sitter proudly display his loyalty to the Medici family through the presenting of a medallion to the audience. Without even seeing the faces, clothing, or

backdrop to these portraits, we are able to divine attributes the sitter wished to be immortalised. For sitters from wealthy merchant families who may not yet have had the cultural capital of established noblemen, rings were an aspirational piece of jewellery. In comparison to a brooch, tapestry, or table settings of silver, a ring set with a gem or even an antique would be more financially accessible to men aspiring to elevate their social standing. To then be painted wearing this jewel conveyed the wealth needed to commission an artist and to preserve his accomplishment by owning that high-value item.

The cost of pigments varied greatly, and so there were additional costs associated with painting sapphires, rubies, and emeralds. Pigments such as ultramarine required the crushing and mixing of lapis lazuli into a binding medium to create a rich, deep blue. In 1521, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) complained that the ultramarine he bought in Antwerp cost one-hundred times the amount of his earth-toned pigment; Sano di Pietro (1406-1481) in 1459 was painting a fresco in Siena, where the town officials retained control of his supplies of gold and ultramarine pigment.¹⁸³ Similar to wearing or owning a gem-set ring, commissioning a portrait that likely required the destruction of precious stones to create, evidences a social and financial access to these costly, scarce resources. Young men had to project themselves into the competitive world of Italian nobility, projecting their marriageability, virility, wealth, and culture. Portraiture afforded this opportunity and preserved their aspirational youthfulness for posterity.

¹⁸³ Kassia St Clair, *The Secret Lives of Colour* (London: Hodder, 2018), 182-186.

Rings in Public Spaces

Men in Quattrocento Italy collected, stored, displayed, and portrayed rings to enhance their authority and family's significance through the cultural capital of these items. Owning and displaying these rings immortalised the socio-political standing of men and their families. It is unsurprising then, that rings became disembodied from the men themselves to become part of public ritual and iconography. Ruling families such as the Medici in Florence, d'Este in Ferrara, and the reigning doges of Venice utilised the powerful symbolism of a ring to establish authority and maintain a public image of leadership and control. Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara used a diamond ring as part of his personal iconography. The rusticated façade of his *Palazzo Diamante* in Ferrara visually referencing the point of a diamond.¹⁸⁴ Further south, the Medici family in Florence were more literal with their employment of the image of a diamond ring.

A diamond ring was the most used *impresa* by the Medici family in Quattrocento Florence.¹⁸⁵ From statue plinths to birth plates, luxury textiles to door knockers, these pointed diamond rings can still be found marking the city today. Like Ercole, the Medici crafted public displays of authority, learning, and virtue that became fundamental to the family's dominance. As the Medici increasingly controlled the city streets, they were able to dazzle the public of Florence with its display of magnificence. The diamond ring became a crucial symbol of legitimacy and legacy for the family. Precisely what the diamond ring was originally intended to convey is not recorded. Paolo Giovio (1483-1552) compiled a

¹⁸⁴ Clark, *Collecting Art*, 102.

¹⁸⁵ Adrian W B Randolph, *Engaging Symbols : Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 108.

sixteenth century volume on the various *imprese* around Italy.¹⁸⁶ He provides two descriptions of the Medici diamond ring, firstly by Cosimo de' Medici and then as used by Lorenzo. He described Cosimo sleeping underneath a sculpted three diamond rings, *tre diamanti*, in the room where he also studied (fig. 25).¹⁸⁷



Figure 25: woodcut illustration of Cosimo's impresa referred to by Giovio

Cosimo's three interlocked diamond rings are visible elsewhere across the physical and cultural space of Florence, such as the adornment of Pallas's dress in Botticelli's 1480s *Pallas and the Centaur* (fig. 26). The accompanying woodcut for Lorenzo in Giovio's text (fig. 24) mirrors the one found on the back of his birth tray (fig. 27); as the symbol of his father Piero, the tray indicated the diamond ring *impresa* was an inherited symbol of family power, rather than tied to an individual man. Speaking to the polyvalence of the imagery of a diamond ring, Lorenzo's *impresa* combines the ring of his father with three coloured ostrich feathers that represented the virtue of justice.¹⁸⁸ These feathers are threaded through the

¹⁸⁶ «Io non posso andar piu alto de' tre diamanti che porto il gran Cosmo ["il Vecchio"], I quali voi vedete scoliti nella camera dov'io dormo e studio, ma, a dirvi il vero, con ogni diligenza cercandolo non potetti mai trovare prescisamente quel che volessero significare.»

Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell'imprese*, 1559, 62-63 in Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 111.

¹⁸⁷ Further evidence of the fluidity of room use in the early modern

¹⁸⁸ Francis Ames-Lewis, "Early Medicean Devices," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42, no. 1 (1979): 122-43, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/751088>, 136.

hoop of a pointed diamond ring conveys a visual message of his magnificent virtues of charity, faith, constancy, and devotedness.



Figure 26: detail of Pallas' robe with three interlocked Medici diamond rings. Sandro Botticelli, *Pallas and the Centaur*, ca. 1480-1485. Tempera on canvas, 207 x 148cm. Uffizi Gallery Florence, n. 752



Figure 27: Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi, *The Triumph of Fame*, ca. 1449. Tempera, silver, and gold on wood, 62.5cm dia. MET Museum New York, 1995.7

As a republic, Florence politically should not have had a ruling family – conspiracies and successful expulsions from the city attest to the divisive nature of Medici rule. In an account of Pope Pius II discussing Florence with the Bishop of Orta, the two men articulated their opinions through a nuptial metaphor:

[the Bishop of Orta replied] that it was a pity so beautiful a woman had not a husband, the Pope said, 'Yes, but she has a paramour,' meaning that she had a tyrant instead of a king and referring to Cosimo, who [was] like an unlawful lord of the city...¹⁸⁹

Positioning Cosimo as a 'paramour' not only delegitimised him as a ruler but attacked his virtue, and so his masculinity. Cosimo is characterised as unlawful leader with no regard for his people. Anti-Medici attitudes signified the need for the family to continuously produce images of grandeur, culture, and magnificence to assert and legitimise their right to dominate. To position his rule as kingly – rather than tyrannical – was foundational to the Medici family's control over Florentine politics. Marking public buildings, patronaged pieces of art, and high-value items with the family's *impresa* was vital in conveying the legitimacy of their rule. Doing so visually represented the vast control the Medici had over the urban space of Florence. It is nigh impossible to know for certain how successfully the people of Florence read and understood this iconography of Lorenzo and Cosimo as deeper than marks of their city's ruling family. Giovio admits that he does not understand the

¹⁸⁹ Peter Elmer, Nick Webb, and Roberta Wood, *The Renaissance in Europe: An Anthology* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 233.

significance of the rings, despite his diligent efforts to.¹⁹⁰ Modern scholarship can only hypothesise the intended meaning of the Medici diamond ring. Art historian Adrian Randolph presents a convincing argument that the ring was a tool to legitimise the leadership of the Medici in Florence.¹⁹¹ Diamonds were referred to by their Greek name, *adamas* meaning 'unbreakable'. The stones were often associated with steadfastness and so linked to fidelity in marriage. Diamond rings, therefore, had a connotation with legitimate marriage and Randolph argues the Medici drew upon to legitimise their lordship over Florence.¹⁹² Just as a ring legitimises the union between a man and woman, so to it legitimises the Medici over Florence.

Florence was not the only city to utilise rings as public iconography of legitimacy and control, expressed through a matrimonial metaphor. Venice was a maritime republic whose wealth and power was derived from its waterways. Naval strength and marine trade enabled the city to facilitate a lucrative trade in luxury goods between the Christian and Muslim Mediterranean. To express this reliance, each year the city ritualistically married the Adriatic Sea in a ceremony on Ascension Day known as the *festa della Sensa*, with language and symbolism that echoed the Medici diamond ring in Florence.¹⁹³ History and myth blend when seeking to uncover the origins of the ceremony, though according to Venetian civic narratives, in 1177 Pope Alexander III (1100-1181) gifted a golden ring to Doge Sebastiano Ziani (1102-1178) as reward for Venice's assistance in facilitating a peaceful conclusion to

¹⁹⁰ «con ogni diligenza cercandolo non potetti mai trovare precisamente quel che volessero significare»

¹⁹¹ Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 108-138.

¹⁹² Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 108-138.

¹⁹³ The 'festa della sensa' is the Venetian name for the ritual of Ascension Day, where *sensa* refers to the day of Ascension. The event of marrying the sea is called '*sposalizio del mare*'. The thesis uses *sensa* as a shorthand for the ritual marriage, which was the main event.

the papal schism of the twelfth century. In the library of Venice's Museo Correr, a manuscript chronicles the events of the 1177 Peace of Venice. Dated between 1370-1425, the illumination on folio 28r portrays the gifting of the ring to Doge Ziani (fig. 28).



Figure 28: Venezia, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, *Correr MS 1497*, Fol. 28r

Robed in his finery, Doge Ziani stands to the left of the image and is easily identifiable by his ducal horn (*cornu ducale*), the soft, red hat of his office. Across from Ziani stands Pope Alexander, dressed in papal regalia including the papal tiara. The gold ring, held aloft by the right hand of the pope, occupies the centre of the illumination. Backed by deep lapis lazuli blue, the gold of the ring draws the eye of the viewer and holds their attention there. The ring is set with a large gemstone and rendered oversized to reflect the magnificence of the gift and for visual clarity. From the deep, red colouring, it seems the ring was set with a spinel ruby; though the red matches that of the doge's hat and cloak, so could be using colour to visually connect the ring with the doge. The text only refers to the ring as a gold with no mention of a gemstone that was a blessed gift from Alexander to Ziani, their

subsequent allyship, and the pope's commandment that the ritual marriage occurs annually.¹⁹⁴ In 1869, archivist Giambattista Lorenzi collated a series of Venetian public documents into a several volume work. Contained in the first volume is an etching and description of the above illumination (Fig. 29).



Figure 29: Giambattista Lorenzi, *Monumenti per servire alla storia del Palazzo ducale de: Venezia*, 1868, page 64

Lorenzi provided a written description of the scene, identifying the figures behind the pope as three prelates but fails to provide details about the men with the doge, simply describing them as *personaggi* (figures).¹⁹⁵ Regarding the ring, Lorenzi is similarly scant on description of the ring itself but does assert that it is the ring associated with the origin of the marriage of the sea.¹⁹⁶ The active pose of the doge reaching for the ring held aloft by the pope illustrates the gendered, religious, and political power implicit in this exchange. That is, the

¹⁹⁴ «alegrica ande uicontra anuf le doxe con le brace auerte e disse ben vegna lo sigrior de turo d mar e tolse uno anello doro elqual el dona amis lo doxe digiando Sicomo ei signio spoxa(r) la turia cossi uoio dx ivi spoxe d' mar isignificacton dae un sie signor de tuto d mar e dito questo nus io papa benedi lo anello e nus lo dexe lo gita un mar. Et aloza con cede nus lo papa a tuti la -- che ogno anno i lo didela»

Transcription: author's own

¹⁹⁵ Giambattista Lorenzi, *Monumenti per Servire Alla Storia Del Palazzo Ducale Di Venezia* (Italy: Tip. del Commercia di M. Visentini, 1869), 65.

¹⁹⁶ «il papa seguito da tre prelate offrire l' anello al Doge Ziani. Dietro al Doge tre personaggi. Signifero L' assocrita origine dello sposolizio del mare» Lorenzi, *Monumenti*, 65.

doge is actively accepting the papal gift and all the symbolism that underpins taking such a gift. Regal masculinity is clearly displayed through the lavishness of their clothing, the size of the ring, and the equal sizing and height of the figures. Each man is at eye-level with the other indicating these are men of equal power and status with neither beholden to the other. Ziani's hand is below the pope's, denoting their roles as recipient and giver respectively. The image positions Venice as an autonomous state that was not inferior to the papacy but rather an ally of equal import.

Edward Muir's seminal work, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, devotes a chapter to the gifts of Pope Alexander III, including a section on the *Sensa*.¹⁹⁷ Muir attributes the origins of the ceremony to Doge Pietro II Orseolo (961-1009) who, ca.1000, sailed on Ascension Day to Dalmatia, after which a blessing of the sea took place by the bishop of Olivolo. Muir's *Civic Ritual* focuses on the ceremonial practices and significance rather than the materiality or mechanics of these rituals in depth. Of the *Sensa* nuptial ring, Muir offers a few lines:

...any particular ring could have had numerous levels of meanings in different contexts. The circular unity of the ring, for example, usually symbolised joining, continuity, eternity, and fertility.¹⁹⁸

Muir is correct in outlining the polyvalence of ring iconography and the cultural symbolism of a circle the ring emulates. From this explanation though, Muir frames the ring used in the

¹⁹⁷ Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 119-134.

¹⁹⁸ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 124-125.

ritual as indistinct from any other ring. Deeper analysis of the materiality and function of the object of the *Sensa* ring instead reveals it as a unique object.

Accounts of the ceremony generally agree on the main series of events: after Mass, the doge would sail out on his gold-ornamented ship called the *Bucintoro* along the grand canal. Once at the mouth of the canal, he would recite the ritual ‘vows’ and then throw the ring into the sea, completing the ‘wedding’. Travel accounts of visitors to early modern Venice record their viewing the ceremony. From the fifteenth century, Pero Tafur (1410–1484), a courtier from the Castilian court of Juan II (1405–1454), and Arnold von Harff (1471–1505), a knight from Cologne, both describe seeing the doge perform the *Sensa* ritual on Ascension Day in 1437 and ca.1497 respectively. Tafur’s account *Travels and voyages of Pero Tafur through various parts of the world* was likely penned in 1457 but chronicles the events of his 1437-1438 journey.¹⁹⁹ He begins his account with a description of Venice on Ascension Day as a chance for the city, and its populace, to display their treasures; describing “all the men and women are arrayed very richly, with jewels of great worth”.²⁰⁰ To a successful man of mercantile Iberian ancestry it is unsurprising that Tafur detailed the material wealth of the Venetians.²⁰¹ He explained to his readers that at the climax of the ceremony, “...the Doge draws a ring from his finger and casts it into the sea”, intending to placate the tempestuous waters.²⁰² As a Spanish courtier transiting through Venice, his outsider status may account

¹⁹⁹ Spanish full title: «Andanças e viaje de Pero Tafur por diversas partes del mundo avidos»

²⁰⁰ Tafur Pero, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, trans. Malcolm Letts (London: Routledge, 2004), 158.

²⁰¹ Monsterrat Piera, “Vulnerable Medieval Iberian Travellers: Benjamin of Tudela’s *Sefer Ha-Massa’ot*, Pero Tafur’s *Andanças E Viajes*, and Ahmad Al-Wazzan’s *Libro de La Cosmographia et Geographia de Africa*,” in *Remapping Travel Narratives, 1000-1700: To the East and Back Again*, ed. Monsterrat Piera (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 61–86, 75.

