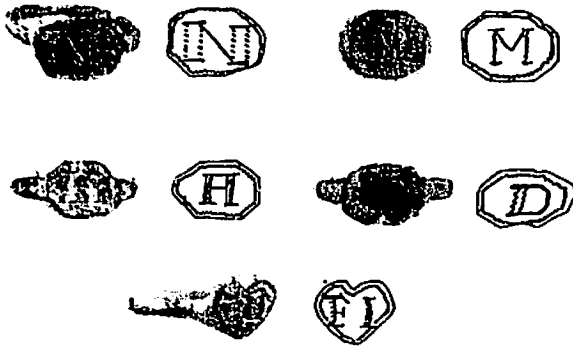


ARTIFACT NOTES

JESUIT RINGS

by Sharon Thomson



Jesuit rings from The Forks.

The excavation of two "signet" rings from the Public Archaeology dig at The Forks was previously reported in the *Manitoba Archaeological Newsletter* Series 2:2(3). Over the course of the 1990 field season, three more of these interesting rings were found bringing the total number excavated to five. Subsequent research has indicated that these rings are, in fact, Jesuit rings.

Jesuit rings are usually found on mid-17th to mid-18th century North American sites of French occupation or influence. The association of these rings with French Jesuit missions, particularly those established in the Great Lakes region, is documented in historical records (Cleland 1972:202). Locally, similar rings have appeared in artifact assemblages at Fort Rivière Tremblante, Saskatchewan, and Pine Fort, Manitoba.

Little is known regarding the origin and function of Jesuit rings. They may have been sacred objects which evolved gradually into more secular items of trade. Historical documents indicate that pupils at 17th century missions were rewarded with these brass rings if they were able to correctly repeat Bible lessons; however, a great number of the Jesuit rings recovered from archaeological sites have not been found in association with religious buildings. At Fort Michilimackinac, Michigan, very few of the 72 Jesuit rings recovered came from either the Church or the Priest's House (Kroker *et al.* 1991:97). Similar evidence from other historic sites supports the contention that, by

the 18th century, Jesuit rings had become primarily trade items.

As the function of Jesuit rings changed, so too did their method of manufacture. The earliest rings had a raised, cast design on a round or oval face, whereas later rings bore an incised or stamped design on an octagonal or heart-shaped face. Early designs had strongly religious overtones, such as hearts, crosses or letters representing Latin religious phrases. For example, the letters "AM" are thought to symbolize the phrase "Ave Maria" (Wood 1974:87). Over time, these more elaborate designs became greatly simplified, and were reduced to one or two often crudely-incised letters.

By tracing the stylistic evolution of their design, attempts have been made to date Jesuit rings in a very general sense. Cleland (1972:202) has suggested that round and oval ring faces date to the period from 1624 to 1700, whereas octagonal and heart-shaped faces became popular only after 1700. Cleland's dates must be used with some caution, however, as his evolutionary progression has yet to be proven. Other researchers (Mason 1986) maintain that the heart-shaped form predates the octagonal form.

The five finger rings found at The Forks are typical of later Jesuit ring design. All are made of brass, and their faces range from 14 mm to 10 mm in width and 10 mm to 8 mm in height. Four faces are octagonal, while one is heart-shaped. Four of the rings have had letters applied by incision only, while the fifth bears a "D" which has been applied by a combination of incision and stamping. On all rings, horizontal design elements are deeply-incised and regular, while vertical elements are much fainter and irregular in outline (Kroker *et al.* 1991:98). This is largely the result of the method by which the rings were inscribed; a common method of incision was by "walking" the point of the engraving tool across the surface of the ring, producing an irregular zigzag effect (Mason 1976:114).

For unknown reasons, the manufacture and distribution of Jesuit rings appears to have stopped rather abruptly after approximately 1760 (Cleland 1972:202). However, being made of a relatively durable material, the use life of these brass rings could extend well past their date of manufacture. This would account for their presence in association with structural remains thought to belong to the North West Company's Fort Gibraltar I, occupied between 1810 and 1816. Alternately, it is possible the rings were distributed

prior to the construction of Fort Gibraltar I. French traders had visited The Forks some earlier, when they had established and briefly inhabited Fort Rouge from 1738 to 1739.

However these five rings came to rest at The Forks, their presence raises interesting questions regarding both their role as trade items and their stylistic evolution.

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