



Illustration from a fifteenth-century edition of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*, which provides a retelling of the twelfth-century tale of Floris and Blancheflour. In this scene, Blancheflour gives Floris a magic ring that will tarnish if she is ever in danger.

MAGICAL RINGS IN MEDIEVAL LEGEND

By Kathryn Walton

PUTTING A RING ON IT

Magical rings are a staple of many of the most famous fantasy stories today. The same was true in the Middle Ages. From rings of protection, to rings of invisibility, to rings of love, magic rings are everywhere in medieval legend.

When Bilbo Baggins first picks up a simple gold ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, one of the most famous symbols of contemporary fantasy is born. Tolkien's Ring of Power is just one of many potent rings that appear in modern fantasy. From the ring that holds the Resurrection Stone in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, to the rings the Aes Sedai wear in *The Wheel of Time*, magical rings are a recurring theme in modern fantasy stories.



Magic rings play an important role in Norse mythology as well. Dating to 950-1000, this runestone from Drävle, Sweden shows, among other figures, the dwarf Andvari, who is holding a magical ring that helps him find gold.

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A twelfth-century Seljuq ring set with a tourmaline. Rings like this were often worn by men, but sometimes also given to women as love tokens.
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The same was true in the Middle Ages. Although there was really no equivalent to the One Ring to Rule Them All, magical rings appear frequently in medieval literature and legend. They were especially common in medieval romance narratives, which told the stories of great heroes and their quests.

Magical rings were popular in medieval romances in part because people in the Middle Ages believed that rings could actually be magical – or rather that the stones set in rings could hold magical power. People in the Middle Ages saw the natural world as endowed with meaning and power that had been put there by God when he created the world. Certain natural objects were understood as having supernatural properties. This was the case with stones, for example, and certain stones were associated with certain kinds of power. Different precious stones were understood as being able to do things such as cure illness, aid in childbirth, bestow strength, offer protection from physical harm, enhance wisdom, and so on.

Medieval writers endowed stones with even more fantastic properties in the stories of great heroes and their journeys. Magical objects are a staple of medieval romance, and magical rings provided a wonderfully flexible object that could be used by anyone, passed on to others, and made to do all kinds of things. So, rings became a staple of medieval lore.

Here are three of the most common kinds of magical rings that can be found in medieval stories.

Rings of protection

Probably the most common type of magical ring to appear in medieval legend is the ring of



protection. All kinds of different legendary heroes have access to rings of protection, which are usually given to them by their lovers. What kind of protection these rings offer varies from story to story, but most protect a legendary hero against harm in battle.

One such ring appears in the story of the early English legendary hero King Horn. While lesser known today, King Horn was an extremely popular figure in medieval English lore. His story, which was first written in the late thirteenth century, tells of a young knight who is cast adrift in a rudderless boat after his father is killed. He is taken in at a court in Western-

The tale of Gawain and the Green Knight also contains a magic ring. While staying with Lord Bertilak, his wife repeatedly attempts to seduce Gawain, eventually even offering him powerful gifts, including a gold ring with a red stone that is implied to have protective properties.

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A page from the mid thirteenth-century *Liber Additamentorum* by Matthew Paris, which contains a description of the various gemstones in the collection of Saint Albans (where he was a monk).

© British Library, MS Cotton Nero D. I, ff. 146-146v

Lapidaries and the magical stones within

The idea that precious stones possessed magical properties was so popular in the Middle Ages that an entire genre of literature was devoted to listing stones and describing their virtues. These texts were called lapidaries, and they were based on ancient works that had also outlined the properties of precious stones. Pliny the Elder's *De rerum natura* (*The Natural History*), for example, which was written in the first century, recounts the virtues of numerous precious stones.

Lapidaries were popular across the Middle Ages and circulated in both Latin and vernacular languages (English, French, etc). Lapidaries were similar to modern-day encyclopaedias; they presented an entry that named and described a stone and then outlined its uses and virtues. The largest surviving example is the Peterborough Lapidary, which was compiled in the later fifteenth century. It lists the properties of 128 stones and gems.



A Byzantine pendant brooch decorated with the Virgin and Child, with elements variously dated to the tenth through thirteenth centuries. It features a number of precious stones, including pearls, garnets, emeralds, and sapphires. According to the medieval lapidaries, all of these had magical and healing properties.
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Special stones

While some of the stones in the Peterborough Lapidary are easily recognized today, others are more obscure and difficult to connect to modern materials. Here is a sampling of some of the descriptions found in the Lapidary:

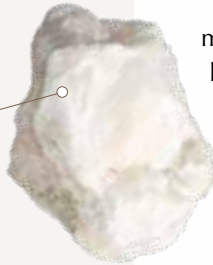


Amethyst

This stone brings comfort to the bearer both from sorrow and when wild animals come toward them. It keeps the bearer strong in body and in spirit, and it protects them from evil spirits and evil dreams. It also ensures that the bearer sings clearly and with a good voice (11).

Alabaster

If you grind this stone with vinegar and drink it, it will cure sores on the foot and knee (9).



