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### Popular and Precious: Silver-Gilt & Silver Pilgrim Badges

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## Popular and Precious: Silver-Gilt & Silver Pilgrim Badges

By Sarah Blick, Kenyon College

Medieval pilgrim souvenirs were popular objects, mass-produced in the millions over the course of several centuries. Since the late nineteenth century, tens of thousands have been recovered, and almost all of these were made of low-cost materials such as lead and pewter, which means that all classes of pilgrims, even the very poor, could afford to take one home with them. Yet, for those with high status and great wealth, such modest souvenirs did not match their social prestige. To remedy this, wealthy pilgrims commissioned pilgrim souvenirs made of gold, silver, and silver-gilt. Unfortunately, the intrinsic value of these precious tokens made them good candidates for the melting pot, so until now, no pilgrim souvenir made from precious metal has been found. However, in the last few years several badges have been discovered, confirming the medieval written documentary evidence.

We know from written sources that the media used in pilgrim badges depended on the status of the recipient. For example, Philip the Good, when visiting the shrine of the Virgin at Bolougne, purchased a gold badge for himself, silver and silver-gilt examples for the courtiers in his retinue, and pewter badges for his servants.<sup>207</sup> The great difference between a humble badge and one made of precious metal lay not only in their sheen, but in their price: a single gold badge cost almost 300 times more than a badge made of pewter.<sup>208</sup> Those who paid no attention to the class distinction indicated by medium were mocked, as was Louis XI of France who insisted on wearing a shabby hat adorned with a simple lead pilgrim badge.

While the majority of pilgrims could not afford gold, silver, or silver-gilt, many still longed for their luxurious look, color, and luster. To satisfy such wishes, during the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century, pilgrim badge artisans imitated the look of gold by using brass and stamping it into thin badges (as thin as tin foil). Called *bracteate*, these badges started to be produced around 1480, when Nuremburg traders began to export brass throughout Western Europe. The same technique was used for tin, silver, and silver-gilt. To strengthen these flimsy pieces, artisans sometimes attached decorative backing plates to the *bracteate* badges. Nonetheless, for upper class patrons, badges made of the only finest materials would do.

In the last several years the diligence of metal detectorists combined with the cataloguing expertise of the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the KUNera database have uncovered several silver-gilt and silver pilgrim badges. It is likely that over the next decade or so even more will be uncovered, expanding our picture of popular devotion as

<sup>207</sup> Kurt Köster, "Mittlealterliche Pilgerzeichen" in L. Kriss-Rettenbeck and G. Möhler (eds.), *Wallfahrt kennt keine Grenzen* (Munich, 1984), p. 206 (203-223); Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London* (London, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>208</sup> Spencer (1998), p. 12.

expressed materially for the upper classes. In the meantime, here are a number of recently-discovered pilgrim badges made of precious metals.



*Figure 1: Pilgrim Badge of St. Nicholas, 15<sup>th</sup> century, silver-gilt.  
Photo: Portable Antiquities Scheme.*

The first badge shows a (now-headless) St. Nicholas behind three children. **(fig. 1)** His left arm rests on the head of one child and his right (now gone) was probably raised in blessing. Cradling all of the figures is a crescent moon. Nicholas, as bishop of Myra in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, became known for miraculously reviving three dead children who had drowned in a vat of brine by the hand of an evil inn-keeper. By reviving them, he became known as a patron saint of children, giving rise to the story of Santa Claus. This badge, dating to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and produced for a shrine to St. Nicholas, might have originated in one of the two major centers devoted to the saint—Bari, Italy, or St. Nicolas-de-Port, France. It measures 15 mm x 15 mm, is gilt silver, and weighs 1.12 grams. For further information, see

[http://www.findsdatabase.org.uk/hms/pas\\_obj.php?type=finds&id=37540](http://www.findsdatabase.org.uk/hms/pas_obj.php?type=finds&id=37540).