²⁰² Tafur, *Travels and Adventures*, 159.

for his brevity as he likely observed the ritual from afar. While his account does outline the wealth of Venice through tales of jewelled doorways, golden brocades, and precious stones, perhaps he was simply unable to see the ring itself. What Tafur does illuminate is that the doge was wearing the ring on his hand rendering the body of doge a dual entity. His body underwent a secular transubstantiation through the ritual of the *Sensa*, where the physical body of the doge becomes a corporeal manifestation of the city of Venice. As he threw the ring from his finger, he physically projected the dominance of the city over the sea, with the gendered connotations of male dominance over a new bride.

Sixty years later, Arnold von Harff witnessed the same nautical nuptials during his extensive pilgrimage-cum-travelogue. His account of the *Sensa* is likely dated to February 1497, though Harff does not consistently date his travel entries.²⁰³ Harff travelled to Venice from Rome with two merchants and used the city as a gateway through to the Holy Land.²⁰⁴ His route reinforces the centrality of Venice to trade and travel between the West and Eastern Europe. Unlike Tafur's focus on mercantile issues, Harff seems to have written with a desire to educate his readership about Venetian culture. He wrote in a low German dialect suggesting he intended his work to be read locally rather than for an educated elite whose texts would typically have been in Latin. His account of the *Sensa* is more evocative than Tafur's as he genders the ceremony through the metaphor of the city and sea as being a husband to wife.

²⁰³ David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 37.

²⁰⁴ Mary Boyle, *Writing the Jerusalem Pilgrimage in the Late Middle Ages* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2021), xv.

Furthermore, on our Lord's Ascension Day the duke celebrates every year... he throws a golden finger-ring into the wild sea as a sign that he therefore marries the sea to be his housewife, wanting to be the lord over the whole sea.²⁰⁵

The dialect term *huysfrauwen* carries a similar connotative meaning to the English term housewife and demonstrates Harff understood, or was told, the gendered framing of the ritual. He understood the Adriatic's role was to be obedient, nurturing, and subservient to her spouse. He also saw the ritual as the city seeking dominance, or lordship, over the sea. The ring itself is, frustratingly, poorly described as in the other accounts but the ring was likely difficult to see from afar, unlike the majesty of the ship and splendour of the city.

As with ecclesiastical rings, the ring of the *Sensa* became more than just a hoop of gold. Through the process of ritual, the significance and symbolism changed. While it is true that the circular shape of a ring suggests eternity and continuity, the *sensa* ring was neither of those. As a ritualistic object of masculinity, political power, and naval dominance, it required the sacrifice and performance to remain culturally powerful. The marriage between Venice and the sea was not eternal but had to be renewed every year. The ring cannot represent eternity, but it is a symbol of continuity. The stability and wealth brought to Venice through trade afforded the citizens security, and the reputation of the city as one of opulence, luxury, and vice — the Venetian *Carnevale* is a celebration of all three. As with the Medici legitimising their rule of a republic through the iconography of a ring, the Venetian state

²⁰⁵ «Item off unsers heren upfartz daich vijrt all jairs der hertzouch vur die poertz off dat hoich mer. dae wijrfft he dan eyn gulden vingerlijn in dat wylt mer zo eynem tzeychen dat he dae mit dat mer truwet zo eynre huysfrauwen, as eyn here oeuere dat gantze mer wyllen zo sijn.» Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 972, 36r

assured their populace of their legitimate, competent rule of the lagoon through this ritual marriage.

Accounts from the later sixteenth century indicate a waning seriousness to the *Sensa*, becoming more of a tourist attraction than a meaningful ceremony to the city of Venice.²⁰⁶

However, in the naval museum of Venice is a glass cabinet whose contents are at odds with the nineteenth-century muskets and twentieth-century military uniforms around it.

Displayed within are seven unusually large rings. Known as 'Launch Rings' (*anelli del varo*), these nineteenth-century ship rings were integral objects in the ritual launching of new ships. According to the museum catalogue, the tradition was created in 1866 with the rings donated by godmothers when the Arsenal of Venice launched a new ship.²⁰⁷ The catalogue continues, "The ring was thrown into the sea when the new [ship] descended into the water... after its recovery, it was placed in a richly decorated box which was kept in the commander's cabin or in the officers' quarters" and concludes that the launch rings may have a connection to the historic *Sensa* ritual.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ For example: Marino Sanudo, Patricia Labalme, and Laura Sanguineti White, *Venice, Città Excelentissima: Selections from the Renaissance Diaries of Marin Sanudo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 82-83.

²⁰⁷ «gli anelli donati dalle madrine». The Italian is vague on whose godmother donated the ring. I would suggest the captain's godmother, as the launch ring was stored on the ship in the captain's cabin.

²⁰⁸ «L'anello veniva lanciato in mare al momento della discenza in acqua della nuova unità e successivamente, dopo il suo recupero, era posto in un cofano riccamente decorato che veniva conservato nella cabina del comandante o nel quadrato ufficiali» page 98 of the Historical Naval Museum of Venice guidebook.



Figure 30: Display cabinet of 'Launch Rings' at the Naval Museum, Venice

The scale and detail of these launch rings reflect a ceremonial purpose, enabling them to be seen at distance. Made from materials that simulate precious metals and gemstones, the launch rings share a morphological similarity to the papal rings such as the 'emerald' launch ring (front, fig. 30). The choice to include an imitation gem speaks to the continued significance of jewels. Emeralds, diamonds and their glass replicas reflect a nobility upon those who own and display such rings. The launch rings are an inheritance of the practices from fifteenth-century noblemen that conveyed a gentlemanly mariner's relationship to ship and sea in post-Napoleonic Venice.



Figure 31: four examples of 'Launch Rings' from the naval museum, Venice

Elite masculinity in the Quattrocento shared similar traits and virtues to the clerical elite. Worldly goods, learning, and an appreciation of culture were all characteristics shared between the noble men of the sacred and the secular. The lay lords of the Italian peninsula had to compete for items of cultural capital, such as gemstones and ancient intaglios. Religious rings of status had been influenced by the secular rings of monarchy and secular rulers, meaning patrician princes needed ways of distinguishing their nobility.²⁰⁹ Collecting and displaying rings set with gemstones enabled these secular rulers to project their social superiority above women and other men. Churchmen were not able to display their

²⁰⁹ Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 122.

collections so overtly – though inventories reveal popes and cardinals to have impressive hordes of jewels – and so this was a space secular men could utilise.

Families and men with titles, land, and socio-political influence engaged with ring-wearing and ring-collecting in the fifteenth century as a means to convey economic superiority over lesser men and women. As argued here, princely men required sartorial brilliance to distinguish themselves from the muted dress of their lesser. During the fifteenth century, Italian cities — Venice and Genoa especially — made 83 substantial sumptuary laws to codify and legislate dress codes, including access to luxury materials.²¹⁰ The mercantile connectivity of the Genoese and Venetians may explain the extensive sumptuary laws in these port cities and a motivation to on-sell these luxury goods, rather than sell to a domestic market. A Venetian law of 1360 stated that the “great quantity of money” tied up in “jewels, converted to trade might bring great returns and profits”.²¹¹ Venice’s acknowledgement of the liquidity of jewels is important as it highlights an economic motivator for patricians to collect rings set with gemstones in large quantities; jewels were valuable but portable items, and their size made them easy to collect and store. Inventories catalogue how and where these patrician collections were displayed during the fifteenth century, and paintings immortalise this practice of ring-wearing. Rings were an effective means of displaying wealth and status as they were small items of adornment that avoided explicit regulation by sumptuary laws for men. Symbolic significance of rings may also

²¹⁰ Diane Owen Hughes, “Sumptuary Laws and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy,” in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West* (England: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 72.

²¹¹ Quoted in Hughes, “Sumptuary Law”, 77.

contribute to their exclusion from sumptuary banning: they were more than mere adornment but culturally coded objects of meaning.

Public displays of rings as elite *impresa*, especially matrimonial rings, evidence a ubiquity of the virtues and social behaviours represented by ring-wearing. What separates elite ring-wearing from common men is the quantity and high-quality of rings they owned. Ring as an effective public symbol is only sensible in a society where the wearing of a ring was widely understood as a token of identity, power, or connection. Therefore, rings as tokens of identity must have been a form of adornment to permeate different social classes in the premodern world.

Marks in Gold: Rings of Common Men



Figure 32: Unknown, finger-ring, late 15th century. Gold, enamel, turquoise, bronze, 1.04in. British Museum, 1872,0604.417

Marred by the passing of time, this exquisite golden ring, with its ornately decorated bezel and bright turquoise, has no known original owner. Set into a quatrefoil bezel, the turquoise now has several fissure lines and evidence of corrosion around the setting.²¹² Curatorial notes and conservation treatments indicate the ring is not made of pure gold and contains elements of copper in the bezel, hence the unsightly deterioration.²¹³ There is also a suggestion that the turquoise is a turquoise paste, rather than solid stone. Black trace enamel around the quatrefoil petal unfortunately exacerbates the dark grey corrosion. Nonetheless, the gold of the hoop is still resplendent, glinting in the light and contrasting the sea-green of the opaque stone.

²¹² Manuscript evidence does suggest that turquoises were understood to have a crackled surface. A c.1400 manuscript of Matfre Ermengaud *Breviari d'amor* from Catalonia depicts a turquoise with a similarly crackled blue-green. For more, see Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 94-97.

²¹³ British Museum, "Curator's comments," *Finger-Ring*, 2025, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1872-0604-417.

The likely owner had wealth, with financial and social access to accomplished goldsmiths (*orafai*) and jewellers (*gioellieri*). The elite inventories analysed in chapter two show that turquoise rings were prevalent amongst the lists of luxury items.²¹⁴ Described by Pliny the Elder as having the colour of water “near the seashore”, turquoises offer an opaque colour that translucent stones, such as sapphires, can lack.²¹⁵ Turquoises came to the markets of pre-modern Europe from Tibet and Persia, with renewed popularity during the fifteenth-century after going out of style in the thirteenth.²¹⁶ In 1532, Venetian goldsmith Alvise Gritti (1480-1534) included turquoises in the gold helmet he crafted for the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566); a significant diplomatic gift.²¹⁷ Given this correlation between turquoises and the wealthy, this ring seems an odd choice to open a chapter on non-elite male ring-wearing.

On the outside of this ring’s hoop is a miniscule marking. It is barely visible to the naked eye; I could only observe it through a macro camera lens. The mark is of two crossed keys and a crudely fashioned conical hat: the control mark of the papal states (fig. 33).²¹⁸ Rather than a reflection of poor craftsmanship, the rusticity of this control mark is due to the minute size;

²¹⁴ Inventoried Turquoise rings:

Piero de’ Medici: four rings with an average value of 17.5 florins

Cardinal Francesco Sforza: 1 gold turquoise ring to be buried with, 2 gold turquoise rings, loose turquoises, 3 turquoise set into a ring with Pope Paul cameo

King Charles VI of France: unnumbered turquoise rings (*anneaux*)

Lorenzo de’ Medici: two turquoise rings, both valued at 200 florins each

²¹⁵ « Callais sappirum imitatur candidior et litoroso mari similis.» xxxvii: 56

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History, Volume X: Books 36-37*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 419 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 287.

²¹⁶ Campbell, *Medieval Jewellery*, 29.

Ronald W. Lightbown, *Medieval European Jewellery* (London: Victoria & Albert Publications, 1992), 11.

²¹⁷ Spinger, *Armour and Masculinity*, 6.

²¹⁸ Control marks are a warranty stamp on jewellery items to denote the quality is verified by the marker.

the hoop measures only 0.38cm thick. Visible above the mark is a slight bulge in the gold, suggesting this stamp was impressed into the metal. When worn, the marking sits on the lower portion of the band. Even if the mark was larger, it would be impossible to see when worn. Likely it was a feature to denote trustworthiness and quality rather than contributing to sartorial display or public expression of religious allegiance. A corroding turquoise ring of imperfect – and possibly imitative – materials, with a near invisible mark of creation, is a worthy metaphor for the focus of this chapter. Barely visible in the historical record, the relationship between rings and socially inferior men.



Figure 33: extreme close-up of Figure One - Papal Markings on side hoop.

Archival gaps, source limitations, and historical silences makes crafting an historical account of the lives and adornment of common men difficult. The methodology dubbed ‘history from below’, has many scholars attempting to access the lived experience of individuals outside of the nobility. Most of the men who owned jewellery in the early modern world were of a higher socio-economic class – royalty, ruling elite, princely clergymen, or holders

of civic office.²¹⁹ The purpose of this chapter is to attempt to draw together the threads of material and documentary evidence available to sketch the relationship between non-elite males and the practice of ring-wearing. As a form of adornment, men wore rings across the social strata of pre-modern Europe, observable in the historical record through documentary evidence, such as wills, court records, and literary texts. However, in this chapter it is necessary to broaden the scope beyond Quattrocento Italy due to the fragmentary source material available. Literary and documentary evidence from England, Bavaria, and the north of Italy is considered here to retrieve and draw conclusions about layman access to rings. Sources from Italy, however, remain the primary focus. While these spaces were linguistically and culturally diverse, there were likely analogous experiences in the daily fashions and lived experience of those excluded from courtly dress. The archaeological record for non-elite rings is reduced by their restricted access to precious metals and stones that do survive in the physical corpus. Rings of base metals or organic materials such as rush-weed are less likely to remain intact over the centuries, and less desirable to nineteenth-century collectors, from whom most British museums gained their ring collections.

The category of 'non-elite' applied to the majority of men and women in premodern Italy.²²⁰

For the labourers, unskilled workers, and people living with little to no means, there is no

²¹⁹ C. Richardson, "as My Whole Trust Is in Him': Jewellery and the Quality of Early Modern Relationships.," in *Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 182–201, 186.

²²⁰ Men and families who lived rurally, or outside of city-centres, are additionally challenging to access in the historical record. Some exceptions, such as the Florentine *catasto*, will be referenced, but largely this thesis will focus on urban, non-elite men. Enslaved men are another category of non-elite that fall outside of the parameters of this thesis, given the definitional barrier to unfree people owning items.

direct evidence of their ability to adorn their bodies.²²¹ For the majority of pre-modern Europe, decorative jewellery and rings would have been beyond the economic means of a large portion of the population, even those made of base metals and local stones.²²² But, culturally, the vast majority of people were not expected to be glistening with gemstones like their elite counterparts. Historian Guido Ruggiero argues “not all people in a society participate in culture in the same way” but that there existed complex premodern societies “various shades of culture.”²²³ In the late fifteenth-century and throughout the expansionist sixteenth-century, markets did see a greater supply of precious stones and materials in the wake of increasing trade expansion and new mine sites, and so perhaps more affordable gemstones appeared in market squares and goldsmith’s workshops.²²⁴ Household inventories from regular families are humble affairs with little of the dazzlement seen in those analysed thus far.

