

... 'IHS' finger ring ...

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AN "IHS" FINGER RING FROM LAKE NIPIGON*

by David Arthurs

Introduction

During a brief reconnaissance survey on western Lake Nipigon in 1981 (Arthurs 1981; 1982), a brass finger ring was recovered from the Nazoteka Point Site, DkJf-1. This ring is of the so-called "Jesuit" style, and represents not only the first such artifact recovered from the vast territory north of Lake Superior, but also one of the earliest European artifacts yet recognized in the area.

The ring was found on the beach on the west side of Nazoteka Point, a long, slender, south-facing point of land that guards the entrance to Gull Bay, on the west shore of the lake (Fig. 1). The site, which was first investigated by K.C.A. Dawson during his inventory surveys of Lake Nipigon in 1967 and 1969, had produced evidence of Initial and Terminal Woodland occupations, the former yielding Laurel ceramics, the latter Blackduck, Selkirk, and "Peninsula Woodland" pottery (Dawson 1976:90-99). During the writer's brief inspection of the site in 1981, at which time water levels on the lake were considerably lower, exposing a larger area of the beach than had been present during Dawson's investigations of 13 years before, 187 artifacts were recovered from the surface of the beaches on the east and west sides of the point. Among them were a bifacial tool of jasper taconite, three small side notched Terminal Woodland projectile points, two of locally available Hudson's Bay Lowland chert, the third of exotic Knife River Flint, the source of which lies in North Dakota; a pseudo-scallop shell decorated fragment of Laurel pottery, and a small collection of historic period artifacts. These included 13 glass seed or embroidery beads, five small cylindrical beads, three white barrel or football-shaped beads, a large spherical bead, a long cylindrical bead of translucent blue glass, a tinkling cone, a fragment of copper cut from a trade kettle, a barrel hoop fragment, and the finger ring. The collection of historic artifacts firmly establishes the presence of a Fur Trade component at this long-occupied and important site. ✓

Description

The finger ring (catalogue no. 81-93), is a "Jesuit" type ring, with an "IHS" motif (Fig. 2). Made of brass, it consists of an oval plaque, and a tapering band, which was cast as a single piece, possibly as one of a series of ring blanks joined together, which were later cut apart and finished (cf. Cleland 1971:29). After application of embossed decoration to the face of the plaque with a die stamp, the ring was roughly finished with a file. The band was then bent into a circular shape, and welded at the seam.

Unlike many Jesuit rings, which possess two or three ridges on either side of the plaque (Thomas 1973; Wood 1974:86), the band on this specimen is plain. It is plano-convex in cross-section, and tapers from about 0.35 cm in width at the plaque, to 0.15 cm at the seam. The length of the band (exclusive of the plaque) is 6.09 cm, the total circumference of the ring 7.13 cm. In modern terms, it would represent a ring size of 8 or 9.

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The plaque is oval and measures 1.30 cm in length, 1.04 cm in width, and a maximum of 0.13 cm in thickness. Embossed on the face, slightly offset, is a motif dominated by three large letters, "IHS". The ends of each letter are expanded somewhat, as are the arms and finial of a cross that rises from the transverse bar of the "H". Beneath the three letters, on the lower margin of the face, are two, or perhaps four, hemispherical or arch-like elements. Within each of the two distinct arches is a small circular node. The rim of the plaque is slightly raised, and although the face is heavily worn, it is possible under magnification to distinguish a series of oblique impressions which give the rim a cable or rope-like appearance.

Preserved on the face of the plaque are traces of a slightly iridescent turquoise and brown coloured substance, which was tentatively identified as glass (E. Jensen, pers. comm.). This trait has not been previously reported for an "IHS" ring. The residue suggests that the face of the ring may have been coated with coloured glass, or perhaps enamel. Interestingly, tests with a geiger counter have revealed that the ring is slightly radio-active. An examination of plain and embossed metal buttons from several Northern Ontario fur trade sites suggests that there is a relationship between embossed decoration and radio-activity, the significance of which is as yet undetermined (E. Jensen, pers. comm.).