The remaining badges are part of a larger group of precious metal pilgrim badges, all devoted to St. George, and all dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They measure from 16 x 13 mm to 26 x 20 mm. The relatively-small badges all depict the armored George on horseback, trampling the dragon underfoot, sword raised in his right hand. The cult of St. George, though popular in England since the time of the First Crusade, expanded exponentially when his feast day was promoted to a major festival (as important as Christmas and Easter) after Henry V's 1415 battle victory at Agincourt. The focus of the

cult was at St. George's chapel at Windsor, where after 1416, the heart of the saint was kept.<sup>209</sup>

Most relevant to this group of badges was "The George," a jeweled badge which formed part of the insignia of the Order of the Garter. As Brian Spencer noted, its design most likely influenced some of the less-expensive, base-metal pilgrim badges.<sup>210</sup> It is even more likely that it influenced badges made of precious metals. Indeed all show a superficial similarity. Two badges (**figs. 2 and 3**) feature the active rider slaying the curling dragon's body, which forms a semi-circular base, though **fig. 3** appears more balanced visually within the curve, while **fig. 2**'s composition with the curlique of the dragon's tail and its arched neck matched with the head and tail of the horse give it a square appearance.



**Figure 2:** *St. George Slaying the Dragon, pilgrim badge, silver gilt, 15<sup>th</sup> century, 16 x 13mm. Found in December 2001 in Briston, Norfolk, England.*

*Photo: Portable Antiquities Scheme.*



**Figure 3:** *George Slaying the Dragon, pilgrim badge, silver gilt, 15<sup>th</sup> century. Found in 2004 in Essex, England. Photo: Portable Antiquities Scheme.*

Three more complicated and slightly later badges picture and even more agitated battle between the two foes. (**figs. 4 5, and 6**) The first, **fig. 4**, found in 2004, illustrates the saint wielding a gigantic sword (stretching the length of his mount) as the horse tramples the twisting and turning snake-like dragon. The sinuous tail of the dragon gyrates upward, threatening to engulf George. The rippling motion creating an active outline which is dynamically centered with the central X of George and his horse's body. Although harder to read at a distance, close up the badge rewards careful viewing. Found by a metal detectorist, it can be viewed at

<sup>209</sup> Spencer (1998), p. 186.

<sup>210</sup> Spencer, (1998), p. 186.

<http://www.gallery.forumukdetectornet.co.uk/showphoto.php?photo=64&si=george%20dragon> (free registration required) The second badge, (**fig. 5**) equally complex, also depicts George turned with his torso and head facing the viewer, while his legs remain in profile. The tail of the horse echoes the dragon's splay of limbs below, making this badge somewhat difficult to decipher.

See <http://www.let.kun.nl/ckd/kunera/showitem.php?nummer=8317&lang=uk> for more details.

The third badge also displays a complicated vision, though more delicate than the last. (**fig. 6**) George, outfitted in splendid armor, raises his sword as his horse gracefully stomps the dragon below. That the horse's head turns slightly to us rendered in perfect foreshortening reflects the time it was created, when knowledge of linear perspective became widespread. The dragon, with its alligator-like scales and body differs from the serpent-like dragon of the last badge. The high quality of this badge is reflected in its medium, pure silver. Until the cataloguing work of the KUNera database, this badge, while found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remained unknown to pilgrim badge researches. Thus, for further information, see

<http://www.let.kun.nl/ckd/kunera/bbthumb.php?album=311&noph=84&offset=63&nophp=0&ntop=9&pageid=311>



*Figure 4: St. George Slaying the Dragon, pilgrim badge, silver gilt, early 16<sup>th</sup> century, 26 x 20 mm. Found 2004 (find site not recorded, but discovered in England).*

*Photo: UK Dectector Net Gallery.*



**Figure 5:** *St. George Slaying the Dragon, pilgrim badge, silver, early 16<sup>th</sup> century, 2.65 cm x 2 cm. Found in Basel in 2003. Photo: KUNera Database; Historisches Museum Basel, 2003.69.*



**Figure 6:** *St. George Slaying the Dragon, pilgrim badge, silver, early 16<sup>th</sup> century, 2.25 cm x 1.9 cm. Found in Basel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Photo: KUNera Database; Historisches Museum Basel, 1882.114.16.*

This brief article merely calls attention to the existence of silver-gilt and silver pilgrim badges. There are a good many precious metal badges not mentioned here, more importantly, there is a good deal more research to be done, particularly in regard to the class and function of the group of St. George badges. Exactly how were they used and how many originally formed an even-more elaborate pin with chains and pendants, such as this example made from pewter? (**fig. 7**) With more discoveries, the picture will become clearer, and with luck, even an elusive example of a gold pilgrim badge may be found.



**Figure 7:** *George Slaying the Dragon with pendant, pilgrim badge, pewter, 15<sup>th</sup> century, 46 x 34 mm. Found in 2004 in Amsterdam, Holland. Photo: KUNera Database; Amsterdam, Archeologisch Depot, RUS-71.*