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# Fraud or Poverty? Medieval Wedding Rings of Legnica Jews

Oszustwo czy bieda? Średniowieczne pierścienie zaślubinowe legnickich Żydów

Abstract: Wedding rings have been known since antiquity. In the Roman Empire, they took the form of bands adorned with a motif of two clasped hands. In Jewish culture, the engagement (kiddushin, erusin) – during which a ring was given – and the wedding (nissu'in) were originally separate ceremonies. It was not until the early 13th century that the giving of a ring to the bride became an integral part of the wedding ritual. According to Halakha, the ring was to be made of pure gold. In practice, however, wedding rings were also made of silver, gold-plated metals, and even cheaper materials like copper. Wedding rings could take the form of ordinary rings, making them difficult to identify as archaeological artefacts. The only feature mentioned in historical sources is the engraved inscription MAZAL TOV.

MAZAL TOV not only conveyed a wish for happiness but also embodied a belief that its presence would ensure a successful union. To date, only three unquestionably medieval rings bearing this inscription are known: from Weissenfels, Colmar, and Erfurt, hoards hidden during the mid-fourteenth-century plague.

Each features a crown in the shape of a miniature building, symbolising not only the creation

of a new home for the couple but also – perhaps primarily – the Temple of Solomon or the Second Temple destroyed by Titus, expressing hope for its future reconstruction.

Two Legnica rings were discovered during archaeological and architectural research conducted between 2021 and 2022 in the area bordered by Grodzka, Szpitalna, and Nowa Streets and the Galeria Piastowska building. One bears the MAZAL TOV inscription; the other has a crown in the form of Solomon's Temple. Both are made of brass.

Jewish tradition permitted the use of silver, gold-plated, or even copper rings as symbols of marriage. However, for the marriage to be valid, the groom was required to inform the bride of the ring's actual material. If the bride was unaware of its true value, the marriage was considered invalid.

The use of gold-imitating materials in the Legnica rings suggests they were made for poorer members of the Jewish community. However, the possibility of deliberate deception cannot be excluded. Even today, nearly 600 years later, these rings gleam with a golden hue, suggesting that they were made of precious metal.

Keywords: ring, wedding, Jews, Legnica, brass



Wedding rings have been known since antiquity. In the Roman Empire, they took the form of a wedding ring decorated with clasped hands (Wrześniak 2015:12). In Jewish culture, engagement (*kiddushin*, *erusin*) – during which a ring was given – and the wedding (*nissu'in*) were originally separate ceremonies. Only from the Middle Ages onwards did they begin to occur on the same day (Baumgarten 2023:19). In cases where a woman was ransomed from the family (*mohar*), the symbolic price paid for the bride was one *perutah* (a small coin equivalent to about ½0 g of 925 silver) or its equivalent. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this payment was often made by using a silver or gold ring of a specific form, and from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, presenting such a ring to the bride became an integral part of the wedding ceremony. According to *Halakha*, the ring had to be made of pure gold, without any precious stones, to allow even a layperson to assess its value accurately. This requirement is clearly illustrated in the account of an Ashkenazi Jewish wedding from the year 1400:

Then the Rabbi sang the blessings of betrothal; when he had finished, he called for two witnesses, showed them the ring, and asked, "You see this ring, do you think it has some value?" "Yes", answered the witnesses. [...] Then he bade the witnesses observe that the bridegroom wedded the bride with the formula: "Behold, thou art consecrated unto me by this ring according to the Law of Moses and of Israel". Thereupon the bridegroom placed the ring on the forefinger of the bride's right hand (as cited in Stürzebecher 2022) (Fig. 4).

In practice, however, wedding rings were also made of silver, gold-plated metals, and even cheaper materials like copper. Occasionally, such substitutions were considered fraudulent and could lead to the annulment of a marriage. Wedding rings could take the form of ordinary rings, making them difficult to identify as archaeological artefacts. The only feature mentioned in historical sources is the engraved inscription *MAZAL TOV* (meaning "good luck") (Noy 2022: 89).

This inscription held symbolic meaning in the context of a Jewish marriage. *MAZAL TOV* not only conveyed a wish for happiness but also embodied a belief that its presence would ensure a successful union. To date, only three unquestionably medieval rings bearing this inscription are known. All of them feature a crown in the shape of a miniature building. This architectural motif symbolised not only the creation of a new home for the couple but also – perhaps primarily – the Temple of Solomon or the Second Temple destroyed by Titus, expressing hope for its future reconstruction. All three rings were found in so-called Black Death hoards – deposits concealed during the mid-fourteenth-century plague (Stürzebecher 2020).