In the 1421 inventory of Churrado Giovanni (n.d.), a Florentine shoemaker, 59 rings are listed among his possessions. These are described as “sewing rings”²²⁵, possibly similar to a thimble. Given the quantity of rings, they were likely low-value and served his profession of shoemaker. Unlike the brilliant precious metals and stones of elite men, these rings were utilitarian; they are craftsman’s tools, not jewels. Through the muted drabness of these lower-class men, the magnificence of elite men is magnified. As discussed with patrician portraiture, men of the nobility had the luxury of preserving their hands from the scars of

²²¹ Hohti’s recent publication has done important work to reveal fashion of the non-elite classes. Paula Hohti, *Refashioning the Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025).

²²² Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 15.

²²³ Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

²²⁴ Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 17-18.

²²⁵ «59 anelli dottone dachucire» ASF, MPAP 152, fol. 214v.

manual labour. Most of the non-elite in pre-modern societies would have relied on their hands as tools of industry and labour. The adornment of their hands with rings was not only financially inaccessible but impractical; it could even hinder their work and in some industries pose a danger should the ring snag on equipment or clothing and result in bodily injuries.²²⁶ Late sixteenth-century art became increasingly interested in capturing scenes of non-elite lives, such as butcher's shops and kitchens. Paintings of butchers and fishmongers depict working men of industry, using their hands in the processing of meat, whose fingers are devoid of adornment.²²⁷ This utilitarianism of the lower classes resulted in brilliance being an attribute of the wealthy, and wholly absent from the masculinity of indigent, labouring men.

Though 'middle-class' is an anachronistic term to apply to the fifteenth century, there were men and households that lived, worked, and adorned their bodies in this widening liminal space between the elite and the destitute. Men with artisanal trades, merchants, lawyers, and professionals did leave evidence of owning rings, suggesting a keystone of their masculinity was in the emulation of patrician practice.²²⁸ This ownership was, typically, on a smaller scale than the collections of the Medici or Sforza, but the cultural capital these rings carried were still meaningful. Evidence indicates that men outside of the nobility primarily

²²⁶ See: John Gagné, "Emotional Attachments: Iron Hands, Their Makers, and Their Wearers, 1450–1600," in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 133–53.

Also: Gábor Almási and Giorgio Lizzul, *Rethinking the Work Ethic in Premodern Europe* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2023).

²²⁷ Examples include Bartolomeo Passarotti's *The Butcher's Shop* and *The Fishmonger's Shop* (both 1580s), Vincenzo Campi's *Kitchen Scene* (1590-1591), and Annibale Carracci *The Butcher's Shop* (1580s). As these paintings were coded for an elite audience, it is possible the workers are depicted with unadorned hands to reinforce the elite imagining that only those with wealth can engage with hand adornment.

²²⁸ Richardson, "As my whole trust is in him", 186.

owned rings to give as a token of marriage or to wear as a form of identification. As demonstrated earlier, noblemen did own and gift rings for this purpose; however, their collecting of rings was significantly larger than the men considered here and for a different purpose. Sources allude to a competitive dynamic between the socially elite and their inferiors; the brilliance of patrician men was emulated by those men who sought but a shimmer of their luminosity. Through imitation, inheritance, or trading, non-elite males sought to build networks and relationships in the way modelled by those at the top of the social strata.

A source type unique to England are the Calendar of Close Rolls that preserve the names of landowners in the kingdom. The roll of 1469-1470 details a family of haberdashers, the Ostrich family. Though hardly destitute, the family was possibly part of a community in England known as 'alien' merchants, possibly migrating from the Low Countries to ply their trade in England.²²⁹ In 1483, Thomas Ostrich bequeathed to his son, also Thomas, a "little ring with a diamond if God fortune him to time coming to wede a woman [and] to geve yt unto her".²³⁰ Thomas' bequest of a small diamond ring to his eldest son and namesake on the condition of his finding of a wife, implies the ring was both monetarily and sentimentality valuable. A condition of the bequest was that the ring could not be sold or pawned for cash. This caveat increases the likelihood the ring was a sentimental item but also indicates that Thomas was a confidence that his son would not be in the financial position of needing to liquidate high-value possessions. This English case study exemplifies

²²⁹ Montague S. Giuseppi, "Alien Merchants in England in the Fifteenth Century," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1895): 75–98, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/3678104>, 87.

²³⁰ Anna Boeles Rowland, "'With This Rynge': The Materiality and Meaning of the Late Medieval Marriage Ring," in *Gift-Giving and Materiality in Europe, 1300 - 1600*, ed. Lars Kjær and Gustavs Strenge (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 17–42, 23.

one avenue of historical inquiry to how common men were able to own rings. Wills and inventories are an valuable source to track how these objects moved through generations of men in the early modern period.

In analysing this correlation between jewellery, relationships, and social strata, scholar Catherine Richardson researched the English non-elite in Elizabethan England, using wills as her main corpus. In a study of 550 sixteenth-century wills, Richardson's analysis of the language used discovered rings as one of three objects most commonly described with the possessive pronoun, leading her to argue that rings were one of the few objects testators felt personally attached to due to their close connection with the body.²³¹ Separately, Richardson studied 1,500 wills of the 'middling sort', with 10% of these wills including items of jewellery. Of those, 60% of jewellery items catalogued were rings and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the jewellery owned by men were rings.²³² Two apothecary wills dated 1528 and 1556 respectively, list rings as pawned items. The earlier of the two has listed several rings left to him by his customers. The 1556 will details three rings included in a small, sealed box that still had the pawn ticket attached.²³³ These wills are evidence that rings were items of adornment that filtered through the second-hand economies sustained by the ignoble classes. Rings being listed as part of an apothecary's goods opens possibilities that perhaps these rings were items of sentiment, or precious items owned by a family, or required as payment for medicine and healthcare for a loved one – though these are speculations.

²³¹ Catherine Richardson, "Written Texts and the performance of Materiality." In *Writing Material Culture in History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 54.

²³² Richardson, "As my whole trust is in him", 183.

²³³ Isabella Cecchini, "A World of Small Objects: Probate Inventories, Pawns, and Domestic Life in Early Modern Venice," *Renaissance and Reformation* 35, no. 3 (March 11, 2013): 39–61, doi:<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i3.19522>, 45.

Lending money on pawn was another way men accessed rings. Historian Paula Hohti has published archival research into pawning by the artisan class in Siena. Much of her material dates outside of the fifteenth century but attests to the ubiquity of rings as cash-items across the peninsula.²³⁴ One case study is from the Venetian pawnbroker and goldsmith Antonio Albrici whose 1644 inventory records a ring set with turquoise and a silver spoon and fork was pledged to him by a carpenter named Gasparo for a plain ring valued at 23 lire.²³⁵ Frustratingly, there is no further context around this exchange between labourer and pawnbroker, but it does attest that later in the early modern period the accessibility to precious materials and items of adornment increased from the fifteenth century in Italy. The pawning of rings in seventeenth century Venice is also recorded amongst the city's Jewish community. Legislation from the Venetian government becoming increasingly restrictive over the Jewish community over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²³⁶ An agreement between the city of Venice and the Germanic Jews (*Ebrei Tedeschi*) dated 16th November 1624, specifies the terms around Jewish lending in Venice. Jews were not obligated to lend upon luxury goods such as gold, jewels, silken clothes, "with the exception of...gold rings, and other rings set with false stones or no stones at all, on which they must provide loans, and they may not refuse, excuse themselves or delay making these loans... on pain of a fine of 20 ducats".²³⁷ Considering the economic importance of Jewish moneylenders in Venice, and wider European society, outlining rings as an irrefusable item

²³⁴ See: Paula Hohti, *Artisans, Objects, and Everyday Life in Renaissance Italy: The Material Culture of the Middling Class*. (Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), Part II.

²³⁵ ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, 359, 4, fol. 2v.

²³⁶ Benjamin Ravid, *Studies on the Jews of Venice, 1382-1797* (London: Routledge, 2023), 237.

²³⁷ Venetian Senate, *Condotta* 16 November 1624 in David Chambers, Jennifer Fletcher, and Brian Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630* (Toronto: University Of Toronto Press, 2001), 342.

to pawn could explain the appearance of rings across socio-economic strata as quick-cash items. This decree from 1624 is, clearly, for a chronologically different Venice from the city of the Quattrocento. During the fifteenth century, Jewish traders from the Levant and mainland were more transient than the community that settled in the sixteenth-century ghetto. It would be erroneous, then, to apply the conditions of this decree to the experience of Jewish lenders in the fifteenth century. Yet the specific codifying of rings as items of pawn may indicate this was an inset cultural practice predating this formal decree, meaning the economic relationship between pawning rings may have been an understood practice in the fifteenth century.

The Venetian state itself was also a lender of money, taking items of pawn as security. A descriptive French report on the government of Venice relates there being “many very fine and very precious rings” in the chapel of the San Marco treasury belonging not to the church but to the Signoria (government) of Venice.²³⁸ The author continues the government purchased these rings “as a pledge for money loaned to various people and they are valued at *more than five hundred thousand ducats*”.²³⁹ Evidently, Venice had a long history of pawning rings enabling the government at the turn of the sixteenth century to possess this staggering sum of rings. The government of Venice was plainly an avenue for cash loans and seemingly a popular alternative to private lenders. Both the Jewish money lenders and the state itself partook in the trafficking of rings from everyday men as part of the city’s

²³⁸ *Description ou traicté du gouvernement et regime de la cyté et seigneurie de Venise* (1504-15) Chapter 18, f. 27v

«Semblablement en ladite chappelle ya beaucoup de bagues tresfines et tres precieuses qui ne sont pas de leglise de saint marc mais cela est de la seigneurie lesquelles bagues ladite seigneurie a aultrestemps a achate et a engage pour argent preste de diuerses personnes et sont de valleur de plus de cinq cens mille escus.» Translation: John Gagné

²³⁹ *Ibid.* Italics added.

economy. Though not sartorial items of brilliance, rings had a role in the performance and construction of non-elite male identities as objects of sentiment, identity, and as liquid asset.

To transition from the state of Venice to the individual, the lives of men such as Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) have been examined for interactions between non-elite men and rings. A renaissance physician, philosopher, and astrologer Cardano wrote a biography that is peppered with references to rings. Within a discussion on virtues and friendships, Cardano asserts he was never one to lose a friendship or to have broken with a friend bar a singular occasion when he was accused of stealing a ring. Cardano claims he “had retained as a pledge of money which he had made without a witness”.²⁴⁰ His claim infers that rings were used as items to pawn within male social networks. Imaginably, a man could easily slip a ring from his finger without much forethought and hastily pledged as payment or collateral. Clandestine pacts between men will echo the predicament women faced when marrying without witnesses, where the exchange of rings becomes central, contested evidence of marriage.

Matrimonial Rings

I have them take a ring with which a young virgin was married
and which has been placed in holy water, then [the impotent
man] must urinate through this ring.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Girolamo Cardano, *The Book of My Life (de Vita Propria Liber)*, trans. Jean Stoner (New York: New York Review Books, 2002), 55.

²⁴¹ Testimony of Apollonia, 11 June 1591, f. 67v; Milani in Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 168

This late sixteenth century testimony from Apollonia Madizza (n.d), healer and practitioner of love magic from Latisana, offered this remedy for men unable to copulate with their wives. The powerful trinity of marriage, virginity, and a ring suggest a potent spell to cure a man of a debilitating and emasculating condition. Apollonia did not explain the efficacy of this magic ritual; however, of interest here is the centrality of the wedding ring. Used to bind virgins into legitimate sexual relationships, the wedding ring is a transformative symbol of femininity – a token of transition from girlhood to womanhood. Marriage rings were items of female decoration and were not worn by men. Part utilitarian and part decorative, marriage bands were a typology of ring that many men and women would have encountered during their lives. Rings used in betrothal and nuptial ceremonies form an interesting case study to understand where poorer men may have participated in the cultural practice of hand adornment and ring-wearing. In the Renaissance, marriage was the most significant ceremony that bound two people and their families together and was a highly public moment for the families and nuptial couple.²⁴² These rings signified a woman's marital status and indicated her role and status. In 1425, Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444) described items typically taken by a bride to her new home, which included a small box (*cassetta*). Contained within these bridal boxes were “[her] ring and pearls and [marriage] jewels”.²⁴³ Separating the wedding rings from the other marital jewels suggests the ring's importance was also divisible from other items of adornment. Pre-modern women were defined by their marital status: young virgin, married woman, widowed. Religious women wore rings to signify their weddedness to Jesus and the Church, in a mirroring of secular

²⁴² Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 14.

²⁴³ Bernardino, 1425 in Hohti, *Artisans, Objects and Everyday Life*, 205.

female identity.²⁴⁴ A man's ability to provide for his bride was represented by wedding rings, and an item of body adornment that marked the bride's transition into his protection from that of her father's. Once the bride left her family home with her wedding ring, she is visibly adorned as belonging to her bridegroom. From the twelfth century, women were viewed by European societies with increasing suspicion and thus need to control, by which marriage was the primary means.²⁴⁵ Her identity subsumed under his, this giving of a marriage ring attests to the man's virility. Marriage for a man symbolised he had reached full maturity and so the social and financial privileges that accompanied full maturity.²⁴⁶ Marriage rings legitimised the union between men and women, though they were not strictly necessary to be wed. Before the Council of Trent (1540-1560) reaffirmed marriage as a sacrament (subsequently overseen by the Latin church) the ritual mechanics of a wedding were remarkably loose. Often a mutual promise sufficed to legitimise a union; however, without tangible evidence of this promise occurring, a union could be challenged. The exchange of a ring could serve as an indicator of this mutual oath to be wedded and was often debated during legal disputes. Wedding or engagement rings themselves had no formal typology in the fifteenth-century; evidence suggests they were typically metal with a precious or semi-precious stone set.²⁴⁷ Nannina Medici (1448-1493) for her wedding ceremony in 1466, received two "little rings" from her bridegroom, one set with an emerald and the other a diamond.²⁴⁸ Nannina's son Giovanni, gave his wife two small rings, one with a diamond and

²⁴⁴ Sharon T. Strocchia, "Naming a Nun: Spiritual Exemplars and Corporate Identity in Florentine Convents, 1450-1530," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 217-218.

²⁴⁵ Jacqueline Murray, 'Hiding Behind the Universal Man: Male Sexuality in the Middle Ages' in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Routledge: New York, 2000), 130.

²⁴⁶ Mazzo-Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 15.

²⁴⁷ An exception are Jewish Wedding rings; an extraordinary ring typology requiring further study.

²⁴⁸ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 231.

the other an emerald.²⁴⁹ Though unverified by the archives, it is warming to imagine Nannina gifted these rings to her son as a token of motherly affection and to welcome her new daughter-in-law to the family. These brief references in inventories and letters make wedding rings difficult to definitively identify in the material record as distinct from other gem-set rings.

