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The Medium is the Message: Votive Devotional Imagery and Gift Giving amongst the Commonality in the Late Medieval Parish

By Matthew Champion, Heritage Consultant and Project Manager, MJC Associates

The study of medieval church graffiti has a long, and not altogether illustrious, history amongst academics. Although first the subject of scholarly attention in the 19th century it has largely remained the domain of inquisitive rectors and churchwardens, general antiquarians and students of folklore. While recent site specific studies have taken a more systematic approach the field has, until the last few years, remained understudied and largely neglected. Indeed, in the UK only one full length work has ever been published upon the subject and, after four decades of additional study, it was recently re-issued in its original circa 1967 form.

That medieval church graffiti should remain such an unexplored avenue for scholars is something of a mystery. In the field of medieval studies the potential of medieval graffiti inscriptions to open up new avenues of investigation has actually been recognized for several decades. That few scholars have risen to meet this challenge is perhaps partially the result of the quasi-academic category that most graffiti studies have been confined to in the past, and a recognition that modern attitudes to graffiti have perhaps colored our view of their creation.

However, the study of medieval graffiti does have the potential to throw new light upon certain aspects of the medieval world that have long held a fascination for scholars, namely the relationship between the commonality and the medieval church. This relationship and the wider aspects of “lay piety” still represent a near void in our understanding of the medieval world, most particularly at a parish level. Although it is true that studies of parish level piety and devotion have expanded almost exponentially in the last century, many of the results, whilst fascinating, have been almost as frustrating as they have been unfulfilling. Studies of medieval wills, building accounts and parish books have given us a view of the devotional life of the medieval commonality, it is a view from afar: an outsider’s glimpse of a world from which the human element, the personal voice, has been almost entirely expurgated.

Indeed, at a parish level, the voice of the commonality is rarely other than silent. Whilst any visit to a medieval church will undoubtedly present the scholar with a wealth of

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1 Most notably the useful and interesting study undertaken by Doris Jones-Baker in The Folklore of Hertfordshire, Folklore of the British Isles Series (Batsford, 1977).


pre-reformation survivals, it is not the commonality, the lower orders of the parish, to which they relate. Even though the stained glass, alabaster monuments and funerary brasses of the medieval church may represent inspiring and educational survivals, they must also be seen for what, and who, they represent. These monuments are not created by or for the laborers in the field, the humble commoner or the aspiring yeoman. Instead, and nearly without exception, they are the testament of the parish elite. They were commissioned, designed and paid for by the top five or ten percent of society as acts of devotion and attempts at temporal immortality.

Where then is the voice of the rest of the medieval parish? Where can we come close to hearing an echo of the voice of the commonality? Although individual members of the commonality do surface occasionally from the darkness, the instances are rare and largely in very specific circumstances. These instances tend to be at very specific points in their lives, such as the rites of passage events of birth, marriage or death, or when those individuals found themselves coming into contact with authority. Therefore, although individuals may appear in wills, manor court rolls or church accounts, these instances tend to represent the atypical and the unusual. For many individuals, indeed the majority of the lower orders, these passing references in “legitimate” documents of authority may well be their only testament to existence: the only official and tangible mark their lives left upon the world they inhabited.

Defining and understanding the relationship between individuals and the church, more especially their own parish church, is particularly difficult. It is only in a few slight and circumstantial areas of direct physical interaction that we can even begin to approach the subject. In particular, one largely overlooked form of interaction, the medieval graffiti of the parish church, may begin to offer insights into the form and nature of this relationship. By its very nature surviving medieval church graffiti is regarded as being outside of the mainstream of the study of image and devotion within the medieval church. Its creation lacks the legitimacy associated with wall paintings, monuments and stained glass, and all too modern connotations associate it with destruction and defacement. However, it is this patent lack of legitimacy, this distancing from authority that can allow it to be regarded, at least in part, as a reflection of the relationship between commonality and church.

