

FINGER RING

Early Christian, 400 A.D.

Bone

W: 3.5 cm

Reference: 21207



This large ring in bone belongs to a small group of similar items dating to the end of the Roman Empire, when the rarity of ivory is often recorded in documents. Only the most deluxe pieces were made out of ivory: bone imitated ivory and was easier to obtain.

Like the present example, surviving bone rings present a rounded hoop on the outside and are flat within. The oval bezels are often carved, some with figures. (See Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings ... British Museum*, p. 237.) Two rings remarkably close in typology to the present ring, and also bearing the Chi Rho inscription, are in the Paleo-Christian collections of the Musée de l'Arles Antique. (*Musée de l'Arles Antique*, published in *Naissance d'une Chrétienté en Provence l'Ve-VIe siècle*, exhibition catalogue, Arles, 2001, pp. 48, 206, nos. 16, 1-3, illustrated).

The inscription, "Victore Aug" translates to "Victor" (and) "Lord." (The abbreviation "Aug" for Augustus, appears interchangeably with "DN,"

"Dominus Noster" – Our Lord, in inscriptions of the late IVth and early Vth Century.) Not an imperial piece, this ring was probably the property of an ecclesiastic who wanted to make sure he was seen as Orthodox. The ring would have been worn only for special occasions, possibly over gloves.

The use of the Chi Rho in this form on the shield of his soldiers at Milvian Bridge (AD 312) was either an adaptation by Constantine or an invention by Eusebius, the biographer of the emperor (*Vita Constantini*, ca. AD 340). Occurring in circular and oval surrounds, the earliest examples are mid IVth century and are numerous on sarcophagi. The motif is also common in coinage of the Western Empire between ca. AD 350 and 390, with occasional usage as late as 450. (It is rarer in the East where the motif takes a more cursive form.) The Chi Rho on the shields of the soldiers in the Justinian mosaic in the chancel of San

Vitale (AD 548) is one of the last appearances of the motif, which had already been supplanted by variations of the Latin cross. This perimeter of c. 350-550 A.D. and the standard late antique majuscule of the inscription confirm that the ring's manufacture in Italy or Gaul during the early Christian period.

CONDITION

Intact

PROVENANCE

Walter Kuhn private collection, Zurich, Switzerland, acquired ca. 1970