



Sealed With a Ring

A visual history of wedding and engagement ring history.

ANCIENT EGYPT

3000 BC



Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics depict eternity as an unending circle. The ring as a symbol derives from the custom of two people pledging a bond inside a sacred circle of stones. The circle symbolized a never ending cycle and the space in the middle represented the gateway to the future.

Plants such as hemp and reed were twisted into circles for a ring. Also leather, bone, ivory were used, and later metals. The wealthier the person, the higher quality the material and design.

Rings were exchanged at the wedding ceremony, meaning both men and women wore wedding rings. An engagement ring was not given in advance.



band c. 2000 BC



Rings in the shape of a serpent were significant in the Egyptian culture.



MESOPOTAMIAN
WEDDING RING
2600 BC

ANCIENT GREECE & ROME



300 BC

A circle held the same meaning of eternity, as well as being symbolic of the sun and moon. To the early Romans, a ring was a sign of ownership more than romance. Iron was preferred to indicate strength and permanence. Wealthy wives were given an iron ring to wear indoors and a gold or silver ring for public display.



iron ring

“hand clasp” rings a common style



1st c. AD



200 BC

sized for a man's finger



Greek 5th c. BC



Etruscan wedding ring, 4th-6th century BC



3rd c. AD



3rd-2nd c. BC

Ring features Hymen, god of weddings, crafted onto the garnet. Size of gold ring suggests it belonged to a man.



MIDDLE AGES 500 - 1500 AD

Rise of the Engagement Ring

- ❖ In the 8th c. Christian's adopt custom of bridal rings.
- ❖ In the 9th c. Pope Nicolas I required a gold betrothal ring to prove the groom's ability to care for a wife.
- ❖ In 1215 Pope Innocent II set a long waiting period for couples to prove serious intent and compatibility.

5-6th century



7-8th century



13-14th century



9-10th century



15th century



Engagement Ring Fads & Design Trends

Posy rings has inscribed love poems and messages on the inner and sometimes outer band.



Gimmel or twin rings were popular from the Renaissance onward. Parts of the ring were worn by both the bride-to-be and groom-to-be, and sometimes by a third party. The parts were united on the wedding day to become the wedding ring.



Heart-Shape rings were popular in 17-18th centuries.



Acrostic Rings were designed with gemstones specific to spell a message.

For example: ADORE: amethyst, diamond, opal, ruby, emerald.



ADORE RING



REGARD RINGS



DEAREST RINGS

The “Vein of Love”

Some sources give credit to the Greeks, but most authorities cite the Egyptians for first settling on the third-finger of the left hand as the designated position for a wedding ring. Both ancient civilizations believed the *vena amoris* – “vein of love” – ran from the third-finger of the left hand directly to the heart. Romans held the same view. This is untrue, by the way, but was believed for many centuries.



- ◆ The left hand, typically, is less used than the right, thus less chance of a ring being damaged or causing injury to the hand.
- ◆ In 1500s Henry VIII established Church of England with the Book of Common Prayer wherein the left hand is designated officially in the wedding solemnization.
- ◆ Ritually in Christian marriages, the rector or priest recited during the binding, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” while touching first the thumb, then index finger, and then middle finger. Lastly, while uttering “Amen” he would seal the marriage by placing the ring on the ring finger.



Not all cultures keep this tradition, or wear rings at all. Roman Catholic tradition is for the right hand, and many European countries follow this trend. Jewish tradition is the index finger or thumb. Chinese couples wear their rings on opposite hands (woman right, man left). Bottom line is that the customs vary widely.

WEDDING RINGS FOR MEN

VIKINGS / NORSE

Little is known of Viking marriage rituals, but as a culture marriage was esteemed, monogamous, and based on love. Swords were exchanged first, then finger-rings. The latter mirrored the sacred arm-ring of Thor upon which all Vikings swore oaths. Below are man-size rings uncovered in Scandinavian countries dating 8th-11th c. AD.



Men wearing rings, or other jewelry, had never been rare. Generally speaking, however, a groom being given a ring on his wedding day has not been a historic custom. One notable exception are the Greeks, as mentioned previously. In the 1300s it became a standard in the Greek Orthodox Church.

Archeologists have uncovered rings in sizes, styles, and with inscriptions indicating they belonged to men in many parts of the world and various dates.

1860



1880



1892



1899



1904



1917



Despite the evidence of wedding rings for men existing in the far past, it was uncommon until WWI, and then WWII. The desire to adorn with a constant reminder of their wives and life back home led to men donning rings as a standard.

Diamonds are a Bride's Best Friend

FAMOUS GOLCONDA DIAMONDS



The Hope | 45.52-carats



The Koh-i-Noor | 105.60-carats



Darya-i-Noor | 186-carats



Archduke Joseph diamond | 76.02-carats



The Regent | 140.64-carats



The Sancy | 55.23-carats

The earliest references to diamonds are from 300 BC. Not until much later were diamonds mined in significant quantities, in the mines of Golconda in India. Many of the world's most famous diamonds came from Golconda. As the Roman's trade routes spread into the east, diamonds appeared in Europe. In the 12th century the first use of diamonds was seen in royal jewelry, in the Crown of St. Stephen of Hungary.

For centuries only royals were allowed to wear diamonds. By the 15th century diamonds were popular gemstones in royal wedding jewelry.

Napoleon's diamond & sapphire engagement ring to Josephine, 1796



15th century

Two torches in one ring of burning fire. Two wills, two hearts, two passions, all bonded in marriage by a diamond.

1475 poem by Constanzo Sforza to bride Camilla d'Aragona

In the 18th century diamonds were discovered in Brazil, becoming more plentiful and affordable. Other gemstones remained popular and valuable, with diamonds entering the possible choices. The extreme hardness of a diamond increased the attraction as a wedding gemstone as much for the symbolism as the appearance.

Archduke Maximilian is recorded as the first to gift a diamond engagement ring to his intended, Mary of Burgundy, in 1477.



WEDDING & ENGAGEMENT RING TRIVIA

Some ancient cultures – Jewish, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian – gave bracelets and armlets as wedding tokens, the same symbolism attached.

In the late 18th century the Church of England made it a requirement for the groom to give his bride a ring during the wedding ceremony as a symbol of his love and devotion

The smallest engagement ring on record was given to two-year-old Princess Mary, daughter of Henry VIII, on the event of her betrothal to the infant Dauphin of France, son of King Francis I, in 1518.

During the colonization of America, wearing jewelry was frowned upon by the Puritans and seen as ostentatious. Instead, thimbles were given as a sign of love and promise to marry. Often the women would cut the tops off and wear them as a ring.

The “Tiffany” - or solitaire - setting was introduced in the late 19th century.

American jeweler De Beer’s launched a marketing campaign in 1930 to convince men that a diamond was the only way to truly show your undying commitment to the woman of your dreams. It worked!

Colored stones were the gem of choice for engagement rings in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) Shakespeare wrote of Portia and Nerissa giving engagement rings to Bassanio and Gratiano, charging the men to never remove as a sign of their commitment.

“I give them with this ring, Which when you part from, lose, or give away, Let it presage the ruin of your love And be my vantage to exclaim on you”