In early 2010 a major study was begun to undertake the very first large-scale and systematic survey of surviving medieval church graffiti inscriptions. The Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey aims to survey and record all surviving pre-Reformation graffiti inscriptions in the more than six hundred and fifty medieval churches of the English county of Norfolk. \(^4\) When the survey was envisaged it was widely believed that surviving medieval graffiti inscriptions were a rarity. Earlier studies had identified only a handful of churches as containing such inscriptions. However, the initial results of the survey, carried out entirely by volunteer survey teams, led to a dramatic reassessment of the situation. Of the ninety or so churches already surveyed, over 70% have been discovered to contain significant surviving pre-Reformation inscriptions. Indeed, the rule of thumb adopted by the survey teams is that,

\(^4\) [www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk](http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk)
Figure 1 Examples of text graffiti discovered during the early stages of the Norfolk Graffiti Survey. The examples shown all date between the early 15th and the early 19th century. However, noticeable chronological concentrations of textual have been identified in the 15th century and mid-17th century. Photo: author.
if a church is not still covered in lime-wash, and if the site has not been the subject of too enthusiastic Victorian “restoration,” then significant graffiti inscriptions will be discovered. In churches such as All Saints, Litcham, St. Nicholas, Blakeney and All Saints, Marsham several hundred individual inscriptions have been located within the same structure.

The individual inscriptions so far identified and recorded number several thousand and are as diverse as they are numerous. Although text inscriptions are relatively common, including inscribed names that appear as forerunners of the more modern street graffiti, it is in a minority. Indeed, certain sites, such as All Saints, Litcham (Norfolk), or St. Mary’s, Troston (Suffolk), have been identified as unusual simply because of the large quantities of textual graffiti that they contain.\(^5\) (Figure 1) Far more common inscriptions are those that display images or symbols that have no associated text. Although beyond the scope of this

Figure 3  East face of the chancel arch, Brisley, Norfolk., showing a small selection of the many compass-drawn designs discovered in the church. Intriguingly virtually no other graffiti was recorded within the church. Photo: author.

short article it must be noted that certain symbols, including the six-pointed compass-drawn flower motif (or the “Daisy wheel” as it is commonly referred to), the swastika pelta and the pentangle have been identified in such numbers, and at such widespread locations, that their use as apotropaic or ritual symbols is now clearly beyond doubt. Indeed, any church that contains surviving graffiti inscriptions will, almost without exception, contain numerous examples of compass drawn motifs. (Figure 2) Even churches such as St. Bartholomew’s, Brisley (Norfolk), which are almost devoid of other graffiti inscriptions, were found to contain over a dozen compass drawn symbols across their wall fabric. (Figure 3)

A large number of the individual graffiti inscriptions would appear to be far more than the random doodling of an idle peasantry. Many of the images are clearly designed to have meaning and, if the term is not already over-used in an archaeological context, were of ritual significance. Concentrations of graffiti inscriptions around certain locations within church structures, such as image niches or altars, indicate that their positioning was by no means random. In addition, the choices of subject matter, and the manner of its execution, also strongly suggest a deliberate purpose to their creation. These were images that had, in the eyes of their creators, meaning and function. (Figure 4) An elaborately inscribed example of ship graffiti, positioned facing an image of St. Nicholas (patron saint of those in peril upon the sea), and located in a position where the only possible interpretation is that the creator was on their knees, would clearly suggest a purpose and function for its creation.

Despite the wide variety of graffiti imagery so far discovered and recorded it has become clear that certain images and types of motif are to be found at numerous, and often geographically remote, locations around the UK. Indeed, their common appearance has led to them being assigned provisional classifications as distinct sub-corporuses of material. Amongst these diverse collections of material several individual groups stand out, due largely to the parallels that have been identified elsewhere within medieval studies. These groups, which include depictions of hands, feet and ships, would appear to be physically similar representations to many of the votive offerings left by pilgrims at the major medieval shrines of the period.
Figure 4 Elaborate graffiti motif recorded on the easternmost pier of the north arcade, Field Dalling, Norfolk. The image appears to show a Tree of Life or Peredexian Tree. Although little other graffiti was recorded elsewhere in the church, this image became the focus of other ritualistic markings that were recorded around it. Photo: author.