**Fig. 1.** Legnica, Grodzka Street. Ring with the inscription *MAZAL TOV*. Drawing by A. Wakulska, photo by W. Łaszewski.



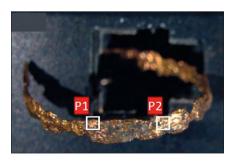
Fig. 2.
Legnica, Grodzka
Street. A ring with
the image of Solomon's
temple. Drawing by
A. Wakulska, photo
by W. Łaszewski.

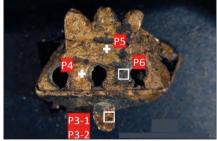


Fig. 3. The Jewish wedding rings from the Erfurt Treasure, Colmar and Weißenfels, early 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Stürzebecher 2020: fig. 3.



**Fig. 4.** Medieval wedding scene from the Second Nuremberg Haggadah (around 1470), Stürzebecher 2022: fig. 1.





 $\textbf{Fig. 5a, b.} \ \, \text{Marked areas of EDS chemical analysis of the ring with Solomon Temple, photo and study by J. Michniewicz.}$ 

Two rings from Legnica were discovered during archaeological and architectural research conducted between 2021 and 2022¹ in the area bordered by Grodzka, Szpitalna, and Nowa Streets and the building of the Galeria Piastowska. These finds were located in layers dating to the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Buśko, Łaszewski 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

The site was inhabited by Jews from at least 1372 (Goliński 2007; Buśko, Łaszewski 2023) and came under the ownership of the Carthusians in the mid-fifteenth century. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, part of the property was occupied by a military hospital adjoining Szpitalna Street. After the Second World War, the buildings in this quarter were progressively demolished, with the exception of one structure in Szpitalna Street, which survived into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the discovered artefacts was identified as a Jewish wedding ring based on the embossed *MAZAL TOV* inscription on its crown. It is made of brass and weighs 1.7 g. The double-conical, hollow crown was assembled from two sheets of forged sheet metal, each 0.2–0.3 mm thick. The shank, with a diameter of 20.8 mm, was crafted from oval wire (1.1–1.4 mm in diameter) drawn manually through a draw-plate. The crown elements were shaped using a die, forming two conical sections (heights: 0.5 and 3.5 mm; base diameter: 13.7 mm). The upper cone was decorated using two dies – one produced a circular meander pattern on the side, and the other engraved the inscription מול (MAZAL TOV) around a smaller base (12 mm in diameter). The decoration included also a single drop of solder below the letter 1 in the word מוב possibly to indicate to the illiterate the correct orientation for wearing the ring.

On the lower, undecorated cone of the crown, two opposite slits (1.4 mm and 2.2 mm wide) were cut and bent inwards. The ends of the ring were inserted into these slits and soldered from the inside. After both parts of the crown were joined with solder, the seam was filed smooth (Fig. 1).

The use of pre-made dies to make the ring suggests the possibility of serial production. While the crown's shape and ornamentation remained fixed, the ring's diameter could be adjusted to fit the wearer's finger.

The ring found in the Erfurt treasure was made using a similar method – mass-produced elements were joined by soldering (Stürzebecher 2020: 73–74).

The second Legnica ring has a crown in the form of the Temple of Solomon. Made of brass, it weighs 4.92 g, equivalent to ½ skojec of the Cologne mark.

<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted by the consortium of "ARCHEOLOGIA B.C." Cezary Busko and "VERBA" Witold Łaszewski on behalf of RITEX Development. Due to a lack of agreement with the investor regarding excavation terms, work ended in early August 2021. It was continued by the team from the "Archaeology" studio led by Piotr Czajkowski, M.A., to whom we extend our thanks for providing access to unpublished materials.

The crown, reaching a height of 12.4 mm, was constructed by soldering two polyhedrons (pyramid frustums) with rectangular bases (15.4 mm x 9.5 mm and 10 mm x 4.3 mm) and trapezoidal sides. The upper section is topped with a 4.3 mm crest featuring three partially sawn pinnacles. The lower base, round, is pierced with outwards-flaring holes (2 mm in diameter) – three on the long walls and one on the short walls. Each hole is undercut with a rectangular slit, creating a keyhole-like shape. Two openings in the lower section allow for the insertion of a 2.5 mm wide and 0.5 mm thick forged wire ring, fastened with solder. Both crown elements were cast using the *cire perdue* method. Traces of fire patina (?) are visible as black spots on various parts of the ring (Fig. 2).

