

# Curator's Choice

## Button Rings and Other Things

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Clothing can be difficult for archaeologists to study because fabric rarely survives in the burial environment. Instead metal fasteners such as buttons and buckles serve as the primary clues about what people wore. Metals are only part of the picture though. Even some buttons were made with fabric-covered wooden molds that rarely survive. Additionally, it is entirely possible to find a button and not be able to say for certain that it is, in fact, a button, because it looks like a simple brass ring.



Figure 1: Detail view of a Dorset button at the shoulder of an infant gown, c. 1790-1810. The button was there to hold a string that could be used to gather the sleeve.

From the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century there was a thriving cottage industry of button makers in England covering small brass rings with fine threadwork to make buttons (Figure 1). The buttons are known as "Dorset" buttons after the region where most of them originated (Hughes and Lester 1991; Luscomb 1967). Originally used primarily for shirts and undergarments, they enjoyed a peak in popularity around the turn of the 19th century when diaphanous neoclassical silhouettes, lightweight fabrics, and white-on-white embroidered decoration were the height of fashion.

Gowns for ladies, girls, and infants often fastened merely with drawstrings or straight pins, but many did employ Dorset buttons (Figure 2).

One example from the MAC Lab's archaeological collections was found in a Baltimore privy that was sealed c. 1810. Privies often have better preservation than other archaeological contexts, and copper corrosion can be toxic to the microorganisms that typically consume organics like thread and fabrics. One (or both) of these factors resulted in the preservation of some thread on a brass ring in the privy, showing that it had been a Dorset button (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Infant gown, c. 1800-1815. The gown closes at the back with drawstrings at the waist and neck, a thread-covered Dorset button at the back bodice and another button made with embroidered fabric over a copper alloy ring at the placket.

It is tempting to look at surviving examples of Dorset buttons to draw conclusions about which rings were used as buttons, but small brass rings are a little too versatile for that. Antiques and period documents show that little brass rings could have been used for such diverse purposes as hanging a picture, running a drawstring, making a drawer pull, connecting a watch fob to a chain, making a pull ring for a knife box lid, or allowing a powder flask to hang from a cord (Figure 4). The ring sizes for buttons varied, as did rings used for all of these other useful purposes, so archaeologists can't really use size as the defining factor.

This is exactly the kind of artifact that can frustrate efforts to make a positive ID in an artifact catalog. Instead of answering the question, "What is it?" the archaeologist can only make a list of possibilities. Artifacts like this tend to get left out of reports for the legitimate reason that one cannot draw many conclusions based on an artifact that could represent furniture hardware, or a clothing fastener, or a ladies' handbag, or jewelry, or knife storage, or firearms usage, or, or, or... There are too many possibilities.

So what does one do when faced with a little brass ring? First, look for surviving thread. If there is none, the best one can do is look at the associated artifacts from the area. It's important to figure out a general time period for the deposit if other diagnostic artifacts like ceramics were found in the same context. That will help narrow the possibilities. The next thing to do is look at the whole artifact assemblage with an open mind about the kinds of things people owned during that time. Are there several rings like for a purse drawstring? Is there a small escutcheon or pin that would be associated with the attachment of a drawer or lid pull? Is there a chain that might be associated with jewelry? Is there a screw with a brass knob that could have been used to attach the ring to a picture frame? The associated artifacts may point to the most probable function. As with pretty much everything in archaeology, for artifacts like little brass rings, context is everything.



Figure 3: This small copper alloy ring with surviving thread was recovered in a Baltimore privy that was sealed c. 1810 (18BC66/227-83). Thanks to the threads it can be definitively identified as a Dorset button.



Figure 4: Small copper alloy rings were versatile and could have been used for many different things, such as 1) A lid pull on a 1790s knife box (1stdibs.com); 2) A drawstring guide for an early 19th-century handbag; 3) Hanging hardware for a small picture frame; 4) Hanging hardware for an early 19th-century gunpowder flask (French Peddler's Trade Catalog, Courtesy, The Winterthur Library); 5) A 17th-century embroidered casket (Museum of Fine Arts Boston Accession 59.1033), and 6) an early 19th-century watch fob chain (French Peddler's Trade Catalog, Courtesy, The Winterthur Library).

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