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Medieval Medicine, Magic, and Water: *The dilemma of deliberate deposition of pilgrim signs*

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Becket's death at Canterbury in 1170 initiated yet another pan-European cult. These famous holy places were only a few of literally thousands of European shrines, each attracting its 'own' pilgrims. Pilgrimage accelerated with the pace of life until it was ingrained tradition by the twelfth century, and it remains one of the hallmarks of the Middle Ages, like the fairs of Champagne, the Bayeaux Tapestry, the Quest for the Grail, the Black Prince.

Finucane 1977, 39.

Introduction and Approach

Although pilgrim signs have appeared in archaeological literature since the mid- nineteenth century [Smith 1846], most analyses have been descriptive and not interpretive [Koldeweij 1999]. Other important characteristics of these artifacts have been neglected, and deserve more exploration, such as the reason why such a large proportion of pilgrim signs have been found in watery contexts. Many have remarked about the curious fact that pilgrim signs seem to turn up in watery contexts, but no one has yet explored this or other questions in depth. This lack of interpretive analysis may be due to the fact that these artifacts were mass-produced and made of base metals, and are thus perceived to be of low value. This article will show that despite this perceived low value, these objects were seen as extremely valuable to those who wore them. Another reason for the lack of interpretive analysis is that, until recently, the data sources within Great Britain were scattered. It is only within the past decade that the evidence has been brought together in an accessible form, specifically with the publishing of three catalogues by Brian Spencer, from collections in Norfolk, Salisbury, and London. With these, a serious effort at interpretive analysis can now proceed.

The article will examine pilgrimage by compiling a data set of pilgrim signs from archaeological excavations in England, Ireland, and Scotland, primarily from the work of Brian Spencer. The data sample consists of 420 pilgrim signs, and the total known number of signs found in England is approximately several thousand. However, the data sample represents the majority of signs discovered by archaeological excavations with a secure find context, which is relevant to the present study. Furthermore, these pilgrim signs represent a small proportion of the total number of shrines that existed in the medieval period. There are many shrines for which no pilgrim sign has been found, including many which have been described as receiving large numbers of pilgrims, such

as Regensburg in Germany [Spencer 1968, 139]. [1] This problem however is inherent in the nature of archaeological investigation.

Function and Context

A pilgrim sign may be defined as a religious token, believed to possess thaumaturgic powers, acquired by a pilgrim at a shrine. It was worn by the pilgrim while undergoing the journey. Although some signs were made of precious metal such as gold and silver, the majority of pilgrim signs produced were a tin-lead alloy and formed from being cast in moulds, while some were merely stamped from thin sheets of metal, referred to as bracteate [Spencer 1998, 4]. Pilgrim signs were produced in two main forms. Ampullae, the most popular type of pilgrim sign in England from the 12th to the 14th century, were hollow containers that contained holy water or some other liquid. (Figure 1) and were worn as a necklace. The other type were badges attached to a pilgrim's clothing, usually on a hat or purse, by being stitched on through a couple of holes or by a pin to clothing. Most English badges were attached with a pin, while most continental forms were stitched to the wearer's clothing. [Spencer 1998, 4] To avoid confusion, when referring to both badges and ampullae, the term “pilgrim sign” shall be employed. Whenever one type of pilgrim sign is being discussed, the appropriate term, “badge” or “ampullae” shall be used.

Figure 1

On the continent, pilgrim signs were first associated with the pilgrimage to the shrine of St James at Santiago, Spain. For reasons which are not clear to us today, the scallop shell was used by Santiago pilgrims to identify themselves as such, sewing the shell onto their pilgrim bag or hat [Spencer 1968]. With the advent of Canterbury as a pilgrimage destination in the 12th century came the origins of pilgrim signs in England. St. Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury was the most popular shrine in England throughout the late medieval period, attracting not only native English, but many foreigners, as attested in historical accounts and the large number of Canterbury signs found on the continent [Koldeweij 1992]. After the holy martyr’s death, some forward thinking monks saved his spilled blood and preserved it in a well, where it became infinitely diluted, yet undiminished, in power. It is the water from this well that was sold in the first pilgrim signs, ampullae, in England. Other sites in England associated with pilgrimage imitated this practice and ampullae were the dominant form of pilgrim sign until the fourteenth century.