Such votive gifts to medieval shrines are well attested in a variety of forms. Ships in particular are recorded as votive offerings at both shrines and parish churches. These would have taken a variety of forms, from models formed from precious metals to simple images in wax or wood. When William Worcester visited the chapel of St. Anne at Brislington, which was a popular local pilgrimage destination for the residents of the nearby port of Bristol, he left a detailed description of its appearance. The lights upon the altar, he recorded, were paid for by the local trade guilds, including the weavers and cordwainers, and he observed that the chapel contained thirty-two models of ships and boats. These models were used for the reception of offerings made at the shrine and a number of them were also recorded as incense burners. The sixteenth-century fabric rolls of York Minster record that the popular shrine of Richard Scrope was similarly surrounded with a small fleet of votive ships, and the same can be seen in a surviving contemporary propaganda print showing the shrine of Henry VI at Windsor. Such mass collections of ships would not have been wholly unusual a sight within an English parish church and instances of votive ship models, or “church ships” as they have become known, are well attested. Although most of these ship models have been subsequently lost, a few parishes, largely those related to coastal

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7 Duffy, p. 198.
communities or ports, still contain ship models to this day. In England examples can still be seen at All Hallows by the Tower and Glasgow Cathedral, whilst surviving examples in Denmark, where the tradition has never died out, number many hundreds. Even today seafaring members of the Danish church offer up models in thanksgiving and commemorate of a safe voyage or career upon the sea.

Although it is rare for votive ship models to survive from the Middle Ages there are a number of references that record their creation, bequest and subsequent removal. The 1451 will of Thomas Fen of Groton, Suffolk, bequests “to Groton church a silver ship of the value 26s 8d, and to Boxford church a silver ship of the same value.” Likewise, in 1227, Henry III gave instructions for the conveyance to the Cluniac priory of Bromholm, Norfolk, of a silver model of his “great ship.” The model had been paid for by collections made by the custos of the ship and presented to the king. He in turn had deemed it a suitable gift for the priory. Similar ships are mentioned in the 15th-century inventory account for the church of East Dereham in Norfolk, whilst three are recorded, one of latten and two of silver, in the 15th century records relating to the neighbouring market town of Swaffham. Reformation records, particularly the extensive collection of “Inventories of church goods” produced in Norfolk during the Edwardian reforms, highlight just how common these devotional ships may once have been. The inventories, which list the medieval Catholic decorations and church trappings that the parish are being ordered to dispose of make numerous reference to “ships of silver” and “ships of silver gilt.” In one small area of Norfolk, the administrative “hundreds” of Holt and Launditch, silver ships are mentioned as being present in Holt, Sharrington, Beeston, Hoe, Scarning and Swanton Morley. Whilst it is clear that some of these ships were fashioned to act as burners for incense, being invariably listed alongside the censers, it is also worth remembering that it is only the ship models that had intrinsic financial value, being made of precious metals, which are listed at all.

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Although Thomas Fen’s connection with the sea is unclear, and his will contains no other maritime references, it is clear that many of these votive ships were presented by mariners as thanksgiving for a safe return from a hazardous voyage, or as fulfilment of a vow made at sea whilst in fear of their lives. Sailors who had survived a life-threatening experience near the Lincolnshire port of Skegness made a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to the relatively minor shrine of St. Edmund located at nearby Wainfleet, where they presented the saint with a ship modeled of wax and a generous offering to provide a candle to burn each day during mass.\(^{14}\) In similar vein, a group of fishermen from the Suffolk port of Dunwich presented a great anchor made of wax to St. Edmunds shrine at Bury St. Edmunds in thanksgiving for their safe deliverance from a great storm.\(^{15}\) It is also apparent that certain saints were more likely to be made offerings of ships than others. Saint Nicholas, (as mentioned previously) patron saint of those in peril upon the sea, appears to have been the most obvious recipient of nautically themed offerings. However, even a saint such as Edmund, who have little obvious connection with the sea, appear to have developed a significant maritime cult. In addition to the offerings made by the men of Skegness and Dunwich, late-15th and early-16th century pilgrim badges depicting the martyrdom of St. Edmund were actually fashioned to represent the shape of an anchor, suggesting that the maritime aspects of the saint’s benevolence were well known enough to be physically commemorated. (Figure 5)