Of the three known medieval Jewish wedding rings (Fig. 3), the earliest was discovered between 1823 and 1826 in the Weissenfels hoard (Wiggert 1844; Sauerlandt 1919). A crown in the shape of a house with a gabled roof bearing the *MAZAL TOV* inscription was mounted on a plain ring. The ogival arcades formed openwork walls, and the roof featured triangular cut-outs and small pinnacles. Inside were silver petals that produced sound with every movement. Made of gilded silver, the ring dates to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Stürzebecher 2022).

The second ring was found in 1863 in the Colmar hoard (*Le Tréson...* 1999). Made of gold with enamel decoration, this simple ring with lion heads or monsters on the shoulders features a crown in the form of a hexagonal building covered with a pyramidal six-slope roof. The walls are formed by semicircular filigree arcades, and the roof is decorated with alternating red and translucent green enamel framing the *MAZAL TOV* inscription in relief. Four-leaf flowers conceal the solder points. It is also dated to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Stürzebecher 2022).

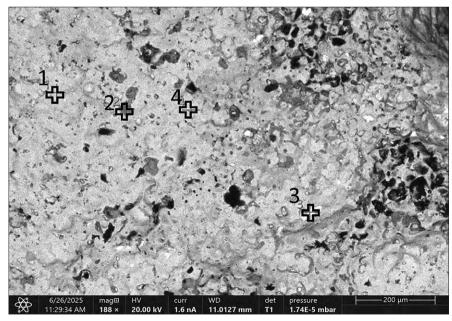
A similar gold ring, part of the Erfurt hoard discovered in 1998, is decorated with a motif of clasped hands at its base and arms in the shape of winged dragons supporting a six-sided building. The tracery walls and gabled roofs are adorned with openwork trefoils and pinnacles. The engraved inscription *MAZAL TOV* appears on the roof, and a golden ball inside the crown produces a sound when moved (Stürzebecher 2022). The Erfurt ring weighs 23 g and consists of 85–88% pure gold, which corresponds to a fineness of 850–880 (Mecking 2010: 95).

The chemical composition of both Legnica rings was analysed using a Thermo Fisher Scientific Apreo 2 scanning microscope, with a backscattered electron detector (BSE) and a microanalyzer of chemical composition (EDS) (accelerating voltage: 20 kV). The irregular ring shapes resulted in variable working distances.

In the case of the ring with Solomon's Temple, the analysis included the ring itself ( $P_1$ ,  $P_2$  – Fig. 5a), fragments of the ring attached to the crown ( $P_3$ –I;  $P_3$ –I – Fig. 5b), and the crown's gilded areas (I4, I5), a patch of dark patina (I6), and the gilded area covered with patina ("Field").

Tab I Chemical	composition of t	he ring with	the temple	of Salaman
iub. i. Chemica	composition of t	ne mig with	the temple	of Solomon.

Element Wt. (%)	Ring		Ring joint		Crown			
	P1	P2	P3-1	P3-2	P4	P5	P6	Field
Cu	92,6	92,8	90,8	79,7	81,3	81,1	58,2	72,4
Sn	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,6	5,4	6,6	13,1	8,4
Pb	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0	2,7	3,0	8,2	6,0
Zn	5,1	5,3	6,0	4,7	8,0	7,2	7,2	6,1
Fe	0,8	1,1	0,6	0,6	1,4	1,7	2,1	2,1
S	0,6	0,4	0,6	11,3	0,6	0,0	9,1	3,1
Al	0,8	0,5	0,0	0,2	0,0	0,3	0,4	0,2
Ca	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,9	0,2	0,0	0,8	0,3
Si	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,0	0,0	0,0	1,1	0,8
Cl	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,6



 $\textbf{Fig. 6.} \ \ Backscattered \ electron \ (BSE) \ image \ of the surface \ fragment \ of the ring \ with \ the \ Temple \ of \ Solomon \ fragment, \ with \ Eds \ point \ analysis.$ 

Tab. II. Composition of the chemical	l phases within t	the crown of the	ring with the temple
of Solomon.	•		