Other artifacts associated with pilgrims include the traditional attire worn by a pilgrim: the hat, boots, water bottle, staff, and scrip, or knapsack. These last two items were sometimes blessed at Mass before the pilgrim set out on their journey [Finucane 1977, 41]. Pilgrim signs, however, differ from all these other objects in one important aspect; they were considered to be relics themselves, having obtained the virtue, or

[1] However, a mold for the Regensburg badges is known. See Denis Bruna, *Enseignes de Pèlerinages et Enseignes Profanes* (Paris, 1996), p. 354.

power, of the saint by coming into physical contact with the shrine or the actual relics [Spencer 1968]. This ability for the miracle working properties of relics to be passed by physical contact, a sort of holy "radioactivity," is well attested in the miracle lists recorded at the shrines [Finucane 1977].

Due to the miracle-working ability attributed to pilgrim signs, they were used in medieval magic and medicine. Relic water from ampullae was often used in hope of effecting cures at home, [Finucane 1977, 94] and many pilgrims donated pilgrim signs to their local church, and these were kept ready in case the need arose for a cure for the sick or dying [Spencer 1978, 238]. The value of pilgrim signs as secondary relics with thaumaturgic powers is attested by contemporary documents. Lists of church valuables at Pilton, Somerset and the bridge chapel at Bridgenorth include pilgrim signs [Spencer 1978, 247].

Other magic-making abilities are apparent in the archaeological record in the discovery of pilgrim signs as foundation deposits [Merrifield 1975, 34] and their incorporation into church bells [Spencer 1998]. Medieval folk belief held that placing magic items under the foundation when building a new house protected a dwelling from evil. It was also believed that the loud clang of church bells warded off evil. Badge designs were integrated into church bells to amplify this ability.

Pilgrim signs are loaded with meaning, some explicit, others implicit. The most obvious meaning of a pilgrim sign is that it represents a specific saint and shrine, by incorporating images of the saint or inscriptions of their name. Many 13th century Canterbury ampullae have inscribed on them the phrase: OPTIMUS EGRORUM MEDICUS FIT TOMA BONORUM ("Thomas is the best doctor of the holy sick"). Another popular form of Canterbury badge portrays the reliquary bust of Thomas Becket, (Figure 2) which contained the skull fragment relics of the holy martyr. This reliquary was displayed prominently to the pilgrims near the shrine and served as a climax of their visit. After ampullae fell out of fashion in the 14th century, this badge was the most popular form of Canterbury sign [Spencer 1968].

Not all badges copied reliquaries, rather they depicted symbols or objects associated with certain saints, such as the wheel of Saint Catherine. (Figure 3) Others portrayed secondary relics of the saints kept at their shrine, such as the gloves of Thomas Becket (Figure 4) or the instrument of Becket's martyrdom, a sword. (Figure 5) Many of these latter signs exemplify the finest craftsmanship, as they were created as elaborate and detailed miniature swords complete with scabbard. All these images were part of a well-established iconography that would have been familiar to the medieval person, and each pilgrim would have had a wide variety of images to choose from at the stalls outside the shrines that sold pilgrim signs. However, not all of them are immediately clear to us today, thus many signs cannot be assigned to a particular shrine or saint.

Figure 1

(Courtesy of Brian North Lee)

Figure 3

Figure 2

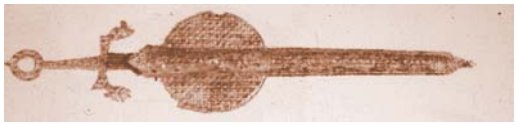

Figure 3

Findspots, Water, and Pilgrim Signs

Badges are found overwhelmingly in watery contexts. This curious depositional context is not exclusive to England. A large number of pilgrim signs have been found in watery contexts at towns along continental European rivers such as the Seine, the Somme, the Loire, the Saone, the ScheIdt, the Meuse, and the Weser [Spencer 1978, 238]. It bas been pointed out that due to the material that most badges are made of, lead, they are more likely to survive in watery contexts [Spencer 1968, 1998]. This may account for part of the explanation as to why they are found in water, but I believe that there is more to it than that. Brian Spencer has noted that very few badges have been found on inland sites in London, and they are conspicuously absent from sites where it might be expected for them to be found where conditions allow for their preservation, such as the City Ditch and wells and rubbish pits [Spencer 1998, 25]. The only locations in England where a substantial amount of pilgrim badges have been found on land are Norwich [Margeson 1993] and Winchester [Spencer 1990b]. These are the only sites in England where more badges have been found on land than in watery contexts. However, the Norwich sample is composed of seven badges, while the Winchester sample is four badges. Spencer posited that, perhaps the obligatory spot where pilgrims would cast their badges into the river at Winchester has not yet been found.