Jacinth

This stone keeps you true and helps you see truly. If you put it in your mouth, it will make you very cold. It also ensures that the bearer can go into another country without dread, and that they will be well received in their host's house (53-54).



Garnet

This stone sharpens judgement and excites and stimulates the blood (9-10).



Onyx

If it is borne around the neck or finger, it excites sorrow and melancholy and dread, and it multiplies pleas and gives the heart over to contention and strife (116).



esse where he falls in love with Rymenhild, the beautiful daughter of the king.

The two plan to marry, but Horn is determined to prove himself worthy of her love before they do. So, Horn sets off on a quest. But before he leaves, Rymenhild gives him a small gold ring, engraved with the words "Rymenhild the Young". On it, she tells him, there is a powerful stone. This stone will ensure

that he need not be afraid of any blows that he might receive in battle. It will also, as she says, ensure that he is not made mad by the battle itself.

It is a powerful token. Its protection, however, is also directly connected to their relationship. In order for the ring to work, he must wear it on his finger, and before he goes into battle, he

must look at it and think of her (*King Horn*, lines 265-280). Horn goes off and ends up having great success in battle. Every time he enters conflict, he looks at the ring, thinks of Rymenhild, and is protected from harm. He is able



A thirteenth-century bishop's ring, set with a malachite, which was perhaps considered a 'toadstone'. This green rock was believed to have healing properties.

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to defeat his enemies, prove himself, and return to his lover in part because of the power of the ring.

Rings of invisibility

A derivative of the ring of protection familiar to fans of modern fantasy is the ring of invisibility. Tolkien himself was a scholar of medieval literature

and so these rings are probably what inspired his own magic ring.

One of the most powerful examples of a ring of invisibility appears in the story of a Yvain, a lesser-known knight of King Arthur's court. This story, originally known as *Yvain; or the Knight of the Lion*, was first written down by Chrétien de Troyes in France in the twelfth century. It was later translated into English as *Yvain and Gawain*.

The tale begins with the brave Yvain hearing of a wondrous spring defended by a

The ninth- or tenth-century Kingsmoor Ring is decorated with a runic inscription that is essentially gibberish, but with recognizable elements. It is believed to be a spell or charm for the staunching of blood. It is one of several rings that have been found with a similar inscription.

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seemingly undefeatable knight. Yvain rides out to find the spring and challenge the knight. They fight, and Yvain fatally wounds the knight. He then pursues the wounded knight into the knight's own castle. The knight dies, and Yvain becomes trapped inside his enemy's castle with a whole horde of angry men looking to avenge their lord.

While attempting to evade capture, Yvain meets a servant named Lunette, who happens to have just the object that will help Yvain escape detection: a ring that is described as having "the same power as the bark that covers wood and prevents it from being seen" (de Troyes, 269). He puts on the ring, then he sits on the bed while the knights of the castle thrash around looking for him. They come into the room brandishing clubs but fail to see him thanks to the wondrous ring. He escapes

successfully and goes on to triumph in the rest of the narrative because of the ring.

Rings of love

Another common kind of magical ring that appears in medieval legend is the ring of love. Despite the term 'ring of love', these were not rings that would cause one person to fall in love with another. Rings of love, instead, magically protect or reinstate an already established relationship.

One such ring appears in the tale of Sir Isumbras, an extremely popular story written in England in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. This tale tells of a wealthy and popular knight, Sir Isumbras, who begins his story by losing everything: his court, his wealth, his children, and even his wife. When his wife is abducted by a rival sultan, she and Isumbras split a ring in two, each taking half. His wife goes on to become a powerful queen, while Isumbras wanders as a

An eleventh-century Fatimid talismanic scroll decorated with Solomon's seal. Attributed to King Solomon in medieval mysticism and also referenced in Islamic and Jewish traditions, this ancient design relates to a powerful magic ring that King Solomon was said to have possessed: it variously allowed him to talk to animals and command both good and evil spirits.

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poor labourer and pilgrim. Over the course of the tale, he regains his fortune. Eventually, because of the ring, he finds his wife again. They recognize one another after many long years by producing their halves of the ring. When they do, the ring magically reforms. The ring both symbolically and in reality helps to reinstate their relationship.

Why so many rings?

The rings listed above are just a few examples of the many that appear in medieval legend. Most tales of heroes feature a magic ring at some point or another. Why were rings so popular?

I would suggest that, in addition to the fact that their magical properties fit within

medieval understandings of the magic of the natural world, the symbolism of a ring had a powerful draw. Like today, rings in the Middle Ages were small, common, easily transportable objects that tended to carry great meaning. So, medieval writers could endow these already symbolic objects with all kinds of fantastical properties and consequently build a great story. Tolkien and authors of fantasy today do exactly the same thing. **MW**

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Illustration from a fourteenth-century manuscript of *The Knight of the Lion*. In the upper-right-hand corner, the knight Yvain is shown with Lunette, a helpful servant who provided him with a ring of invisibility.

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During the High Middle Ages, moments from courtly romances became a popular decorative motif. In this case, a fourteenth-century ivory panel depicts Sir Gawain laying on the marvellous bed. Such stories were full of magic items, which included (but were not limited to) rings.

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