Culturally and legally, marriage rings were important objects of male oath and honour in the fifteenth century. English scholarship on early modern marriage largely focuses on the socio-politics that underpinned the joining of two families and the resulting events from these unions: more often this analysis centres on marriage between patrician or noble individuals. Further, English scholarship primarily focuses on Florentine marriage, with some foray into the northern states such as Venice. Few scholars of early modern marriage have critically analysed the connubial ritual and wedding ring itself, typically offering passing reference to this ring exchange. Carole Frick's analysis of Florentine fashion and Julius Kirshner's substantial analysis of the marriage system in pre-modern Italy offer a combined total of two sentences on this ritual ring exchange.²⁵⁰ Likewise, Thomas Cohen in *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* offers a passing reference to marriage rings in Italy. Cohen describes the engagement process as "before witnesses [the bride and groom], made promises, signed papers, gave a ring".²⁵¹ Critical analysis of the gendered performance of this ritual is still lacking. Two scholars who have conducted object-specific analysis into the nuptial ring are Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Anna Boeles Rowland. In *Women, Family and Ritual in*

²⁴⁹ Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*, 65.

²⁵⁰ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 115; Julius Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, 24.

²⁵¹ Cohen, *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy*, 145.

Renaissance Italy, Klapisch-Zuber considers rings in Italian marriage as part of a broader 'ring game' that entailed a complex exchange of rings between patrician families, gamified through the implicit obligation placed upon the groom to ensure he reciprocated the generosity given to his bride. As such, rings forged networks of exchange and obligation between families of the nobility through this obligated male gifting of rings to the bride.²⁵² As suggested by the title, the focus of this text is uncovering the female experience with men as background players in the lives of the women discussed. Conversely, Rowland considers the relationship to the wedding ring of both men and women, though does not explicitly unpack the gendered associations. From the evidence, Rowland concludes that rings used in wedding rituals were "vessels for communication on the importance of marital fidelity and the ethics of marriage".²⁵³ Her analysis of the materiality and symbolism of rings in marriage has a broad temporal and geographic scope but focuses primarily on English culture from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. More recently, researchers have sought to undercover the experiences of marriages outside of elite unions. Tovah Bender's 2009 doctoral thesis explored the marriages of artisans in Florence. The thesis opens with the 1428 betrothal of thirty-three-year-old widower and used clothing salesman Luigi Agnolo to Gemma, sister of a butcher. Bender argues couples such as Luigi and Gemma are not remembered to history but do represent "the majority of the living and dying, marrying and having children, working, buying and selling in the city".²⁵⁴ Artisan marriage may have been humble compared to the extravagance of a patrician wedding, but no less meaningful. The work of these scholars underpins the arguments presented here, but this thesis seeks to

²⁵² Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 234.

²⁵³ Boeles Rowland, "With this ryng", 25.

²⁵⁴ Tovah Bender, "Negotiating Marriage: Artisan Women in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Society." (Dissertation, 2009), 4.

offer an analysis of marriage rings as objects of male authority that carried meaning and weight regardless of the man's socio-economic status.

Rings held significant cultural and legal importance in early modern Italy, meaning non-elite men and women had to exchange and wear rings of lower quality and in reduced quantity than their social superiors. Imitating precious metal and stones through simulant counterparts provided such an opportunity. Sixteenth century Florentine goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) cautions in his treatises against imitation stones:

...false stones are made in Milan, set in silver, and are much in vogue among the peasant folk... [fake stones were] devised to satisfy the wants of these poor people when they wish to make presents at weddings... to their wives, who of course don't know the difference between the real and the sham stone...²⁵⁵

As a goldsmith and jeweller, Cellini likely critiques the practice as it undercut his business. Nicolao da Milano, goldsmith to Isabella d'Este, informed Isabella of the forged diamond and dishonest jeweller from chapter two. Nicolao's Milanese training likely equipped him to identify the forgery and perhaps reflects a similar desire to Cellini to protect the perceived veracity of his work. Cellini's assertion that peasant women would be unable to discern between real and false stones undoubtedly reflects his sense of social superiority; however, the comment also attests to the quality of Milanese imitation jewels. Though the practice of

²⁵⁵ Benvenuto Cellini, *The Treatises of Benvenuto Cellini on Goldsmithing and Sculpture*, trans. Charles Robert Ashbee (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 27.

crafting fake gemstones is ancient, with sources such as Pliny the Elder discussing methods for identifying and testing the veracity of stones.²⁵⁶ Cellini's comment may also highlight the relationship between peasants and precious material. Given the economic status of peasant men and women, it is debateable what – if any – access they had in the fifteenth century to real gemstones and precious metals. It is plausible that imitation material would have felt and appeared as the precious counterparts and so fulfil the need of the lower classes.

Literary evidence proves the practice of using imitation materials to create wedding rings for poorer couples predates Cellini. Composed c.1410, *Der Ring* is an early fifteenth century German satirical poem whose moral discourse is framed by the marriage of two fictional peasant characters. During the wedding scene of the poem, the groom Bertschi is described as presenting his bride Mätzli with a wedding ring:

Then Bertschi took out a ring made thus... of lead and plated
with tin, with a stone that was called glass sapphire [around
which] was an enamel of resin as blue as water [with] two
pearls from fish eyes.²⁵⁷

Bertschi's ring made of plated base metal, imitation gemstones, and false pearls provides documentary evidence to the quality of rings that were perhaps available at lower cost. Such a ring would have visually emulated the magnificently jewelled silver rings of the elite

²⁵⁶ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXXVII, LXXV, 197.

²⁵⁷ Heinrich Wittenweiler, *Wittenwiler's Ring, and the Anonymous Scots Poem Colkelbie Sow*, trans. George Fenwick Jones (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 71.

but would have costed significantly less.²⁵⁸ Made from lead, the ring would have felt weighted on the hand, echoing the material heaviness of precious metal, and the plating would have given the ring a silver-like shine. The simulated pearls of Bertschi's ring illustrate the ingenuity of early modern chemistry and may be the least familiar material listed by Wittenwiler. Recipes for imitation pearls have a long history and call for a variety of ingredients and methods: wax, isinglass, powdered pearl in adhesive, quicksilver, and snail slime.²⁵⁹ However, the first records of using fish products by Europeans to give imitation pearl beads their distinctive nacre date to the sixteenth century.²⁶⁰ The poem does not indicate the ring's monetary worth, but as it was gifted from a poor man this item of jewellery was likely rich in symbolism but not value. The marriage ceremony was completed without scholar or priest, indicating it was Mätzli's receiving of Bertschi's ring that codified their marriage.²⁶¹

A similar focus on the ring exchange is observable in the historical record from Florence. Bartolomeo Masi (1478-1526), a coppersmith, records his sister's wedding in the family *ricordanze* (diary of family events). Once his sister Caterina had received her ring, the guests immediately moved into the house to celebrate with a banquet.²⁶² In both the Black Forest

²⁵⁸ Late sixteenth century inventories evidence ownership of pearl jewellery, including rings, amongst the Italian working class. From the research undertaken here, there does not seem to be the same accessibility to real pearls for non-elites in the fifteenth century. See Michele Nicole Robinson, "Né vera né falsa: non-elite ownership of pearls in early modern Italy," in *Refashioning the Renaissance*, ed. Paula Hohti (Manchester University Press, 2025), 136.

²⁵⁹ Charlotte Eng and Maria Fusco, "Fish Scales and Faux Pearls: A Brief Exploration into the History of Manufacturing Faux Pearls," *Textile History* 43, no. 2 (November 2012): 250–59, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1179/0040496912z.00000000013>, 253.

²⁶⁰ Eng and Fusco, "Fish Scales and Faux Pearls", 252-254; Wallis Richard Cattelle, *The Pearl: Its Story, Its Charm, and Its Value* (London: J.B. Lippincott company, 1907), 295-310

²⁶¹ Line 5274.

Heinrich Wittenweiler, *Der Ring*, trans. G.F Jones (Stuttgart: Helfant Edition, 1956), 71.

²⁶² Hohti, *Artisans, Objects and Everyday Life*, 291.

peasant wedding and the urban wedding in Florence, the marriage ceremony was concluded and codified when the bride received her ring. The importance of a wedding ring and the legality of gifting a ring to a woman transcended socio-economic boundaries. Therefore, men outside of the nobility were equally bound by a ring exchange as their titled counterparts. The act of giving a woman a ring, regardless of quality, material, or size, was culturally understood as a binding marriage oath. This social expectation appears applicable to men of marriageable age, from all social classes, and a man could encounter legal ramifications should he be flippant with his ring gifting.

Court records and legal proceedings are an important documentary corpus to observe these legal ramifications, with rings evidencing the degree of intimacy between a couple without which, trials would become one word against another.²⁶³ Disputed marriages, clandestine nuptials, and sacrilegious bigamy give voice to non-elite men and women and their engagement with matrimony and wedding rings. Often in these accounts, witnesses, plaintiffs, or defendants discuss the exchange – or not – of a ring as concrete evidence for a man's oath to wed a woman. Courtship was often accompanied by an exchange of material goods, which had implied or symbolic significance. A handkerchief, for example, was gifted to young women by suitors during courtship, likely in part due to its erotic connotations; sexualised in the early modern mindset, a handkerchief symbolised the cleaning of virginal blood after a woman's first sexual encounter.²⁶⁴ However the exchange of a ring was less disputable as a symbol of emotional involvement and promise of marriage in both courtship rituals and legal cases. In 1598, a female healer from Feltre named Elena Cumano was found

²⁶³ Daniela Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice* (London: Routledge, 2004), 77.

²⁶⁴ Hacke, *Women, sex, and marriage*, 190.

undressed in bed with one Gian Battista. Upon their discovery, Elena testified that they were already married, and Battista stated before witnesses, “[i]n confirmation of this contract made, [I] give her here this ring in pledge”.²⁶⁵ The account describes the nuptial ring, as gold and adorned with a pearl. The choice of a pearl rather than gemstone may have a reference to the association between pearls and female virginity.²⁶⁶

Three court cases from the 1450s illuminate how rings were used in legal dispute as symbolic of the man’s vow. Such cases reveal the expectations around male behaviour and the weight of a man’s oath, and the consequences men faced from failing in their promises. Historians Ludwig Schmutge and Gene Brucker have published studies using marital court records, and their analyses forms the bedrock of the following discussion. Outlining numerous fifteenth-century court cases from the Low Countries, Schmutge’s explores the legal parameters of marriage and the social context for the couples presented. Similarly, Brucker uses legal sources to construct a social history of marriage in fifteenth-century Italy, albeit through the lens of a single court case. Like Schmutge, Brucker illustrates the context from which the legal dispute arose and uses the case to build broader conclusions about the function of marriage. Where this thesis intersects with the work of both Schmutge and Brucker is in understanding how the court documents position the wedding ring as legal evidence of a man’s oath, and as a corollary, understanding how women used wedding rings as evidence of male abandonment or misconduct.

²⁶⁵ Ruggerio, *Binding Passions*, 62.

²⁶⁶ Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 41.

Anna, daughter of Risch von Furn vs. Johannes Wellenburg, 1457, papal court of Chur

In early 1457, from the parish of Grütingen, Anna was engaged to wed Hans Kaisz von Haldsenstain. They had spoken their vows to each other, after which Anna and Hans began a sexual relationship. Hans gave Anna a ring as symbol of their marriage and the union would have been solemnized by the church. However, some eight years prior Anna had been pledged in marriage to another man: Johannes Wellenberg. Before the court, Anna recalled her relationships with Johannes. With the permission of her father, the two had lived together as a married couple and had “laid together for four nights as a legitimate couple” when Johannes “robbed Anna of the flower of her virginity”.²⁶⁷ Despite this, a few months later Johannes forced Anna before an ecclesiastical judge and denied his earlier promise of marriage, claiming they were only betrothed. Johannes had taken another wife and so the court ruled neither Johannes nor Anna could enter into another marriage. Ultimately, the church decided to approve the marriage of Anna and Hans.

In a patriarchal society, wherein women had little recourse for legal representation, the gifting and wearing of a wedding ring afforded Anna visibility in this space. Contrasting the two relationships of Anna, the court viewed the relationship with Johannes – who gave no ring – as less legitimate than her relationship with Hans, who had gifted Anna a ring. The authorities were willing to ratify Anna’s second relationship due to this material exchange of promise despite the earlier ban. This small object, a wedding ring, is rendered weighty with the legal and social importance placed upon it. Johannes’ reported change of mind about the nature of their relationship seems almost a cautionary tale for girls who engage in a

²⁶⁷ Ludwig Schmugge, *Marriage on Trial: Late Medieval German Couples at the Papal Court* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 305.

sexual, lasting relationship: without tangible proof of his promise, men could abscond little social recourse. Hans' gifting of a ring to Anna must have been of reassurance after her jilting by Johannes and possibly signalled to the court that he was serious in this oath of legitimising their relationship.

Hans Burner vs. Anna, daughter of Ulrich Haelstab, 1457, Papal court of Chur

Also in 1457, the court heard from the tailor Hans Burner who sought legal assignment of Anna as his spouse, a twenty-year-old domestic servant from in Kloster, Pättigau region of Switzerland. In Hans' testimony, he recalls talking to the "polite virgin" about his desire for her, to which she purportedly said "Hans, if you want me lawfully for marriage, then say yes".²⁶⁸ After confirming verbally, Hans recalls giving Anna a ring but that she later changed her mind.²⁶⁹ Anna's change in heart was outlined as a realisation of her father's displeasure at her becoming engaged without his permission. In her statement to the court, Anna recalled Hans 'proposing' through convoluted questioning. To the judge, she asserted that she had given Hans no promise of marriage – indeed, she detested the man – and that she never received a ring from him. The court ruled in Anna's favour to proclaim there was no legal marriage between the two. Lacking a ring, or the irrefutable evidence that Anna accepted a ring, meant that legally an engagement did not occur.

²⁶⁸ Schmugge, *Marriage on Trial*, 300.

²⁶⁹ The account uses the Latin term *subarravit* meaning to pledge and by extension to become engaged. This term was often used as the verb of gifting a ring with the intention to marry.

Lusanna, daughter of Benedetto di Girolamo vs. Giovanni della Casa, 1455, Florence

Detailed records exist for a legal dispute between Lusanna, daughter of an artist named Benedetto di Girolamo, and the minor nobleman Giovanni della Casa than the previous two cases. Presided over by Archbishop Antoninus in 1455, this Florentine example of a legally disputed marriage contains a reasonably complex timeline and colourful cast of characters from a diversity of backgrounds.²⁷⁰ Lusanna and Giovanni entered into a clandestine sexual relationship, possibly initiated whilst she was married to her first husband. Giovanni requested their relationship remain clandestine due to their class difference as, according to Lusanna, the couple had to wait until Giovanni's father died before publicly announcing their marriage. Uncertainty around the legitimacy of their relationship peaked when Giovanni became publicly engaged to the daughter of a wealthy and powerful patrician. Archbishop Antoninus was tasked with deciding if there was a legitimate marriage between Lusanna and Giovanni with serious socio-political consequences should the church solemnise this union.