A likely candidate for such a spot has been found at Canterbury [Spencer 2000]. In the 1980's a group of metal detectorists investigated the Stour River at the exact spot where returning pilgrims would first encounter it, (Figure 6), at Eastgate Bridge adjacent to the hospital for pilgrims, which remains standing to this day. They recovered

over 200 pilgrim badges before being ordered to halt by the authorities. These badges were viewed and hastily recorded by Brian Spencer before being put up for auction. The total lack of any early badges has left Spencer to believe that the river was dredged in the late 14th/early 15th century. Another cause for the lack of early badges could be that badges were recycled, which is attested by written sources [Spencer 1968].

Figure 6

Badges are also conspicuously absent at other locations where one would expect to find them. On long distance pilgrimages, pilgrims often stayed at hospitals, many of which were originally founded specifically to host pilgrims. Thus, medieval hospitals would be one place where one might expect to find pilgrim badges. However, a review of several medieval hospital excavations uncovered a paucity of pilgrim badges. The excavations reviewed include: St Mary's Hospital, Strood [Harrison 1970]; St James and St Mary Magdalene, Chichester [Lee & Magilton 1989]; St Mary Ospringe [Rigold 1964, Spencer 1980], SS Stephen & Thomas, New Romney [Rigold 1964]; Tintern Abbey [Courtney 1989]; St Bartholomew's, London [Ponsford and Price 1998]; St Giles, Brompton Bridge [Cardwell 1995]; and St Mary Spital, London [Thomas, Sloane, and Philpotts 1998]. St Mary 0springe, commonly called Maison Dieu, and St Giles, Brompton Bridge, were the only excavations that reported any pilgrim badges. Finds from non-archaeological circumstances are also predominantly recovered from watery contexts. The “core” collection of the Museum of London (finds that do not come from formal archaeological excavation) consists of 1021 medieval badges, of which 739 are pilgrim signs and the rest are secular badges. Of the 739 pilgrim signs, 45% have the Thames as the find spot, with most of the remainder from riverside sites [John Clark; pers. comm.]. However, the medieval secular badges have a similar distribution of find spots.

In comparison, not many signs have been found in watery contexts throughout the rest of the British Isles. However, the total number of signs found outside of England is very low. Only eighteen badges have been found in Scotland, most of them on land and in Perth. Only six have been found in Ireland. To my knowledge, no pilgrim signs have

been found in Wales. Two of the Irish badges come from burials at St. Mary's Cathedral, Tuam, Co. Galway. The other published pilgrims badges from Ireland were all found in Dublin. Three are from English shrines, two ampullae from Canterbury and one ampulla from Worcester. The other sign is a badge from Rome [Spencer 1988]. It has been suggested that the lack of badges from watery contexts in Scotland might be explained by the amount of archaeological investigation in Perth and relative lack of archaeological inquiry into rivers and the paucity of dredging compared to the amount of this type of work done in England [Yeoman, pers. comm.]

One problem with the suggestion of pilgrim signs being intentionally deposited in water is the fact that these objects were perceived as having magical properties, and thus very valuable. Yet, if pilgrim signs were valuable, why would pilgrims dispose of them by throwing them in the water? Documentary evidence shows that pilgrims were in the habit of purchasing more than one badge. Therefore it is conceivable that pilgrims who purchased more than one badge did so with the intention of disposing of one by throwing it into water. There was no practical difficulty for pilgrims in complying with two contradictory beliefs, one calling for keeping a pilgrim sign, and the other requiring its deposition [Spencer 1978, 250].

Unfortunately, there are no accounts in contemporary literature that describe pilgrims disposing of their signs in rivers. Assuming that this is deliberate, it is likely that there was no single motivating factor, rather many reasons for doing this. In the archaeological literature pertaining to pilgrim signs, it has been suggested that this was sort of an offering of thanksgiving for a safe return from the dangerous journey [Spencer 1998]. The practice of depositing metal objects in water in other time periods, such as the Bronze Age [Bradley 1998] and Iron Age [Fitzpatrick 1984], is well established. In these periods, it was primarily weapons that were deposited in water. Because these are prehistoric periods, there are no contemporary documents that explain why people did this, yet the traditional interpretation is that the practice was intentional and done for ritual purposes as some sort of votive deposit. Votive deposits were also carried out during the Roman period at places like Bath [Cunliffe 1988]. Throwing special metal objects into the water may be some sort of universal practice occurring throughout many cultures. Even today, this ritual is carried out with wishing wells, where people throw coins into water. People in medieval times may have been aware of these earlier practices if they found these artifacts in the river, just as we continue to do today. They became aware that people in the past had placed metal artifacts in water and thought it was appropriate for them to do so as well. That secular badges show a similar distribution of depositional context as pilgrim signs suggests that more than just religious motives for disposing of badges in the water were at work. It supports the argument that one of the motives for this ritual was a cultural awareness that special metal artifacts should be deposited in water.