Element (Wt. %)	P1	P2	Р3	P4
Cu	86	48,1	29	85,4
Zn	6,9	4,8	3,2	7,1
S	0,9	11,4	0	0
Fe	2,1	1,2	0	1
Sn	4,2	5,8	3,4	6,4
As	0	0,9	5,7	0
Al	0	1	0,3	0
Si	0	1,5	0	0
Cl	0	0,8	0	0
Ca	0	19,8	0,6	0
Pb	0	4,5	57,7	0

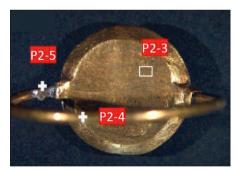


Fig. 7. Marked areas of EDS chemical analysis of the surface of the ring with the inscription *MAZAL TOV*, photo and study by J. Michniewicz.



**Fig. 8.** Marked areas of EDS chemical analysis of the bottom of the ring with the inscription *MAZAL TOV*, photo and study by J. Michniewicz.

The analysis results revealed significant compositional differences between the ring and the crown. The ring is made of copper with a consistent 5% zinc content – possibly derived from the zinc-bearing chalcopyrite (CuFeS2) or sphalerite (ZnS) (cf. Bolewski, Manecki 1993; Siuda, Gołębiewska 2011; Tomaszewska-Szewczyk 2016). The crown is made of a heterogeneous alloy with slightly higher

zinc (7-8%) and tin (5-6%) content. Besides the dominant copper-zinc phase (Fig. 6, points P1, P4), grey areas of sulphides (P2) and lead (P3) were also identified. The presence of arsenic (As) is also noteworthy.

Also important is the fact of a slightly different composition of dark patina (Fig. – P6), which had elevated levels of tin and lead, along with sulphur – possibly from secondary liquefaction due to fire (?).

Analysis of the *MAZAL TOV* ring turned out to be complicated due to conservation treatments, possibly wax coatings, which obscured BSE imaging by increasing the carbon content. For this reason, chemical composition analyses were conducted after the varnish had been removed. The examined areas included the crown surface  $(P_{2-1a}, b)$ , the crown side  $(P_{2-2a}, b)$ , the base plate  $(P_{2-3a}, b)$ , the ring  $(P_{2-4})$ , and the solder joint between the ring and the crown  $(P_{2-5})$ , cf. Fig. 7, Fig. 8).

**Tab. III.** Chemical composition of the ring with the inscription *MAZAL TOV*.

	Cro	own	Crown	- side	Crown -	-bottom	Ring	Weld
Element Wt. (%)	P2-1a	P2-1b	P2-2a	P2-2b	P2-3a	P2-3b	P2-4	P2-5
Cu	74,4	67	73,7	77,1	78,4	87,7	73,6	9,9
Sn	0	0	0	0	10,1	3,2	0	60,5
Pb	0	0	0,8	0	0	0	2,2	10,4
Zn	23,2	23,8	23,9	22,9	8,1	8,7	20,9	1,9
Fe	0,8	2,4	0	0	0	0	2,1	1,2
Ni	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5,4
S	1,2	4,2	1,6	0	2,5	0	0,8	0
Ca	0,4	1,4	0	0	0,9	0	0	2,6
P	0	0,7	0	0	0	0	0	0
Al.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,4	2,5
Cl	0	0,5	0	0	0	0	0	0

The results indicate that the ring was made of brass: both ring and crown consist of an alloy of copper (approx. 73%) and zinc (20%). The base of the ring was made of sheet metal with a significantly lower zinc content (approx. 8% by weight). Tin found there may have been contamination introduced during repair. The solder joint was tin-based with approx. 10% lead and traces of gold.

As mentioned earlier, Jewish tradition permitted silver (gilded) or copper rings as valid symbols of marriage. Nevertheless, since marriage was a legal act, it often became the subject of rabbinical rulings regarding the ring's material and value. It had to belong to the groom and became the bride's property when placed on her finger.

Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi, late 11<sup>th</sup> century) considered a marriage valid if the ring – though gilded silver – had recognised value, even if the bride did not know the material. However, around 200 years later, Rabbi Mordechai Kimhi ruled that a marriage with a gilded silver ring could be invalid if the bride had been misled to believe it was pure gold (Stürzebecher 2020: 76–78).

