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## **Saint Armel of Brittany: The identification of four badges from London**

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In the sixth century, Saint Armel travelled from Wales to Brittany (France) founding several monasteries that now bear his name.<sup>187</sup> One day, a dangerous dragon appeared and began to prowl the district where the Welshman founded an oratory, attacking the inhabitants.<sup>188</sup> When Armel could no longer bear to witness the ravages of the monster, he decided to meet (not unlike Saint George) the beast in the cave where the dragon lived, but unlike George, Armel, using sacred water, lured the dragon out, whereupon it became as meek as a lamb.<sup>189</sup> Tying a stole around the neck of the monster, Armel led the dragon to the top of a mountain. There, he ordered it to plunge into the river below, freeing the populace from its menace. To commemorate this event, the mountain was dubbed Mont-Saint-Armel. Armel is believed to have died around either 552 or 570, but his earliest-known cult and *vita* only date from the twelfth century.<sup>190</sup> He was mainly venerated in Brittany and surroundings, but the saint was revered in England as well.

The memory of Saint Armel was kept by the pilgrimage cult that produced pilgrim badges in his honor. This article examines a group of these badges found in London that show the Welsh-Breton saint. Two of these badges, now in the Museum of

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<sup>187</sup> The monasteries were called Saint-Armel-des-Boscheaux and Plou-Ermel (or Ploërmel). See Pierre Jakez Hélias, *Dictionnaire des saints Bretons* (Paris, 1979) : 28-31 and Albert Le Grand, *Les vies des saints de la Bretagne armorique* (Paris, 1901): 383-387.

<sup>188</sup> Le Grand (1901): 383-385.

<sup>189</sup> Martha of Bethany also used sacred water to tame a monster that threatened the inhabitants of Tarascon in the Provence, where the female saint did her missionary work.

<sup>190</sup> Farmer and Le Grand mention 552 as the year of the saint's death. Le Grand (1901): 385 and David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (1992): 29. Réau mentions the year 532, probably an erroneous borrowing. Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien. III: Iconographie des Saints. Tome 1* (Paris, 1958-59): 140-141. According to Kirschbaum, the saint died in 570. Engelbert Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der Christliche Ikonografie. Teil V* (Rome, 1968-1976): 246.

London, have been identified incorrectly. In the past, the figure has been hesitatingly identified as Saint George trampling the dragon. Other badges showing the same subject have also been published, but without a satisfying outcome regarding their subject matter. Indeed, all of these images bear the same iconographic elements that, without a doubt, identify the saint as Armel. By focusing on this group of badges, the figure depicted not only regains his true identity, the new attribution brings to the fore questions about a forgotten cult of medieval England.

### ***Former identifications: John Schorn and George***

In 1986, Michael Mitchiner published his extensive collection of medieval badges and ampullae that was put up for sale shortly afterwards. Among many other objects, the catalog contains a badge, found at the Billingsgate waterfront in London,<sup>191</sup> which, according to Mitchiner features “a long boot with devil’s head emerging” visible next to the central figure. At first, this element would suggest a label of the uncanonized popular saint, Sir John Schorn who conjured the devil into a boot. However, as the shoe is almost meandering alongside the saint, the identification as a boot seems rather forced.

Years later, Brian Spencer published part of the collection of pilgrim’s souvenirs of the Museum of London; mostly objects found in the British capital in the seventies and eighties after dredging works of the Thames, including a badge that is almost identical to the above-mentioned badge in the former collection of Michael Mitchiner.<sup>192</sup> (**fig. 1**) Another find at Southwark Bridge shows the same figure, but this time rendered in much more detail.<sup>193</sup> (**fig. 2**) Spencer connected an unidentified fragment with a dragon in Mitchiner’s book that could have been part of a similar badge.<sup>194</sup> Spencer identified the depicted saint on all these badges as George, but he observed: “St. George is normally shown trampling the dragon, and these unfamiliar iconographical features leave open the

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<sup>191</sup> Michael Mitchiner, *Medieval Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (Sanderstead, 1986): 232, no. 869: badge, 31 x 27 mm, found at Billingsgate foreshore, London.

<sup>192</sup> Brian Spencer, *Museum of London. Medieval Finds from Excavations in London, 7: Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (London, 1998): 186-187, no. 206h: badge, height 29 mm, found at Vintryhouse and coffer-dam, London, Upper Thames Street, London, 1988-89.

<sup>193</sup> Spencer (1998): 186-187, no. 206g: badge, 45 x 38 mm, found at Southwark Bridge, London.

<sup>194</sup> Mitchiner (1986): 233, no. 874: fragment of a badge, 21 x 30 mm, found at London Bridge North, London. “This could be the devil from a badge of Saint George, but other possibilities exist (e.g. John Schorn, St. Margaret).”

possibility that this particular group of badges may refer to a soldier-saint other than St. George. They seem unlikely to have commemorated John Schorn, however, as has been claimed.”<sup>195</sup>



*Figure 1: Badge of Armel found in London, pewter, height 29 mm. Museum of London.*

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<sup>195</sup> Spencer (1998): 187.