As plaintiff, Lusanna framed her case as concern over Giovanni's immortal soul as he was violating the sanctity of marriage through the sin of bigamy. A ring became critical evidence in the case with several of the witnesses and parties attesting to the existence, or absence, of a wedding ring. In Lusanna's version, she recalls a fight between her brother and Giovanni in which he told Giovanni to "give her a ring" as doing so would legitimise their sexual

²⁷⁰ Detailed analysis: Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

relationship and avoid scandal for Lusanna.²⁷¹ Witnesses for Lusanna attest to attending this clandestine wedding at the house of her eldest brother, Antonio. Fra Felice recalled after the couple said vows, “Giovanni took a ring from his left hand and placed it on Lusanna’s finger”.²⁷² Antonio’s wife provided a description of this ring, “Giovanni’s ring was gold with an inlaid stone, but [the wife] could not identify the jewel.”²⁷³ This is an interesting detail in the case about the typology of wedding rings in early modern Italian marriages. Wedding rings could be repurposed male rings with this act by Giovanni indicating that some rings were transferred from a male hand to a female hand, with the symbolism of the ring being inherited in that transfer.

Evidence against this ring exchange is scant. Giovanni acknowledged their sexual relationship but did not admit to partaking in a clandestine marriage ritual nor to giving Lusanna a ring. His defence, essentially, was to discredit Lusanna’s reputation and present her as a serial adulterer and lustful woman. A neighbour of Antonio, Monna Fiora, overheard the argument between Giovanni and Antonio but contradicts Lusanna’s version of events. Fiora remembered asking Lusanna “if she had received a ring from him [Giovanni]” to which a distressed Lusanna said she had not. Ultimately, Archbishop Antoninus ruled that a clandestine marriage had occurred, and so rendering Giovanni’s second engagement illegitimate. Unlike the cases from 1457, this dispute had a significant imbalance of gendered and economic power. With a modicum of imagination, it is easy to characterise Giovanni as a young, wealthy man who agreed to a sexual relationship with a

²⁷¹ Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*, 16.

²⁷² *Ibid.* 20.

²⁷³ *Ibid.* 21.

slightly older, experienced woman not believing that a court would rule against a member of a politically powerful family. Evidence that Giovanni did give Lusanna a ring as a sign of their legitimate union made it difficult for the court to rule against her, resulting in an initial verdict that the union was legitimate, but Giovanni won on appeal.

The marriages and complex interpersonal relationships captured in these court records evidences the increasing desire for clarity around the ritual of marriage in this period. For all three women, a wedding ring was a key element in their testimony and these records show the exchange of a ring was often cited in court as concrete evidence for or against the occurrence of an engagement or wedding. The ring represented a man's word and promise to conduct himself respectfully towards a woman. At stake was female purity and virginity, two fiercely guarded virtues. Rings, ultimately, are small circles of metal; they bore immense cultural capital for a woman to begin a sexual relationship upon receipt of one. Lusanna took Giovanni to court primarily to restore their marriage and her reputation; Anna too sought legal clarification that her abandonment by Johannes would not mar her virtue and so ability to wed. Law courts were motivated to rule in favour of these deceived or jilted brides by holding men accountable for their actions. Without the pressures that canon law exerted on these litigants, receiving of a ring could have become meaningless and possibly licensed male dalliances and unvirginal brides. The English idiom 'a ring of rush' was first recorded in 1449. Its origin lay in the practice of men presenting young girls with a ring of worthless woven rush leaves to persuade her to lie with him, only to leave her ruined and the ring easily crushed, disposed of, or disintegrated.²⁷⁴ An encyclopedia from 1843 defined

²⁷⁴ William George Smith, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 373.

a rush-ring as “a method of deceiving girls into fornication, under the presumption of their being thus married.”²⁷⁵ A similar idiom appears almost a century later to describe a near escape from misfortune: ‘better no ring than a ring of rush’.²⁷⁶ The polysemy of the term ‘rush’ adds depth to the idiom, referring both to a marshland grass and to act in haste: a lack of consideration that might lie behind a quick promise to wed. These two idioms speak to a cultural anxiety around false or clandestine marriage and serve as a caution to young women against trusting a man with her virginity without a vow bound by expensive, lasting, metal.

Inherent in this idiomatic thinking are class and financial access. Evidence such as *Der Ring* seems to suggest that metal or metal-like rings were the most appropriate choice for weddings, but it is difficult to discount rings of organic material. Before the Council of Trent published its decrees on marriage in November of 1563, a ring had a central role as this legitimising symbol and was a panacea against such a threat to female virginity. Marriage was foundational to the creation of civic morality, an antidote to the social anxieties around illicit love and sex; a way of preserving female honour and virtue and to cool the hot-bloodedness of young men.²⁷⁷ Clandestine marriages are described by the canons as causing “grievous sins” where individuals “live on in damnation” by contracting a second marriage

²⁷⁵ Thomas Dudley Fosbroke, *Encyclopedia of Antiquities, and Elements of Archaeology* (London: M.A. Nattali, 1843), 248.

²⁷⁶ Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), 572.

²⁷⁷ Guido Ruggiero, “Marriage, Love, Sex, and Renaissance Civic Morality,” in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19.

despite having “contracted [a] marriage secretly”.²⁷⁸ Powerfully, such a situation led men to “with her live in perpetual adultery; an evil which the Church...cannot rectify”.²⁷⁹ Evidently, the words of Trent’s decree responded to the confusions arising from a looser ritual of marriage. Men, too, were protected through clearer rituals around marriage as their immortal souls were protected from accidental bigamy. Johannes, Giovanni, and other men who lost court appeals reflected poorly on their masculine identity. Found liable for a marriage he deemed only an informal relationship publicly challenged the trustworthiness of a man’s word and his honour. For men such as Giovanni, the loss extended beyond his individual masculinity to impact him politically and economically, though the loss of an advantageous marriage. In a society where men were expected to dominate women and lesser men, rings became a powerfully binding item that held men of all social standing to account. Trent saw a shift away from the ring as the validating symbol of marriage to spoken oath, publicly and before witnesses, as the primary form of validating a marriage. The Quattrocento was the last century in which the marriage ring held such significant legal weight in western Europe.

Merchant Signets

Marriage rings were not the only legally binding ring in the early modern world. In an era before reliable forms of centralised identification, signet rings were an important tool used by the church, wealthy nobles, royalty, and merchants. Signet rings have been used to impress the owner’s mark on goods and documents since Ancient Egypt and consist of an

²⁷⁸ Papal Encyclicals, “The Twenty-Fourth Session Catholic Fathers,” *General Council of Trent: Twenty-Fourth Session*, 2000, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/twenty-fourth-session.htm>, 197.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

engraved metal or jewel bezel with the iconography of the owner in relief; once impressed into a soft substance such as wax, the icons appear in high relief.²⁸⁰ Mercantile masculinity describes a subcategory of non-elite males who inhabited a liminal space in society: wealthy and economically powerful, though crucially lacking the social rank of lineage or titles – they typically had smaller socio-political networks of influence and power. In many Italian city-states though, merchants could find positions of prominence as they lived outside of traditional monarchy structures present in neighbouring nations, such as France and Spain. A shared characteristic between marriage and signet rings is their origins in the Classical world with commentators such as Pliny the Elder who critiqued their use. For Pliny, signets marked identity and authority beginning in the pseudo-mythological age of Homer and the Trojan war. By the Roman Imperial age, Pliny describes people wearing a signet ring on their little finger to seal documents with.²⁸¹ Importantly for this chapter, he outlines a precedent of merchant and lower-class people using signet rings as items of authentication and identity. While not an exclusively mercantile practice, non-elite signet rings had metal bezels rather than the elite use of antique intaglios or classical-style gemstones as their signets.²⁸² Metal bezels originated in the fifteenth century and may have increased access to signet rings for those unable to procure such stones.

²⁸⁰ Mason. *Dictionary of Jewellery*, 334-336.

²⁸¹ «sunt qui uni tantum minimo congerant, alii vero et huic tantum unum, quo signantem signent» Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historiae*, XXXIII:2, Loeb Library.

²⁸² Mason, *Dictionary of Jewellery*, 335.



Figure 34: collage of signet rings from the British Museum, London (AF and 1872 accession numbers) and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (WA accession numbers).

Figure 33 collages examples of fifteenth century signet rings with engraved metal bezels, illustrating the diversity in designs and quality. Several different metals are represented: unblemished gold, blackened silvers, and gilt bronzes, though none is made from the cheapest of materials, such as Bertschi's lead ring. The smallest sampled is the narrow, oval bezel of a silver signet ring from the British museum (AF.590). A mere 1.46cm wide, this is the smallest signet studied in this thesis. The elevated, oval shape of the bezel would make wax seal imprinting quite easy, as the hand remains raised from the hot wax. There is

significant wear on the signet, suggesting substantial use, though some damage may be from how far it protrudes from the hoop (fig.). It is difficult to discern what the signet depicts without being able to impress it in wax, but it seems to be a roughly carved fish and hook.²⁸³

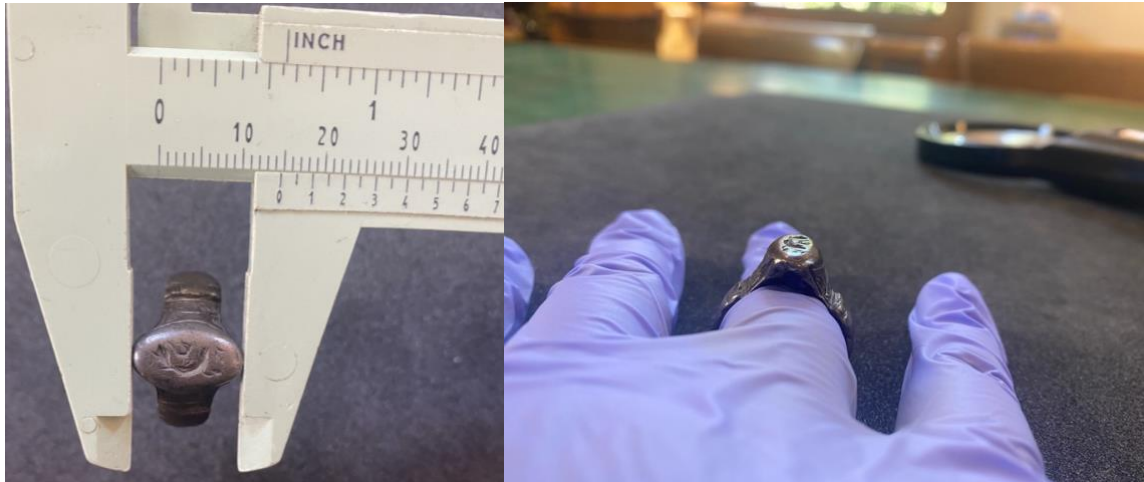


Figure 35: detailed images of signet ring on AF.590

Variations in the bezel size could be explained in myriad ways: the cost of production or material, the craftsman's skill, the detail of the signet, and the frequency of use as seals. The meanings of these signet rings have been lost to time, making it impossible to align them with an individual owner or family. Clues, such as the marine animal of ring AF.590, could suggest the owner of the ring was involved in the fishing industry, marine trade, or lived along the Italian coastline. Alternatively, the dolphin could also represent a heraldic pun on the owner's family name, proverb, or other rebus that was associated with the wearer.

Made in Venice in the early fifteenth-century, or possibly the late fourteenth, a silver signet ring (fig. 36) survives that showcases a different quality from those above. Thin and crudely carved, the bezel and hoop of the ring were created separately – the bezel possibly being a

²⁸³ The British Museum online catalogue posits the engraving to be that of a dolphin, though this is caveated with a question mark. Either way, it seems to be some aquatic animal.

repurposed coin. Where the two were joined has clear signs of solder and is roughly made. Undoubtedly, this signet ring belonged to a man whose status fell outside of the wealthy or noble classes.



Figure 36: Unknown, *Signet ring*, 1300-1500. Silver, 1.8cm dia. Ashmolean Museum Oxford, WA1897.CDEF.F369.

Though made of silver, the ring is only 0.4cm thick and weights 9.01g.²⁸⁴ Inscribed on the bezel is a central crest surrounded by lettering: S.IOANIS.RABUSINI. Ioanis is derived from the Greek spelling of John, with biblical origins, and often spelt as Giovanni in Italian; Rabusini may be the family name of the owner. Whilst it was made of a valuable material, only a small amount was used. The construction is basic and could have easily been made in a day and so the labour required, along with the small amount of metal, would make this a comparatively low-cost ring. Though light enough to comfortably wear for a length of time, this sharp-edged joint might have chafed against flesh. Though this discomfort was covered

²⁸⁴ Ashmolean Museum, "Catalogue Details," *Signet Ring*, 2025, <https://ashmolean.org/collections-online#/item/ash-object-351143>.

by the large, round silver disk that did look sophisticated on my hand; I could imagine myself wearing this ring throughout a work day particularly over a glove.

Merchants and non-elite men were not typically the subjects of portraiture in the fifteenth-century. Therefore, portraits that display the wearing of a signet ring present two significant issues: firstly, the sitter is usually a man of wealth and rings rendered in paint can be difficult to identify with certainty. Signet rings can look like gem-set rings, particularly those with a yellow stone. One such example is the *Portrait of a Young Man* by Petrus Christus painted between 1450 and 1460 (fig. 37). The man is dressed in expensive clothing, including a vibrant red, fur-lined outer garment (*houppelande*, Italian: *pellanda*). Hailed as the artistic successor of Jan van Eyck, the Netherlandish painter has been recognised for his portraits, which form the most personal works in his oeuvre.²⁸⁵



Figure 37: Petrus Christus, *Portrait of a Young Man*, 1450-60. Oil on wood, 35.4 x 26cm. The National Portrait Gallery London, NG2593

²⁸⁵ Ian Chilvers, "Christus, Petrus," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).



Figure 38: detail of hand in Fig. 36

Clues within the frame indicate the sitter was an Italian merchant.²⁸⁶ In a black bag about his waist, the man has a 'notebook' of wax tables with a silver stylus that suggests he was often taking notes and recording information as a merchant would be required to do. Just visible on the left side of the portrait is a golden lion with his paw atop a shield, possibly bearing heraldry, sitting on a balcony of exotic inlaid stone.²⁸⁷ Upon his right index finger sits a gold signet ring (fig. 38) and though the signet itself is difficult to discern this is clearly a work of fine craftsmanship and is reminiscent of the quality and detailing in the HS Signet ring (fig. 34–F597). As with elite portraits, the ring draws the viewer's eye to the man's right hand. The clean, pale, slender fingers are thumbing the page of a small book with reverence and care, possibly a devotional act with a religious text. Merchants' hands were tools of his trade, often acting as mnemonic instruments to remember complex number systems and conversions.²⁸⁸ Active hands brought a life and interiority to a portrait that could not be

²⁸⁶ Christus was known to have worked with Italian patrons, and the painting was part of a private Italian collection prior, both suggesting the sitter could be Italian.