Perhaps it is related to the universal symbolism of water. Water is essential to life and is often perceived as an element of cleansing and healing, precisely the same qualities associated with shrines, relics, and pilgrim signs. As mentioned earlier, many shrines were associated with holy wells, which is one reason why ampullae were the dominant form of early pilgrim signs in England. Veneration of many holy wells date to before the Christian period [Rattue 1995]. If this pagan practice continued into the

Christian period, it is not inconceivable that votive deposits could have also continued. If pilgrims were throwing their signs into water, they may not have been able to consciously express why they did so, except than to say that it is what they thought it appropriate, due to many motivating factors in the ritual.

If pilgrim signs were offerings of thanksgiving for a completed journey, then it can be said that pilgrim signs encompass the entire scope of pilgrimage. A journey is not complete until one has returned home. So depositing a pilgrim sign at the end of a journey places the sign in the same location of the beginning of the journey. The pilgrim sign ended up at the point from which the owner had set out on pilgrimage [Spencer 1990b]. Thus, the pilgrim sign deposited as thanks for safe return is found at the site of both the beginning and end of a pilgrimage, and at the same time its imagery represents the goal of the journey. Therefore the start, climax, and conclusion of the pilgrimage are found in the context and imagery of the sign. Water also acts as a symbolic and physical boundary marker. It is the border between the city and the country, civilization and wilderness, inside society and outside society. The river itself is between the two and thus, can be described is liminal. Consequently, upon returning from a pilgrimage, before re-entering normal society, as one crosses the threshold, the pilgrim performs a ritual by throwing the sign of their liminal period into the water. This supports Turner's model of pilgrimage as analogous to a rite of passage discussed in the next section.

Archaeology and the anthropology of pilgrimage

The work of Victor Turner is the seminal work within the anthropology of pilgrimage. While it focused primarily on contemporary Christian pilgrimage, it is relevant to medieval pilgrimage. Turner described pilgrimage as a sort of rite of passage. However, within Christianity, it is a voluntary rite, though heavily encouraged and practiced, especially in medieval Europe. Using Van Gennep's model of the rite of passage, Turner portrayed pilgrimage as a period of liminality, a separation from conventional society punctuated by rituals of separation and reintegration. During this period there is a reversal of the status quo, the normal rules and social barriers that govern society are broken down or reversed and those undergoing the experience, experience *communitas*. All are seen as equal and achieve a higher level of maturity or some other form of spiritual growth.

Many of the characteristics of Turner's theory can be found in an interpretation of the archaeology of pilgrimage described in this article. Pilgrims were separate from mainstream society. During the Middle Ages the majority of the population, especially the lower classes, was not very mobile, spending most of their lives not very far from where they were born. For many, pilgrimage was a rare opportunity to leave their home, family, and friends. Pilgrimage was unique in that it was perhaps the only chance to travel available to everyone, no matter what their class.

This separation from society did involve an appropriate rite in church liturgy. Various rites of blessings for intending pilgrims were practiced at Salisbury, York, Hereford, and other English cathedrals. According to Finucane, these rites have been compared by some French historian-sociologists to rites of separation as described in Van Gennep's model [1977, 41]. The pilgrim signs worn by travelers, in addition to their attire, marked them as pilgrims and separate from society, and therefore immune from

political-military conflicts between countries wherever they traveled, as described above.

The normal rules of society were not applicable during pilgrimage. This is illustrated by pilgrims renouncing possession of material goods and living on charity, though usually discouraged within mainstream society. This aspect of pilgrimage caused problems in the late medieval period, as some people dressed up as pilgrims so that they could receive offerings, even though they never went to any shrines. Many used pilgrim badges purchased from others to show as "proof" of their journey [Spencer 1968].

One part of Turner's theory that does not seem to hold true is the breakdown of social barriers. Although people from all classes practiced pilgrimage, these class barriers seem to have remained. Many wealthy pilgrims purchased badges made of precious metals, such as the silver gilt badge of St. Nicholas found near Bradford.[2] These expensive badges are well attested to by documentary evidence. For example, Philip the Good and Charles the Bold, Dukes of Burgundy, purchased badges of gold, silver-gilt, silver, and pewter. Many of these were for members of their retinue, who were given badges of value that matched their rank. Charles VIII of France purchased 42 gold and silver signs from the shrine of Our Lady of Embrun. However, not all noblemen wore pilgrim signs made of precious metal. Louis XI of France is known to have worn a lead badge [Spencer 1998, 12]. Thus, while the social barriers while not completely dissolved, they were relaxed a bit. This relaxation of social barriers is demonstrated in the lodging of pilgrims at inns and hospices, which were not segregated according to the normal social barriers of society. Indeed, access to the area within most shrines was open to people of any social status, while outside of shrines, access to special areas was limited according to social status.

