

Late medieval religious and secular badges

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Badges (religious and secular); apotropaic; mass-production; pilgrimage; database

The banderole text of two almost identical fourteenth century pewter badges, found in Paris (fig. 1; 2), in the form of a dog, reads 'bien aia qui me porte' (Well being to him who wears me). This inscription informs us about the significance of late medieval brooches, both secular and religious ones: not meaningless, but apotropaic, supposed to avert evil and bring luck. At the same time the mostly mass-produced and at the time very cheap ornaments reflected the wearer's real or wished status.

A fact that has only recently emerged from the vast amount of finds, especially in the Low Countries, is that in the Middle Ages there was a tremendous variety of mass-produced, cheap jewellery ranging from devotionalia to erotic brooches. Little research has been devoted to the imagery depicted by these 'poor mans' jewels.

Closer research of these mass-produced images will redefine our view of the medieval culture. The mass-production of images is, until now, linked with the invention of printing. The staggering amount of images not limited socially nor geographically and originating long before the invention of printing, must have

been very important by the dissemination of iconography and ideas in the late Middle Ages. Four years ago the Catholic University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands) started to develop an international, computerised database containing medieval badges (the name of the project is KUNera). The database contains medieval badges from all over Europe. The largest part is made of a cheap tin lead alloy. A smaller group consists of copper, silver or gilded silver. Seventy-three percent of the items included in the database has a religious meaning. The greater part are pilgrim souvenirs. Twenty percent has a secular meaning and of 7% of the items it is not clear if the meaning is religious or secular. Ampullae are included as well as related pilgrim souvenirs like the shells from Santiago de Compostela. This paper serves as an introduction to this database, its purpose and its contents.

Badges and related objects

The contents of the database can be divided into two main groups: the preserved originals and the contemporary sources that give prima-



Figure 1 (left).



Figure 2 (right).

ry information about badges. In both categories a further distinction can be made. The first of these – the preserved originals – includes badges of a religious and a profane nature. Besides badges that originated from a specific site of pilgrimage, there was also a large production of tokens that cannot be attributed to an identified place, for example badges with well-known saints like Christopher, Catherine and Barbara, or crucifixes. Last but not least, there's a large group of pins and brooches that does not seem to depict any religious topic whatsoever. The range of subjects is extremely wide: from historical or literary figures to heraldic signs, from erotica to representations of animals, plants or utensils.

These so-called 'profane' badges should also be recorded in the database. The functioning of profane insignia in the Middle Ages remains highly unclear, but there seem to have been similarities with the way religious badges functioned. For example, the erotic badges had a similar apotropaic element. The heraldic badges identified the bearer as the pilgrim badges did, not as pilgrims but as members of a specific political group or family. Our view of medieval life and the use of badges would be very limited, if we only studied the religious examples. An additional reason to include all three types – pilgrim badges, religious and profane badges – is the simple fact that a clear distinction between the three groups cannot be made.

The second group is made up of the contemporary sources telling us about badges and the way they functioned during the Middle Ages: moulds of badges, casts (for example on bells, baptismal fonts or tin cans), visual sources (the depictions of badges on paintings, statues, in the margins of manuscripts and so on) and textual sources like archives, travel guides or reports by pilgrims. These additional sources are indispensable for an identification of incomplete or unclear badges.

There's a restriction in time, however. As the starting point we have chosen the year 1000. The production of cheap lead tin badges began with the rise of mass-pilgrimage. The rise of mass-pilgrimage, on its turn, is closely related to the rise of Santiago de Compostela as a place of pilgrimage. At the end of the eleventh century Santiago was well known all over Europe. The places on the route to Santiago became sites of pilgrimage themselves. During the twelfth century, pilgrim badges were al-

ready manufactured on a large scale and over a vast geographical area. After the Reformation, during the sixteenth century, the production dropped considerably and the metal badges were replaced by other kinds of souvenirs. Consequently, the year 1600 serves as the terminus of the database.

Purpose of the database

The reasons for a documentation of medieval badges and ampullae are twofold. On the one hand, it serves as an aid for scientific research. Researchers always come across the same problems when studying badges. Especially the distribution of the material and the inaccessibility of specific collections are recurring obstacles. An elaborate survey is essential for a more profound study of medieval pilgrimage in general and pilgrim badges in particular. Furthermore, a computerised database has several advantages. It makes sure the researcher can approach the recorded material in several ways. It facilitates the gathering and retrieval of data, the reconstruction of objects and inscriptions and the documentation and arrangement of the material. The stylistic development of a specific type of badge is more clearly visible. Statistics and surveys can be put together relatively easy. The database can also be used for educational purposes as well. On the other hand, a thorough registration is urgently needed, because of the vulnerability of the material. Once excavated, badges and other lead or pewter objects suffer from external influences like oxygen, which causes oxidation. Details gradually disappear and inscriptions become illegible. Important information is only preserved, if documented in an early stage. This drawing of an ampulla, now in the Musée de Cluny in Paris, was made shortly after its discovery in 1861–62 (fig. 3). The photograph was taken more than a century later (fig. 4). The loss of information would have been immense had Forgeais not documented the item at an early stage.

State of affairs

At this point in time, several large collections have been recorded in the database. The KUNera-database now contains over 7000 items. The contents are still growing. Because



Figure 3 (left).

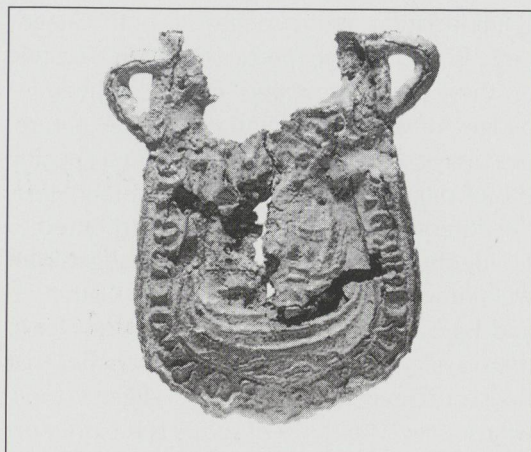


Figure 4 (right).

of the vastness of the material the goals of the project had to be revised. As for now we chose variety over quantity. This means that a new type of badge or ampulla has preference over yet another shell from Santiago or Vera Icon from Rome.

Thanks to a research-grant from the NWO (Academic Research Netherlands) we are able to

continue our research for another four years. We have the intention to launch our database on the Internet so the public, researchers, interested persons, archaeologists and amateur-archaeologists can consult it. Furthermore, we have the intention to establish an international registration-centre for finds of medieval badges and ampullae.

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