²⁸⁷ This golden lion may be a reference to the symbol of Venice, a luxury trade city, which would be fitting iconography for an Italian merchant, or even merchant patrician. However, definitively identifying this lion requires further research and lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁸⁸ Randolph, *Touching Objects*, 46.

achieved through the face alone. Viewers come to understand that this young man is literate, educated, devout, and proactive, all of which are traits that would be expected of a successful merchant.

In the sweltering heat of Damascus, August 1455, a scribe methodically walked through the home and warehouse of a recently deceased merchant. Living and trading over three-thousand kilometres from his place of birth, one Venetian merchant living in a city of between sixty and one hundred thousand people could have easily vanished from the historical record.²⁸⁹ By the fifteenth century, Geona and Venice acted as important trading partners with the Islamic east. There was wealth to be made in transporting and sourcing luxury materials from the east, such as spices and gemstones, that provided lucrative opportunities for merchants in this cross-cultural trade. Important for caravan routes through to Central Asia, Arabia, and India via the Red Sea, Damascus frequently hosted merchants from Venice. In the 1480s, approximately forty Venetians were living in Damascus' Christian quarter, and galleys frequently travelled between the two cities under Venetian state protection.²⁹⁰ Such inventories, surviving largely through luck, offer valuable insight into the lives of men who traded and lived within this foreign community in pursuit of wealth. Powerfully, they also attest to an adoption of Arabic language and culture by these Venetian merchants, with the inclusion of terminology and possessions more typical of a Muslim owner. Unlike the patrician inventories that describe rings and gemstones with

²⁸⁹ Torsten Wollina, "A View from Within: Ibn Ṭawq's Personal Topography of 15th Century Damascus.," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 61 (2012): 271–95.

²⁹⁰ Deborah Howard, "Death in Damascus: Venetians in Syria in the Mid-Fifteenth Century," *Muqarnas Online* 20, no. 1 (2003): 143–57, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1163/22118993-90000042>, 143.

their valuations and significance, these merchant inventories capture jewels and rings as items of trade, focusing instead on their weight, carats, and grains.

Venetian merchant Stefano di Bossina lived in Damascus, renting a home from two compatriot noblemen, Zuanne Lando and Polo Erizzo, both of whom oversaw the creation of his postmortem inventory.²⁹¹ The collegiality evidences the male networks of exchange that existed between the merchant and noble classes of Italy, as well as the importance of trade to the Venetian economy. Though noblemen did not actively participate in merchant trading, they profited passively from the industry through avenues like rental incomes.

Written on the 29th of August 1455, di Bossina's inventory reflects a man with a diversity of lavish items to trade from spices and porcelains to gemstones and jewellery.²⁹² Considering the words used in these inventories to describe the precious trade goods enables us to conjure the rings and gems themselves into being.²⁹³ From this inventory, it seems his sole profession was a merchant trader of luxury. Within a little silvered box, made in the Moorish style, were found five rings:

- One little gold ring with a turquoise set in the French style
- One little gold ring with one ruby set in the French style
- One little gold ring with one round pearl set in the French style
- One silver ring with one turquoise set like the Moorish [style]
- One gold ring with one head in carnelian [i.e. an intaglio stone] set in the French style²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Howard, "Death in Damascus", 145.

²⁹² Francesco Bianchi e Deborah Howard, "Life and Death in Damascus: the Material Culture of Venetians in the Syrian Capital in the Mid-Fifteenth Century", *Studi Veneziani*, XVI (2003): 243. With thanks to Professor Howard for her generous provision of the full transcripts of these inventories.

²⁹³ Catherine Richardson, "Written Texts and the performance of Materiality." In *Writing Material Culture in History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 57,

²⁹⁴

Having the stones set into rings of different styles reflects the internationality of the merchant's role, who traded and carried goldsmiths' wares between Europe and the Levant. Bossina was expected to source sellable items from traders arriving to Damascus from the East, to then prepare and transport to the markets of Europe. Such a role would require an educated man, able to manage several languages, currencies, weights, and measures, whilst maintaining a network of suppliers and buyers. Integration of both French and Moorish jewellery styles evidences a taste for both types of rings, though it is unclear if they were intended for the same market. A ring listed at the conclusion of Stefano's inventory is described as a silver ring of arms – a signet – with a carved Jesus.²⁹⁵ The central design of the silver signet ring of Rabusini (fig. 36) could illustrate this kind of devotional signet ring, as the bearded man may be a rudimentary rendering of Jesus. Listed separately from the gemmed rings, this silver ring was seemingly personal to Bossina. Amalgamating his signet with an image of Jesus characterises him as a good, Christian merchant living in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith metropolis.

Twelve days prior to Bossina's inventory, a list of personal effects of Stefano Ravagnino was compiled after his death in 1455. Ravagnino, like Bossina, was a resident of Damascus and rented the house of another Venetian nobleman, Luca Loredano.²⁹⁶ Alongside numerous gemstones and jewellery, Ravagnino's inventory includes tools typical of a jeweller:

«aneleto d'oro con una turchexe e ligado a la francha
aneleto d'oro con 1 rubin ligado a la francha
aneleto d'oro con 1 perla tonda ligado a la francha
anello d'ariento con 1 turchexe a la morescha
anello d'oro con 1 testa in corniola ligado a la francha»

Transcription: Bianchi e Howard, "Life and Death in Damascus", 276. Translation: author's own.

²⁹⁵ «anello da bolla d'ariento con uno Iesus schulpido»

Transcription: Bianchi e Howard, "Life and Death in Damascus", 280. Translation: author's own.

²⁹⁶ Howard, "Death in Damascus", 145.

touchstones (used for testing metal purity), files, gemstone scales, polishing cloths, and a jeweller's pear-wood block.²⁹⁷ These items led scholar Deborah Howard to suggest Ravagnino was a jeweller and a merchant. Ravagnino's inventory attests to the mobility of goldsmiths, who traversed geopolitical bounds to develop their craft and find new commissions. His inventory lists 213 gemstones – a mixture of diamonds, rubies, and one pearl – described as belonging to "Ser Tomà Zane".²⁹⁸ Described by weight and quality, rather than a monetary figure, this inventory reflects information pertinent to a merchant jeweller. Working across multiple currencies would make a cash figure meaningless, but the weight and carat were less changeable than fluctuating currency values. Listed with Ravagnino's own items was a gold signet ring with his arms nestled within a bag of crimson silk and other luxury items. We know there is a high probability this ring bore his own heraldry and was used by Ravagnino as an authenticator of documents from the intriguing opening to the will. Contained within a document box were:

A small black leather purse, not full, sealed with three seals...
and one sealed with his [Ravagnino's] signet ring that had
various jewels in it; the aforesaid man, while living, ordered
that his purse not be opened if his mother were not present.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Bianchi e Howard, "Life and Death in Damascus", 271.

²⁹⁹ «busteta de chuoro negro non conpida, bollada de bolle 3, una de san Marco el piccolo de misser lo consolo, una del suo bolador et una con la suo arma bolada del suo anelo de bolla con zoie de asai sorte entro, la qual busta el dito vivante ordenò non fosse aperta se non presente suo madre.»
Transcription: Bianchi e Howard, "Life and Death in Damascus", 271. Translation: John Gagnè

Specified in the inventory is the use of a signet ring by Ravagnino to seal and secure this purse. The required presence of his mother was perhaps to ensure the item was returned to his family in Venice, rather than being on-sold in Damascus. This sealed bag is clear documentary evidence that merchant men secured their personal documents with rings for authentication and proof of identity. Both Ravagnino and di Bossina's lives in Damascus attest the distances travelled by Venetian men to trade in luxury goods. Made from precious metals – and some gemstones? – these lavish signet rings were certainly ornamental and visually appealing but also served practical purposes for these men. Their personal seal rings were legal marks and symbols of their identity, important whilst living in a land of foreign customs and language, traversing the line between utility and ornament.

The study of non-elite male ring wearing has presented challenges and silences not encountered when analysing the hand adornment of secular and spiritual elite men. Archival gaps and archaeological limitations resulted in drawing evidence from a diversity of scholars and archives to avoid pure speculation. History has become increasingly interested in the lives of disempowered or disenfranchised peoples — undoubtedly important work — though to do so for the pre-modern world remains challenging. By employing literary, visual, and legal sources, this chapter outlined how non-elite men imagined and used hand adornment. Merchant men had economic capital without the authority of lineage and ancestry. Understanding these touchstones between elite and non-elite behaviour is more than simple paralleling. Though wealthy, merchants were required to develop their own individual reputations and networks in order to succeed in their business endeavours. Largely this involved rings that were symbolically or physically utilitarian; rings that

represented oaths, masculine honour, legal status, or identity. This tightrope between adornment and utility is represented in this final ring (fig.39).



Figure 39: Unknown, *Signet Ring*, 1401-1600. Gold, jasper, 1.7cm dia. Ashmolean Museum, WA1897.CDEF.F405

Small, but exquisitely preserved, this gold ring set with red jasper is representative of the two purposes argued here. On the public-facing half of the hoop sits a sauntering lion surrounded by celestial bodies. Present in Petrus Christus' portrait of the young Italian merchant (fig. 37), lions were popular choices in formal heraldry and associated with male virtues of fortitude, courage, magnanimity, and vigilance in art.³⁰⁰ This intaglio signet could have represented the qualities of a male owner.



Figure 40: Ring WA1897.CDEF.F405 on the hand

³⁰⁰ Devonshire Jones, ed., "Lion," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture* (Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199680276.001.0001/acref-9780199680276>.

However, the underside of the hoop forms what Italians called a *fede*: two hands clasped together. Popular in ancient Rome as a symbol of engagement and marriage, by the early modern period a *fede* ring could represent oaths outside of a nuptial. This ring may have been exchanged between two men as a symbol of allegiance and collaboration; a material promise of unity. The intaglio-mounted bezel is open on the underside, meaning the skin could have made contact with the jasper stone, physically connecting the wearer to the strength of the stone, its symbolism, and a reminder of his oaths.³⁰¹ Non-elite men were unable to access the social capital afforded to patrician and ecclesiastical elites, yet this does not mean they operated outside of gendered behaviour expectations. Just as patrician marriage was a joining of two families through legitimate union, non-elite exchange of marriage rings was similarly binding ritual. Appreciating how those with less adorned their bodies with items of utility, the magnificent uselessness of elite men is magnified.

³⁰¹ Standley, *Trinkets and Charms*, 71.

Conclusion

The male practice of ring wearing in pre-modern Italy was a deliberate presentation of gender, identity, and authority. Male identities required individuals to project competency, dominance, and authority by which lesser men, women, and children were subjugated. Rings contributed to the sartorial display of princely bodies but filtered through the social strata to all but the most desperate indigents. Political distinctions can be made for men across the patchwork of polities in Quattrocento Italy, as male performance of power was responsive to the socio-political framework within which an individual lived. Analysed on the micro level, it is erroneous to consider fifteenth century Italy as a singular society; however, there existed enough cultural coherence to present conclusions about male identities as largely shared across the peninsula. The broad categories of men presented in *Adorned Hands* — religious, elite, common — were identities that transcended political boundaries.

Ultimately, what this thesis seeks is recognition of rings as meaningful sartorial markers of gender and identity. Considering ring typologies beyond marriage rings was important to capture a breadth of fifteenth-century male experiences. Through examining ring typologies that have become unfashionable, this thesis draws attention to rings that may be less familiar to a contemporary reader, to reposition hand adornment as purposeful, meaningful, and more profound than just aesthetics. Unlike engagement and wedding rings, which remain significant in contemporary culture, older rings —the Papal, Fisherman, intaglio, *fede*, and signet varieties— have barely survived into twenty-first century European societies. In the Quattrocento, rings played an integral role in the social rituals and networks

of exchange that underpinned social and political structures: marriage, personal identity, religious sacrality, and political authority.

Performances of masculinity were as multifaced as the jewels men wore, with complexities that are difficult to access in documentary evidence. Material culture provides a lens through which to perceive male bodies as sites of gender performance where the physical body and gender identity are indivisible. The Quattrocento was a century of change in the Italian peninsula. It saw the rise and fall of the Medici men of Florence, the Sforza lordship in Milan, and the return of the papacy to Rome. Through the wearing and owning of rings, Quattrocento men's behaviours and motivations are made manifest in gold, gems, and their imitative counterparts. Sartorial display enabled men to navigate social and religious instabilities through outward projections of honour, continuity, and reliability.

Princely bodies and display of brilliance underpinned patriarchal authority through conveying wealth and authority. Adorning hands with rings enabled men to display high value items like jewels, or to present replicas intended to convey the same effect. Then ornaments intended to both materially and symbolically to convey religious leadership, dynastic connections, and cultural authority. On occasion, such manifestations were achieved through imitative materials but fashioned to closely replicate their precious counterparts. Imitation stones and precious metal enabled men of lower social station to engage with hand adornment and the cultural practices of ring exchange. Similarly, the church utilised simulated materials for papal diplomacy to represent church power without the ruinous cost of producing papal rings with true precious materials. Dismissed today as 'costume jewellery', imitative rings provided opportunity in the fifteenth century for men to

partake in symbolic and ritualistic practices of wearing and giving rings. Papal rings were not costume, nor were lead rings with fish-eye pearls: they were inherited with sacrament and religious authority. Fake gemstones were legislated against – such as the Milanese regulations; however, signifying the importance of real gemstones to the patrician class. Cellini’s assertion that false rubies and sapphires were the domain of the peasantry speaks to the patrician monopoly over owning, wearing, and displaying true gemstones. The ring collections of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga and Piero de’ Medici, as examples, represent male participation in princely competition for brilliance that juxtaposes those who were adorned with simulated materials, or completely unadorned. Importantly, ring-wearing permeated the social stratigraphy of the Quattrocento and is a case study for how common men sought to emulate the practices of their social betters.

By analysing and contextualising rings as tools of identity, *Adorned Hands* contributes to the broader academic conversation on Renaissance masculinity and sartorial performance. This thesis engages with recent scholarship and methodological approaches to framing the history of gender through material culture and fashion to consider how the hands and rings illuminate different male identities in the fifteenth century. Focusing on men’s hands provided necessary parameters to the scope of this thesis, narrowing to one form of adornment that spans multiple male identities. Rings were highly valuable and polyvalent objects that men in the fifteenth century interacted with across different social strata, polities, and experiences that allows for an effective comparative study of different male identities. Despite the challenges rings present to historians — difficulties in accurate dating, authenticating ownership, gaps in scholarship — they are an illuminating form of adornment to study. Rings are a relatively abundant item of material culture but often lack

provenance and records. Narrowing the corpus into a manageable, but meaningful, number of rings was vital to the viability of this research. Digital photography and printed scholarship cannot replicate the experience of handling these rings. Studying each ring enabled me to experience the feeling of wearing each ring, examine the quality of the craftsmanship, observe the materials interacting with light informed the conclusions articulated here about practicality and comfortability of the objects, the verisimilitude of imitation gemstones and glass paste, and the visual impact of these rings on an observer. Working with the rings directly illuminated how men were able to project brilliance through literal shine along with the precious and rare material they adorned their bodies with.