Jesuit Rings

"Jesuit" rings are relatively common on historic sites south and east of Lake Superior (Ridley 1954:49; Quimby 1966:77); (Cleland 1971, 1972; Rexe 1972:H-1; Thomas 1973; Wood 1974). Though they occur in a bewildering variety of shapes and motifs, most appear to represent stylistic variations of at least three prototypes inspired by religious subjects: the "L-Heart", "Double-M" and "IHS" motifs (Cleland 1972). The "IHS" motif was originally the symbol of the Society of Jesus, founded in the 16th century by St. Ignatius Loyola. Though the letters "IHS" are popularly translated as "In Hoc Signo" (in this sign) or as "Jesu Hominum Salvator (Jesus, Saviour of Mankind - see Cleland 1971:31, 1972:205), the original meaning is believed to have been an abbreviation of the Greek spelling of "Jesus" (Wood 1974:86).

Cleland has argued that there is a temporal succession in ring styles, the shape of the plaque, and the method of decoration, which makes them sensitive chronological markers for dating historical sites. Through the process of stylistic drift as the rings, which were first given to Native converts by Jesuit missionaries as tokens of their new faith, became popular trade items and moved from the religious to a more secular domain, the prototype motifs transmuted to more varied forms. According to Cleland, rings with embossed plaques, round or oval in shape, predate ca. A.D. 1700, while those with engraved motifs, and plaques octagonal or irregular in shape, fall between ca. A.D. 1700 and 1760. Research by other investigators suggests that, while it has a basic validity, the sequence is more complex, and that embossed and engraved varieties co-existed over much of the period (Mason 1976).

The Nazoteka Point ring varies only slightly from Cleland's prototype "IHS" ring. In the prototype, three nails, symbolizing the spikes of the Crucifixion, occur beneath the letter elements, their tips together and their heads radiating outward (Cleland 1972:205). The Lake Nipigon ring more closely resembles the first variant in Cleland's F-P-D progression, in which the nails have been replaced by, or have degenerated into, a pair of arches (Cleland



Fig. 1. Location of the Nazoteka Point Site, DkJf-1.



Fig. 2. The Nazoteka Point "IHS" Ring.

1972:205, Fig. 36). A similar motif is illustrated by Quimby (1966:77, Fig. 15d).

Dating the Specimen

The dating of the Nazoteka Point ring remains somewhat problematical. Under the Cleland progression, as the specimen is stamp-embossed, has an oval plaque and a plain band (all traits of early rings), it likely dates prior to A.D. 1700 (Cleland 1972:207). Two stamp-embossed rings from the Frank Bay site on Lake Nipissing, north of Lake Huron, bearing the three nails of the prototype, were found in a context believed to date ca. 1665 (Ridley 1954:49; Cleland 1972:207). These and similar rings from other sites such as the Lasanen cemetery in northern Michigan (Cleland 1971), presumably predate, stylistically, the Nazoteka Point specimen.

Interestingly, in New York State "IHS" rings occur in relatively high frequencies on sites occupied as early as the mid-1600s and are most common between ca. 1670 and 1687, after which they sharply decline (Wood 1974:100, Table 1). The ring from Lake Nipigon may then reasonably be assigned a date in the last quarter of the 17th century, perhaps some time in the 1670's or 1680's.

The dating of the Nazoteka Point ring is corroborated by historical data as well. During the mid to late 1600's, French explorers and missionaries advanced swiftly into the Upper Great Lakes region, in search of souls, and the rich fur lands north and west of Lake Superior. In 1661 Radisson visited the north shore with the Cree, in the course of his controversial expedition down to "Hudson Bay" (Adams 1961:145-147; Nute 1978:65-66; Rich 1976:20; Bain 1969:233n). Father Allouez explored the Nipigon River and Lake Nipigon as early as 1667 (Ray 1974:8). By the early 1670's, the north Superior shore had been accurately mapped by the Jesuits, although it would be several years before the Lake Nipigon area would be accurately depicted (Rich 1976:70). In 1678, the first documented French trading establishment, Fort Outoubilis, was established on Lake Nipigon, followed by Du Lhut's Fort la Maune in 1684, in an attempt to interrupt the Assiniboine and Cree on their way down to James Bay to trade with the English (Voorhis 1930:98, 133; Burpee 1968:47n; Innis 1973:49; Ray 1974:11). By the early 1700's the French were well established along the north shore, and were moving deeper into the western interior across the height of land.

The date assigned to the Nazoteka Point ring corresponds closely, then, with the period of early French exploration and settlement in the area north of Lake Superior. Given the extent of French exploring, trading, and missionary activity in the Lake Nipigon area in the late 1600's, it is somewhat surprising that the Nazoteka Point "Jesuit" ring is, as yet, one of the very few pieces of tangible evidence we have to demonstrate their presence.

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