A similar view was expressed by the thirteenth-century rabbi Meir (Maharam) of Rothenburg, who valued the bridegroom's intentions over the actual worth of the wedding gift. If the groom, upon presenting a copper ring, declared, "I pledge you with this ring" instead of "I pledge you with this ring of gold", there was no fraud, and the marriage was valid. However, if the bridegroom, the witnesses, or even the goldsmith asserted that the ring was made of gold, and it was later discovered to be copper, the marriage was deemed invalid (Stürzebecher 2022).

The use of gold-imitating materials in the Legnica rings suggests they were made for poorer members of the Jewish community. However, the possibility of deliberate deception cannot be excluded. Even today, nearly 600 years later, these rings gleam with a golden hue, suggesting that they were made of precious metal<sup>2</sup>.

THE PERCENTAGE SHARE OF THE AUTHOR IN THE PREPARATION OF THE WORK: CB 34%, WŁ 33%, JM 33%

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<sup>2</sup> We learned this the hard way, having assumed – based solely on visual inspection – that the metal buckle discovered at the site was made of gold or of copper plated with a mercury-gold amalgam (Buśko, Łaszewski 2023). However, specialist analyses revealed no trace of gold. The object was composed almost entirely of copper (93.23%), with only a small admixture of iron. A similar misidentification occurred with the material of the ring depicting Solomon's Temple (Buśko 2021).

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#### Streszczenie

Pierścienie zaślubinowe znane są już od czasów starożytnych. W imperium rzymskim przybierały one formę obrączki ozdobionej połączonymi w uścisku. W kulturze żydowskiej początkowo zaręczyny (kiddushin, erusin) – na których wręczano pierścień – i ślub (nissu'in) były odrębnymi ceremoniami, a dopiero od początków XIII w. przekazanie pierścienia pannie młodej staje się integralną częścią ceremonii ślubnych. Według Halachy

pierścień taki musiał być wykonany wyłącznie z czystego złota. Jednakże w praktyce używano także biżuterii wykonanej ze srebra i pozłacanej oraz miedzianej. Pierścienie zaślubinowe mogły mieć formę zwykłej obrączki i w takich przypadkach niemożliwa jest ich identyfikacja w materiale zabytkowym. Jedyną cechą charakterystyczną zanotowaną w źródłach pisanych jest obecność wygrawerowanego na nich napisu MAZAL TOV.

Napis *MAZAL TOV* to nie tylko życzenia szczęścia, ale i wiara, że użycie pierścienia zapewni udany związek. Jak do tej pory znamy tylko trzy bezspornie średniowieczne pierścienie z takim napisem – z Weissenfels, Colmar i Erfurtu, wchodzące w skład skarbów ukrytych w trakcie epidemii dżumy w połowie wieku XIV. Wszystkie mają koronę w kształcie miniaturowego budynku. Symbolizuje on nie tylko budowę nowego domu młodej pary, lecz także – o ile nie przede wszystkim – świątynię Salomona lub też Drugą Świątynię zburzoną przez Tytusa i nadzieję na jej odbudowę w przyszłości.

Dwa pierścienie legnickie odkryto w trakcie badań archeologiczno-architektonicznych prowadzonych w latach 2021–2022 w kwartale zabudowy ograniczonym ul. Grodzką, Szpitalną i Nową oraz budynkiem Galerii Piastowskiej. Jeden z nich nosi napis *MAZAL TOV*, zaś drugi ma koronę w kształcie świątyni Salomona, a oba wykonane są z mosiądzu.

W tradycji żydowskiej możliwym było wręczenie oblubienicy srebrnego lecz pozłacanego, a także i miedzianego pierścienia jako symbolu zawarcia małżeństwa. Jednakże aby małżeństwo było ważne, pan młody powinien powiadomić oblubienicę, z jakiego surowca pierścień jest wykonany. Gdy panna młoda nie była świadoma rzeczywistej wartości pierścienia, małżeństwo było nieważne.

Surowiec jedynie imitujący złoto wykorzystany do wykonania legnickich pierścieni sugeruje, iż przeznaczone one były dla uboższych warstw żydowskiej społeczności. Nie należy jednakże wykluczać możliwości wykorzystania ich w celu dokonania oszustwa. Nawet dziś, po upływie prawie sześciuset lat od zdeponowania, lśnią one złotym blaskiem, sugerując, iż wykonane zostały właśnie z tego szlachetnego surowca.

Słowa kluczowe: pierścień, ślub, Żydzi, Legnica, mosiądz

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