The scope for this research in fifteenth-century male jewels extends beyond the conclusions reached here into other types of rings that became fashionable at the very end of the century. Doctoral rings are a tantalising typology for future research: European universities, such as those in Prague and Portugal, presented academic rings to graduates of doctoral degrees.³⁰² Genres of rings popular in England and France remain another area of future research beyond the scope of this thesis: posey rings (rings inscribed with love poetry) and rings for joust victories. These typologies present other male identities not considered here: the scholar, the lover, and the sportsman. Furthermore, collections of rings housed in smaller institutions across Italy and Europe deserve deeper research. Whilst museums such as the Ashmolean and British Museum have done admirable work in cataloguing, digitising, and publishing data of finger rings in their collections, smaller institutions need scholars to

³⁰² W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 153.

devote time to similarly inventory the rings in their collections. Currently, there is a difficulty in accessing these objects in public institutions due to missing catalogue data.

Rings were created and worn within a social, politically, economic, and cultural context wherein gender and expected behaviours were carefully moderated and performed.

Contextualising rings within these contexts, including intersections, is a valuable scholarly pursuit. Researching masculinity through the lens of material culture is an access point for theorising how quattrocento men may have wished to project their sense of masculinity and male identity onto their world. While physically small, rings were polyvalent tools, crafted, collected, emulated, and worn with purpose and a valuable archive for historical inquiry.

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Glossary of ring terminology

Definitions adapted from Anita Mason. *An Illustrated Dictionary of Jewellery*. Reading: Osprey Publishing, 1973.

Bezel

Part of a ring where a stone or item of decoration is set.

Cabochon

Oldest style of gem cutting, where the gem is smoothed as opposed to being cut with facets.

Cameo

A hard stone with a design that is cut in high relief. Popular among the wealthy of Ancient Rome by the first-century AD. In Italy, great numbers of stones were cut from the Fourteenth Century.

Enamel

Decorative process in which powdered glass is fused to the metal of the ring, giving colour that ranges from a light tint to opaque colour dependant on number of applications.

Smalto Roggio was a rich red enamel developed in the Renaissance.

Foil

A thin leaf of metal placed under a gemstone to enhance the richness of colour; Cellini claims yellow, red, blue, and green foils were used to deepen rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. Diamonds were not foiled but tinted with a dark substance to increase their brilliance.

Hoop

The part of a ring that encircles the finger – also, Shank.

Intaglio

An engraved stone – or piece of metal – that is engraved with the design sunk into the material. When pressed into a soft substance, such as melted wax, a raised impression is left in relief. This technology has a long history, from the fourth millennium BCE, with the stones being set into rings from the sixth century BCE in Egypt. During the Renaissance, excavations in Italy unearthed numerous ancient examples that were collected and replicated, with the fashion for intaglios extending beyond Italy in the sixteenth century.

Niello

Common technique for decorating silver, and sometimes gold; a dark grey substance is applied to engraved recesses of the metal, fired, and darkens decorative parts it was applied to.

Paste gem

Term for a composition of glass, used to imitate gemstones. In the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries, the technology was refined from ancient and medieval techniques in Milan with a market for imitations of coloured gemstones rather than colourless mimicry of diamonds.

Signet Ring

Seals set into the bezel of a ring for impressing the wearer or owner's mark onto, primarily, documents. Originating in Western Asia, the typology was adopted in Ancient Egypt. By the Fifteenth Century a fixed metal bezel was introduced as an alternative to engraved stones. Wealthy individuals in the Renaissance used antique cameos and intaglios but merchant classes and poorer typically used the engraved metal style with merchant marks or centuries-old devices. As literacy increased from the seventeenth century, and changed to business practices, signet rings became largely obsolete.

Setting

Broadly, the term for describing how a stone is attached to a ring-hoop. Prior to the seventeenth century in Europe, this was a closed setting where ring-stones were set and foiled encased in metal.

Quatrefoil is a type of setting, in which the cardinal points of the hoop around a stone are removed to allow more light to reach the gem, and increase the visual interest of the ring.



Figure 41: diagram of basic ring anatomy. From the British Museum Finds Department: <https://finds.org.uk/counties/findsrecordingguides/finger-rings/>

Appendix 1 – Portrait Data

Artist	Title	Date	Museum/Collection	Notes
Laux Furtenagel	<i>Hans Burgkmair and his Wife</i>	1529	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	Man wears a small ring on his left index finger, with gemstone
Gentile Bellini (attributed)	<i>Man with a Pair of Dividers or Compasses</i>	Early 16th-century	National Gallery, London	Man wears an oval ring on his left ring finger - central gem surrounded by smaller stones (pearls?)
Raphael?	<i>Half-length portrait of a Young Man</i>		Alte Pinakothek, Munich	Young sitter wears a pinky ring on his right hand
Parmigianino	<i>Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror</i>	1524	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	Young artist clearly displays a gold ring on the pinky of his right hand
Giovanni Britto	<i>Titian sketching</i>	1550	Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam	Figure porportedly Titian has a ring on his left ring finger - signet ring?
Joanquim Inza	<i>Portrait of Don Tomas de Iriarte</i>	1785	Museo del Prado, Madrid	Sitter is clearly wearing a large cameo ring on his left pinky. "His intellectual's thin long hand laid upon one of his novels draws the attention to a cameo whose oval shape mirrors that of his face." - <i>Jewels in Painting</i> p. 130
Lorenzo Lotto	<i>Portrait of Sir Marsilio [Cassotti] and his Wife Faustina</i>	ca. 1480	Museo del Prado, Madrid	Painting depicts the man holding a ring, clearly about to place this upon the female figure's left ring finger.
Lorenzo Lotto	<i>The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine</i>	1523	Accademia Carrara, Bergamo	On the far left of the painting, the sole male figure (the master of the house?) raises his left hand to his chest, upon which a thumb ring is displayed. It appears to be a simple gold band, with a intaglio or decorative gem. Baby Christ is also trying to put a ring on St Catherine's finger.

Francois Clouet	<i>Pierre Quth, Apothecary</i>	1562	Musee du Louvre, Paris	In a painting largely devoid of frivolity and colour, the jewelled pinky ring on the apothecary's finger starkly contrasts the black of the clothing. "The artists takes the same care in reproducing the delightful ring, which has found its place on the little finger of the apothecary." - <i>Jewels in Painting</i> p. 92
Petrus Christus	<i>A Goldsmith in His Shop, Possibly Saint Eligius</i>	1449	MET, New York	Though none of the figures are wearing rings in this painting, it is a depiction of a goldsmith surrounded by the tools of his trade. Seemingly, there is an impatient couple waiting for their goods. To the right of the painting is prominently displayed a case of rings, presumably for sale. They are all gold finger rings with variously set stones, though some are plain gold.
Unknown English or French	<i>The Wilton Diptych</i>	c. 1395-1399	National Gallery, London	Behind the kneeling figure of Richard II, the central religious man appears to be holding an extra-large gold ring
Hans Memling	<i>Sir John and Lady Donne (The Donne Triptych)</i>	c. 1468	National Gallery, London	The kneeling Sir John Donne is wearing a ring on his right index finger. The ring appears gold and to be set with a blue gem, possibly a sapphire?
Fra Filippo Lippi	<i>Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement</i>	c. 1440-44	MET, New York	The woman is wearing several jewelled finger rings, but we can see the male on the left side of the portrait has a ring on his right pinky finger. The ring has a large yellow stone (topaz?) beset with a raised gold bezel. There is possibly a dainter ring on the same finger, above the first knuckle joint. His hands rest upon a coat of arms, potentially linking the ring to familial wealth or connection.

Andrea del Castagno	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	c. 1450-57	National Gallery of Art, Washington DC	Dressed simply and largely unadorned, the young male is depicted with a simple gold band around his right pinky finger. Even the simplest men seem to have worn rings.
Hans Memling	<i>Portrait of a Young Man</i>	c. 1472 - 75	MET, New York	With his hands gracefully resting atop each other, the viewer can see a pair of rings on the individual's ring finger on his right hand. Interestingly, they are worn on the middle joint of the finger. They appear fairly ornate and set with rubies.
Rogier van der Weyden	<i>Francesco d'Este</i>	c. 1460	MET, New York	The sitter of this painting, Francesco, son of Lorenzo d'Este, is depicted wearing a ring on the pinky of his right hand, and holds another gold ring set with a ruby. Interestingly, he is also holding a small steel-headed hammer. Suggestions are they are jousting prizes or symbols of power at court.
Francesco del Coaa	<i>Portrait of a Young Man with a Ring</i>	c. 1472-74	Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid	The subject of this painting holds a gold ring with a gemstone, seemingly for the viewer to inspect. The ring is framed by the open cloak, causing it to have prominent focus in the artwork despite being in the lower portion of the frame.
Gerard David	<i>Portrait of a Goldsmith</i>	c. 1505-1510	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	
Antonio del Crevalcore	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	c. 1475-80	Museo Correr, Venice	Though not depicted wearing the ring, the portrait of this man clearly displays a ruby set ring that is placed atop a book - presumably a bible - along with a single pearl. The placement of the items on a breviary projects the items into the viewer's space. Concetto Nicosia (in Ferrara,

				2004, p. 304) cites a treatise specifying ruby and diamond rings are part of nuptial rites with the ruby signifying fidelity, the diamond faithfulness.
Pietro di Spagna	<i>Federigo da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo</i>	c. 1476-77	Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino	The son is depicted with a diamond ring on his left hand. He is laden with gems and ornaments, possibly signifying the passing on of familial titles and wealth.
Christoph Amberger	<i>Matthaus Schwarz</i>	1542	Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid	On the sitter's visible left hand there are four rings, three of which are on the index finger. The fourth, somewhat obscured is on the fourth finger and seemingly quite plain. The more prominent index rings contain singular gemstones.
Hans Holbein	<i>Man Aged Thirty-Nine</i>	1533	Staatliche Museen zu Berlin	Sitter wears a singular ring that is identified as the coat of arms for the Cologne family of Wedigh - a similar ring is at New York (50.132.4)
Lorenzo Lotto	<i>A Goldsmith in Three Positions</i>	~1530	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	The individual is displayed wearing a pinky ring on his left hand, though it is partly obscured. The sitter is identified as a goldsmith as he is holding a case of rings in the centre of the image. These rings appear to be made of gold and heavily encrusted with gems.
Upper Rhenish	<i>A Young Couple</i>	c. 1470	Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland	The young man is wearing a ring on the fourth finger of his left hand - possibly a wedding ring?
Hans Memling	<i>An Old Man and an Old Lady</i>	~1480	Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin	The identity of the older male is unknown. He is wearing a ring between the first and second knuckle on his right

				hand- seemingly gold and with gems.
Imitator of Parmigianino	<i>Man holding a Book</i>	c. 1530s	Museo di Capodimonte, Naples	Though not the primarily focus of the painting, the main figure wears a ring on the fourth finger of his left hand - it has a single stone in its centre, possibly a wedding ring?
Raphael	<i>Pope Julius II</i>	1511-1512	National Gallery, London	The elderly pope is wearing a plethora of rings on both hands, six in total. They all contain sizeable gemstones
Justus of Ghent	<i>Pope Sixtus IV</i>	mid-1470s	Louvre, Paris	Outfitted in the various adornments of the papalcy, Sixtus is wearing two rings in the portrait. One on the pinky of his left hand, the other between the first and second joint of the ring finger on his right hand.
Jan van Eyck	<i>Portrait of a Young Man with a Red Rose</i>	144-1460	Gemäldegalerie, Hauptgeschoss, Raum 6	The young man holds a bright red rose in his right hand, clearly displaying a gold ring with two stones - a ruby and a darker stone, possibly a very deep sapphire?
Follower of Jan van Eyck	<i>The Man with the Pinks</i>	~1436	Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin	In the hand holding a single flower, the sitter has an intricate ring between the first and second finger joint on his right hand.
Titian	<i>Frederico Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua</i>	~1529	Museo del Prado, Madrid	On his right hand, the duke has two delicate gold rings. The first, on his pinky, seems to be beset with several small rubies or garnets. Between the first and second knucle on his fourth finger, the duke wears a gold ring with a single turquoise.
Barthel Beham	<i>Portrait of an Arbitrator or Mathematician</i>	1529	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	The sitter's ring carries a coat of arms and the initials HS, though he has not been

				identified. The arms seems to be coloured and the ring is golden - possibly through enamel?
Giovanni Battista Moroni	<i>il Tagliapanni (The Tailor)</i>	c. 1570	National Gallery, London	The famous painting of an Italian Renaissance tailor, there is a small gold ring on the pinky of his right hand.
Paolo Veronese	<i>Man</i>	~1570	Palazzo Pitti, Florence	The man has a small gold ring on his right pinky
Remigius van Leemput, after Hans Holbein the Younger	<i>Henry VII, King of England with his Wife Elizabeth of York, their son Henry VIII and his Wife Jane Seymour</i>	1667 - original ~1537	Royal Collection, Hampton Court, England	A compressed dynastic portrait of Henry VIII, his father, mother and third wife, likely made to commemorate the birth of his son Edward by Jane. The original was lost in a fire in 1698 but this copy was made for Charlie II. Both Henrys are depicted with rings on their fingers; VII has three on his left pinky and index, then one on his left index. VIII has a ring on each index finger
Follower of Master Flemalle	<i>Guillaume Fillastre (?)</i>	1440 or 1450	Courtauld Institute Galleries, London	The identity of the sitter is uncertain. He wears a ring on both hands: a prominent cameo ring on his left pinky and an obscured ring on his right index - possibly another cameo or intaglio?
Antonis Mor	<i>Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle</i>	1549	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	In both artist's portraits of Antoine Perrenot he wears three rings on his left hand. On the fourth finger he has two gold, jewelled rings and on his pinky a singular large gold jewelled ring.
Titian	<i>Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle</i>	1548	Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri	