When pilgrims arrived at the shrine, they practiced more rituals. Upon arrival, they often followed a prescribed route through the shrine to view the various relics on display. The route was usually laid out so as to cause minimal disturbance to the normal proceedings of a church and its clergy. The church architecture of the medieval period was often designed to accommodate the housing of relics. During the visit to the shrine, pilgrims would leave their votive offerings. This was usually in the form of coins or wax. It was customary when making a vow of pilgrimage to bend a coin to represent the vow, and to give that particular coin as one's offer. This was usually done when some tragedy had been averted, such as ships surviving fierce storms or when a family member having been revived from death. Wax candles were also common offerings for this type of miracle. Wax offerings also took the form of body parts that had been inflicted with ailments but had been cured through an invocation of a particular saint. The cured person would then go to the shrine of said saint for thanksgiving. For these pilgrims, who had already received a miracle, or those just going on pilgrimage for the sake of pilgrimage, once the offering had been made, then they would hear Mass, and then journey home. Those who were ill and hoped for a cure would find a comfortable spot in the church and wait.

If the model of Van Gennep's rite of passage is to be followed, then pilgrimage requires a ritual of reintegration into society. I believe this rite is not recorded in documentary sources, but illustrated in the archaeological record. It has already been mentioned that deliberate deposition of pilgrim signs in water may have been some sort

[2] http://www.findsdatabase.org.uk/hms/pas_obj.php?type=finds&id=37540

votive offering, thanksgiving for a safe journey [Merrifield 1975, Spencer 1978]. This could also act as the rite of the return to society. As the pilgrim returned home, they took the pilgrim sign, the representation of their journey and separation from society and threw it into the water, which not only represented the healing aspects of pilgrimage, but also symbolized boundaries, the boundary between the liminal period of pilgrimage and normal life, thus ending this phase of their life and beginning a new one. So far, the archaeology of pilgrimage has been discussed in conjunction with Turner's theory of liminality, but the evidence also supports the critics of Turner's model, Eade and Sallnow. Their main contention with Turner's theory is the idea that all the rules and social barriers were broken down or reversed. It has already been demonstrated that the archaeological evidence does not fully support this, and can be said to refute it. Eade and Sallnow describe pilgrimage as occurring in a religious void, where each participant possesses their own ideas about what pilgrimage meant. This model adheres to the documentary and archaeological evidence. Each pilgrim voluntarily underwent a pilgrimage. They made their own decision as to which shrines to visit and which routes to take within the constraints of their class and gender. Furthermore, of the thousands of pilgrim signs discovered since the mid-nineteenth century, very few are identical badges, further supporting the notion of individual choice and volition.

Conclusion

This article has focused on an interpretive analysis, considering pilgrim signs within the context of the entire pilgrimage experience and what they meant to those who wore them. They designated the wearer as a pilgrim and affirmed their right to protection and charity as a politically neutral Christian. Pilgrim signs also represented the actual journey itself, the rite of passage and period of liminality, and the spiritual reward for accomplishing a pilgrimage. As symbols of this rite of passage, pilgrim signs were used in the ritual of reintegration into normal society as votive deposits in rivers. There were many motivating factors for this ritual. The water recalled the symbolic properties of healing and cleansing associated with Christianity and pilgrimage, specifically the curative waters from holy wells found at many English shrines such as Canterbury. The act also recalled the long tradition of votive deposits in water going back at least as far as the Bronze Age up to the present day. Furthermore, as signs of pilgrimage, they represented the higher spiritual status achieved by the pilgrims which transcended the medieval belief that all were equal in death attested by their use as grave goods.

The greatest significance of pilgrim signs can be found in their role in medieval medicine and magic. By coming into contact with the shrine or relics of a saint, they obtained the same miracle working properties. Their use in magic was demonstrated in the archaeological record with their discovery in foundation deposits [Merrifield 1975] and their incorporation into church bells [Spencer 1998]. However, the most important aspect of their magic was their miracle-working ability to cure illnesses. Medieval people turned to saints just as easily as doctors for cures [Finucane 1977]. The most effective way to receive a miracle from a saint was to make a pilgrimage to their shrine. However, pilgrim signs, as signs of the saint and their power, were just as potent, as acknowledged in the inscription seen on many Canterbury ampullae: “Thomas is the best doctor of the holy sick.”

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