*Figure 2: Badge of Armel found in London, pewter, 45 x 38 mm. Museum of London.*

The unusual iconographical features of the badges – the chasuble over the suit of armor, the cowl behind the head and the dragon on a leash – point to Armel. The badges represent the most significant miraculous event in the monk's life: the fight with the dangerous dragon. The relatively-large and detailed badge found at Southwark Bridge (**fig. 2**) accurately reproduces the different iconographical elements of the miracle story. In his left hand, the kneeling saint holds either an aspergillum or a cross-staff and, in his right hand, he holds the end of the stole which is tied around the neck of the dragon. The monster itself lies below the knees of the saint in a posture of submission. The beast turns its head to look at the victorious saint. The smaller badges found at Billingsgate and Vintryhouse (**fig. 1**) show the same, but rather simplified scene. Armel kneels here as well. The saint's chasuble is clearly visible, though the suit of armor can no longer be detected, except perhaps the armored shoes with their typically round toes. Here, Armel does not trample the beast. Instead, the snake-like body of the dragon crawls up alongside

the edge of the badge. As seen on the badge from Southwark Bridge, the saint keeps a firm hold of the stole that is tied around the neck of the creature.

### *The Devotion to Armel*

The early cult of Armel spread from Brittany to the surrounding lands, such as Normandy, Touraine, and Maine. Later, in England, the saint's popularity grew after the succession of Henry Tudor (1456-1509) who became king of England and Wales in 1485 as Henry VII. In his funerary chapel in Westminster Abbey, among the statues of a multitude of saints, Armel is immortalized.<sup>196</sup> The saint is depicted in the usual way, as a priest wearing the chasuble and cowl, but unlike a typical priest, he wears gauntlets. In his right hand, Armel grasps the end of a stole that keeps the dragon in its place.

The events that preceded Henry's succession stimulated his devotion to Saint Armel. When the future king Henry was only fourteen years old, his uncle, Jasper Tudor, took him to Brittany to protect him from his Yorkist adversaries.<sup>197</sup> The young boy probably came in contact with the saint during his long stay on the Breton peninsula. The noble and courageous Armel - resembling Saint George in many respects - personified several characteristics that would appeal to a nobleman. Henry's veneration of Armel possibly increased because of their common Welsh ancestry. From his father's side, Henry stemmed from Welsh royal lineage as did Armel who was a wealthy Welsh nobleman before he gave away his fortune to the poor and left his country.<sup>198</sup>

Yet, a specific event firmly embedded Henry's faith in the saint. When the aspiring king tried to return to England in 1483 to claim his throne, his ship became separated from his fleet and was threatened with shipwreck. Only after invoking the name of Armel did Henry VII safely reach the shore.<sup>199</sup> In 1485, Henry finally arrived in his native Wales and ascended the throne after a crucial battle at Bosworth Field with the help of Welsh and Breton troops. As indicated by the statue of Armel at his funerary chapel at Westminster, Henry VII maintained a special devotion for this Welsh-Breton

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<sup>196</sup> Helen Jeanette Dow, *The Sculptural decoration of The Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey* (Edinburgh, Cambridge, Durham, 1992): 9.

<sup>197</sup> For the early years of Henry Tudor, see Stanley Bertram Chrimes, *Henry VII* (London, 1972): 15-49 and Michael Van Cleave Alexander, *The First of the Tudors. A Study of Henry VII and his Reign* (London, 1980): 17-28.

<sup>198</sup> Le Grand (1901): 385.

<sup>199</sup> Farmer (1992): 29.

saint his entire life. The king's interest probably stimulated the devotion to Armel in England, especially in London. In 1498, the saint was even included in the Sarum calender.<sup>200</sup>

### ***The Provenance of the Badges***

Even though the badges of Armel might have come from a cult site on the Breton mainland, it seems likely that they were produced in the British Isles. All of the objects were found in London at different archaeological sites. There are no traces of similar badges on the European Continent, not even on the Breton peninsula. Moreover, the smaller badges of Armel show some significant visual similarities with the pilgrimage souvenirs of Henry VI from Windsor (**fig. 3**) and other badges that circulated throughout London.<sup>201</sup> Like the souvenirs from Windsor, the badges of Armel are datable to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The production seems to have coincided with the period after the succession of Henry Tudor. The solid identification of these badges point to a hitherto-overlooked English devotion to Saint Armel, centered in London during the reign of Henry VII. Further research on pilgrim souvenirs (such as presented here) promises to uncover even more popular, but forgotten forms of devotion in the later Middle Ages.

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<sup>200</sup> Kirschbaum, V: 247.

<sup>201</sup> Mitchiner (1986): 229, nos. 850-852 and Brian Spencer, "King Henry of Windsor and the London Pilgrim," *Collectanea Londiniensia. Studies in London archaeology and history presented to R. Merrifield* (London, 1978), 2: 237, 238, 251-252, nos. 17-26. During the reign of Henry VII, the cult of Henry VI (1422-1471) that had been suppressed by Richard III, was given a new stimulus. Spencer (1998): 189. For another stylistic parallel, see also a late fifteenth-century badge of John Schorn, Mitchiner (1986): 232, no. 870.



*Figure 3: Figure of Saint Armel, Funerary Chapel of Henry VII, Westminster Abbey.*



*Figure 4: Badge of Henry VI found in London, pewter, 29 x 26 mm. Present whereabouts unknown.*