Antonis Mor	<i>Anton Perrenot de Granvelle</i>	1549	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	Son of Emperor Charles V's state minister Nicolas, Anton is depicted with three rings on in left hand. On his pinky, he has a large jewelled ring made of gold. The other two are both golden rings on is lower fourth finger; one has a ruby and the other a darker stone - onyx or sapphire? Both gems are set in a bezel reminiscent of a flower or petals.
Antonis Mor	<i>Portrait of Sir Thomas Gresham</i>	c. 1560 - 1565	Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam	At the very edge of the portrait, Gresham's left hand hangs loosely from the chair arm. On his index finger is a fairly simple gold banded ring with a single medium blue/green stone.
Antonis Mor	<i>Alessandro Farnese</i>	1557	Galleria Nazionale, Parma	The young man, identified as the future Duke of Parma, wears a pinky ring on his right hand
Lucas Cranach the Elder	<i>Johannes Cuspinian</i>	1502	Sammlung Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur	Holding a large red book - the sitter was a doctor, humanist, and philosopher associated with the University of Vienna - he wears a ring on his right index finger (signet ring?) and three gold bands on his fourth finger of the same hand.
Lucas Cranach the Elder	<i>Henry the Pious, Duke of Saxony</i>	1514	Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden	In the highly adorned portait of the duke, he is clearly wearing several rings. All rings appear to be gold. Right index finger has a large blue gem, whilst on the left he seems to have a ruby ring on his ring finger and the ring on his index finger appears to bear his coat of arms.
Hans Maler	<i>Matthaus Schwarz</i>	20 Feb 1526	Louvre, Paris	On the index of his left hand, the 29 year old has two bejewelled rings. Both sit between the second and third knucle joint, the top ring

				appears to have a ruby whereas the bottom ring as a coat of arms or signet?
Hans Mielich	<i>Ladislav of Fraunberg, Count of Haag</i>	1557	Sammlungen des Regierenden Fürsten von Liechtenstein, Vaduz	An older gentleman stands with a leopard and has a small gold band on the fourth finger of his right hand. Possibly with small gems or enamel details?
Titian	<i>Young Man with a Tattered Glove</i>	early 1520s	Louvre, Paris	On his non-gloved right hand the young man has a small gold ring, possibly bearing a family crest or signet
Quinten Metsys	<i>Erasmus</i>	c. 1517	Royal Collection, Hampton Court, England	Erasmus writes with his right hand, upon his index finger is an itaglio ring
Quinten Metsys	<i>Pieter Gillis</i>	c. 1517	Private Collection, United Kingdom	With his middle finger, Pieter points to a book and so clearly displays a flat-topped ring. Perhaps a signet or heraldry ring
Alonso Sanchez Coello	<i>Don Carlos</i>	1564	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	The eldest son of Phillip II of Spain wears a ring on the index finger of his left hand. It has rubies around the band of the ring with a flat central stone - perhaps an onyx?
After the Master of Flemalle	<i>Barthelemy Alatrue</i>	Copies of original 1425 portraits, probably completed after 1562	Musee des Beaux-Arts, Tournai	Barthelemy was a chief official in the Burgundian ducal court. He wears two rings in his portrait on his right index and ring fingers. The index finger ring seems to depict arms or heraldic symbols. The second ring, worn between the first and second finger knuckle seems to have a central gemstone.
Hermann tom Ring	<i>Johannes Munstermann</i>	1547	Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster	He wears a signet ring on his left index finger with the initials MJ, helping identify the sitter of the portrait. On the same finger he also wears a gold band, and on the ring

				finger a jewelled ring. On his right index finger he also wears a ring with a smaller gem.
Titian	<i>Phillip II of Spain in Armour</i>	1551	Museo del Prado, Madrid	Phillip wears two rings in the portrait, both on his left hand. The ring finger holds a round-topped gold ring whilst the pinky ring seems to have a gem.
Titian	<i>Phillip II</i>	1549-1550	Museo del Prado, Madrid	Akin to his armoured portrait, Phillip is wearing the same two rings. Though in this portrait, the ring on his fourth finger contains a dark stone - perhaps this stone was lost between the two portraits?
Alessandro Filipepi/Botticelli	<i>Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Medallion</i>	ca. 1475	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	The young man, who is likely the painter's brother, holds a medallion to the viewer of Cosimo de' Medici. On his left pinky, there is a small ring with perhaps a carnelian stone.
Hans Memling	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	ca. 1475	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	Depicts a wealthy Italian merchant who moved to Bruges. His right hand rest atop the frame of the portrait with two gemstone rings, a smaller turquoise on his pinky and a larger redstone on his index finger
Joos Van Cleve	<i>Portrait of an unknown man and his wife</i>	1520	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	This diptych is dated 1520 on the reverse and is likely painted on the occasion of the couple's wedding. She wears two rings and worries a string of coral beads whilst he threads a green-blue encrusted ring onto his right index finger
Hans Holbein il Giovane	<i>Portrait of Sir Richard Southwell</i>	1536	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	Brought to Italy by request of Cosimo de' Medici (not il Vecchio) it has been housed by the Uffizi since the 17th century. A very austerly

				dressed man has his hands neatly folded with a gold and green-set ring visible on his right index finger
Hans Memling	Portrait of Benedetto Portinari	1487	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	Originally part of a triptych, the man holds his hands in prayer above an open bible or book of hours. Simply adorned, his left pinky has a simple gold banded ring with a turquoise (?) set into the bezel
Raphael	<i>Portrait of Angelo Doni</i>	c. 1504-1507	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	Another example of 16th century double-wedding portraits. Angelo faces the viewer's gaze with his left hand angled so that the light catches the gemstones in his rings. On his pinky, an oval red stone - possible a carnelian signet? - and on the index a table-cut, squared dark green stone, possibly a deep emerald.
Francesco Mazzola Parmigianino	Portrait of a Man	ca. 1530	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	The sitter has both hands visible to the viewer, though his right hand is partially obscured. Both index fingers are adorned - the left with a red (carnelian?) gold ring and the right with a dark green that is flatter than an emerald - perhaps a jasper? On his left pinky is a small gold ring with a dark stone with white highlights - possibly either light reflection or rough suggestion of a cameo?
Jean Clouet	<i>Claudio di Lorena</i>	ca. 1530	Pitti Palace, Florence	The Duke of Guise is draped in valuable cloth with most of his right hand visible, and partially his left hand. On the ring finger of his right hand sits an ornate silver(?) ring with a rich red stone, probably a ruby. Harder to see his left, but on his index finger is another ornate-

				bezelled ring but the stone is difficult to discern.
Josse van Cleve	<i>Male portrait</i>	1530?	Pitti Palace, Florence	the sitter wears a cameo set into a ring of gold on the index of his right hand, in which he holds his glove. His unadorned right hand points to a piece of paper barely in the frame with accounting figures = merchant?
Titian	<i>Pope Paul III</i>	1545	Pitti Palace, Florence	Pope Paul III sits rather hunched in a chair. Over the arms his hands hang, the left displays a large jewelled ring on his fourth finger - possibly his papal ring? - and the left hand is obscured so unclear if adorned
Raphael	<i>Pope Julius II</i>	1512	Pitti Palace, Florence	The painting mentioned by the biographer, identified in the past as the Palatine Gallery exemplar, is now unanimously recognised as the version in the National Gallery, London, which was executed in oil on wood. Our painting, on the other hand, which came to Florence with Vittoria della Rovere's inheritance, is to be considered a second version on the same model, probably executed by the pupils of the painter to be sent to Urbino, in homage to the reigning family to which the pope belonged. The pope's fingers are heavily adorned with a total of six large rings with gemstones - three on each hand.

Raphael	<i>Portrait of Cardinal Bibbiena</i>	ca. 1516	Pitti Palace, Florence	The cardinal is painted in his red vestments, both hands sit within the frame. In his right hand he tightly holds folded paper, with gold rings on both index and fourth finger. Resting on the edge of the frame is his left, on his pinky is a gold ring with a small red stone
Titian	<i>Portrait of Pope Julius II</i>	ca. 1545	Pitti Palace, Florence	another highly adorned pair of papal hands. More visible is his right hand, with three gemstone rings and his left two equally vibrant rings are discernible.
Jan Provost	<i>San Giovanni Battista, santa Caterina e devoto donatore</i>	1510-1520	Gallerie dell'Accademia Venice	The donor in this image, dressed in somber black, sits in direct centre of the painting. This portrait within a painting is an interesting way to indirectly craft a portrait. His hands in prayer are adorned with one gold thumb ring, that looks like it could possibly be a seal/signet
Sebastiano Zuccato	<i>San Sebastiano e un devoto (il pittore stesso?)</i>	1485-1490	Gallerie dell'Accademia Venice	a 15th century example of a disguised portrait within the devotional - possibly the painter himself. Kneeing in prayer before an emaciated saint Sebastian, the devotee has his hands in prayer. Visible on the ring finger of his left hand is a thick gold ring, with what seems to be a small ruby/red stone.
Matteo Giovannetti	<i>San Ermagora con un devoto; San Fortunato</i>	1345-1350	Gallerie dell'Accademia Venice	A 14th century example of a devotee portrait - though the devotee has no rings and is very simple clothing compared to the gilt saint
Domenico Tintoretto	<i>Ritratto di Marcantonio Zeno, podestà di Treviso</i>	ca. 1615	Museo Correr, Venice	Almost full-body portrait, one pinky ring with amazingly rendered diamond. Simple square bezel and gold ring

Hans Memling	Portrait of a Man	ca. 1490	Uffizi Gallery, Florence	unknown male sitter of high status - sometimes named as Folco Portinari, was a florentine man living in Bruges. His hands are just squeezed into the lower right of the frame, with a thick-band of gold as a ring on his right pinky is visible.
Raphael	<i>Pope Julius II</i>	1512	Pitti Palace, Florence	The painting mentioned by the biographer, identified in the past as the Palatine Gallery exemplar, is now unanimously recognised as the version in the National Gallery, London, which was executed in oil on wood. Our painting, on the other hand, which came to Florence with Vittoria della Rovere's inheritance, is to be considered a second version on the same model, probably executed by the pupils of the painter to be sent to Urbino, in homage to the reigning family to which the pope belonged. The pope's fingers are heavily adorned with a total of six large rings with gemstones - three on each hand.
Netherlandish Painter	<i>Portrait of a Man in a Chaperon</i>	1440-1450	MET, New York	Dominated by the large red turban (Chaperon?) the man is dressed in mostly black, accented with the red of the flower he holds and ruby in his button(?). On his left hand he has two rings, a gold ring on his index that may be a signet and a two-gem ring on his fourth finger - both rings sit between the second and third knuckle

Jacopo Tintoretto	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	1550s	MET, New York	unknown sitter is thought to be a German or Flemish trader living in Venice. Dressed entirely in black, his two rings are similarly restrained - one on his left index finger is a gold ring set with a blue stone and on his right ring finger sits a gold ring with a red(?) stone. Both are oval shaped and simple
Corneille de Lyon	<i>Portrait of a Man with Gloves</i>	ca. 1535	MET, New York	Clutching brown leather gloves, of quality but still practicality, on the index finger of his left hand is a ring with a round bezel. Perhaps gold or bronze, the flat round bezel is either plain metal or maybe a rusty-red stone.
Hans Holbein the Younger	<i>Hermann von Wedigh III (d. 1560)</i>	1532	MET, New York	A well-known Holbein portrait, the young German sitter wears a ring on his left hand, just visible behind the right hand and arm. The ring is a large gold signet ring with red, green, white, and black enamel, presumably of the family crest.
Jan Gossart (Mabuse)	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	ca. 1520-25	MET, New York	In the bottom left of the painting is the man's right hand that holds a rolled scroll of paper and on his index finger a broken gold hoop ring.
Hans Memling	<i>Tammaso di Folco Portinari (1428-1501)</i>	ca. 1470	MET, New York	Part of a dual wedding photo, Tommaso was the Medic bank manager in Bruges. Though commissioned for his wedding, it was part of a devotional triptych hence the hands in pray of both figures. On his visible right pinky, Tommaso has a ring. It is a simple gold ring with a quatrefoil on the hoop, in the centre is a small turquoise.

Conrad Faber von Creuznach	<i>Portrait of a Man with a Moor's Head on His Signet Ring</i>	Unknown, artist died 1552 and active 1524	MET, New York	The title draws attention to the two rings worn by the unknown sitter, with emphasis on the cameo that adorns his ring index finger. The hand grasps the adorned handle of a sword that has a gold medallion of an armed man upon a horse, lance facing downwards. The ring with the likeness of a young black man sits below this, possibly the intended target of the spear. On the ring finger sits a simpler gold ring with a black (onyx?) stone
Hans Holbein the Younger	<i>Benedikt von Hertenstein (b. 1495, d. 1522)</i>	1517	MET, New York	A young male sitter in quite fashionable clothing, with only his left hand visible. It is highly adorned with a total of 6 rings across three fingers. Firstly, there is a large gold signet ring on his index finger, on the fourth finger sits a large purple ring (amethyst?) and a smaller blue ring (sapphire?). The pinky is laden with three double-stone rings: 1 = green and pink (emerald and ?), one with a diamond and topaz?, and third with two less-coloured stones.
Moretto da Brescia (Alessandro Bonvicino)	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	ca. 1520-25	MET, New York	simple gold ring with oval red stone (carnelian? Ruby) set into the flat bezel - on the right index finger of the sitter
Barthel Bruyn the Elder	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	1533	MET, New York	The young, upper-class man holds a glove in his right hand while his just-visible left hand has the profile of a gold ring. It has a high bezel with a gem set in it, but it is unclear which one
Tommaso Fiorentino	<i>Portrait of a Man</i>	1521	MET, New York	Sitter wears a lace ruffed shirt and two rings on his right hand, both with carnelian stones set. The pinky ring is

				smaller with only a little stone, while the index finger sports a longer stone
Jean Clouet	<i>Guillaume Budé (1467-1540)</i>	ca 1536	MET, New York	Sitter wears a gold and red-stoned ring on his left index finger
Lucas Cranach the Elder	<i>Portrait of a Man with a Rosary</i>	ca 1508	MET, New York	Young male sitter holds a rosary, possibly of coral beads, and has a ring on his right index finger. It is gold with a blue -turquoise?- stone set in the bezel
Monogrammist LAM	<i>Portrait of a Man in White</i>	1574	MET, New York	A very fashionable dandy dressed in white courtly clothing. On his left hand is a gold ring on his index finger with a red gem setting
Lucas Cranach the Elder	<i>Lukas Spielhausan</i>	1532	MET, New York	Well-dressed, the sitter wears a signet ring with the initials LS, representing his name and possibly a coat of arms, in a carnelian or ruby intaglio. On the same hand, he has a small gold turquoise-set ring on his ring finger. The signet ring is either very thick or stacked with 1/2 simple gold hoop rings.
Petrus Christus	<i>Portrait of a Young Man</i>	1450-60	National Portrait Gallery, London	The unknown young sitter holds a book of hours or bible with ornate gilt edges. On his right hand, the index finger has an ornate gold signet ring, that is possible also a seal. It is made of gold with no gemstones. He may have been an Italian merchant given the artist often worked for wealthy Italian patrons, and his tablets and page suggest a merchant.
NO RINGS	156			
Total Corpus	245			