Although distinct and identifiable ship models, created in either precious metals or wax, formed only a very small percentage of the votive, or ex-voto, offerings made at shrines and parish churches throughout England. By far the most common form of offering, still seen in Catholic countries to this day, were images and models of parts of the body – often of the area that had been cured, or for which a cure was being sought. Duffy, giving numerous accounts and instances of these ex-voto items, describes than as “a standard part of the furniture of a shrine.”\(^{16}\) As well as acting as offering and prayers of thanksgiving these items

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\(^{15}\) Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an image of medieval religion* (Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 158.

\(^{16}\) Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 197.
acted to advertise the particular saints efficacy and power, and even as a visual reminder as to the specialization that individual saints offered to certain maladies, in the same way that the anchor-shaped pilgrim badges of St. Edmund may perhaps have functioned. As Thomas More recorded in his accounts of the shrine of St. Valery in Picardy, who was regarded as being efficacious in matters relating to the sexual organs, “all theyr offrynges that hong aboute the walles/none other thynge but mennes gere and womens gere made in waxe.”

Contemporary accounts make it clear that the ex-voto offerings at the shrine of St. Valery were unusual only in respect of what they depicted, although other recorded offerings were also perhaps a little out of the ordinary. In 1285 it is recorded that Edward I had made an offering of wax candles at the church or St. Mary, Chatham, of a total length equal to the combined heights of the royal family and the following year sent a wax image of a sick gerfalcon to the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury. More common though were the ex-voto offerings recorded as being present at many of the major shrines of Europe. Alongside the numerous chains and shackles of freed prisoners and crutches from healed cripples were many hundreds of wax models of hands, feet, limbs and heads given by those who had received or were seeking a cure for their ailments. The numbers present at some shrines was so great that at least one pilgrim, visiting the popular shrine of Rocamadour, accused the monks of actually making them themselves.

One of the most notable aspects of the recent systematic study of church graffiti inscriptions has been the identification of several groups or types of inscriptions that bear strong similarities to the previously recorded ex-voto offerings found at medieval shrines. Recorded instances and distribution of ship graffiti in particular suggests a strong correlation with the phenomena of votive or church ships, in that very clear patterns of association are present. Although ship graffiti is found at numerous sites, and is almost as common at inland locations as it is upon the coast, the number of examples recorded at the churches of St. Nicholas, Blakeney, and St. Thomas, Winchelsea, have allowed clear patterns of distribution to be identified that suggest strong links with the ex-voto phenomena.

The church of St. Nicholas, Blakeney, contains in excess of forty clearly defined ship graffiti inscriptions. (Figure 6) Intriguingly, although examples of pre-Reformation inscriptions are to be found throughout the church, all the examples of ship graffiti so far discovered have been located upon the piers of the south arcade. Indeed, even within the south arcade a clear distribution pattern is evident. The arcade is formed of four large piers of high quality dressed stone. Upon the pier at the western end of the nave only three or four examples have been recorded. The next pier contains five or six examples. The third pier contains at least thirteen examples. The most easterly pier, which is located next to the side altar and opposite a now empty image niche, contains over twenty-five examples of ship graffiti. (Figure 7) Furthermore, all of these examples of ship graffiti are distinctly separate

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17 Ibid.
19 Sumption, Pilgrimage, p. 157.
from each other, with each ship inscription respecting the space of those other inscriptions around it. Where little room is available between two larger inscriptions the space has been filled with a much smaller image of ship graffiti. This is even more significant when it is understood that these individual inscriptions were created over a period of at least two centuries. 20

Figure 6 A small selection of ship graffiti recorded in St. Nicholas’ church, Blakeney, Norfolk. The images vary greatly in detail and quality of execution, with some showing rigging, sails and even streamers flowing from the masthead. Photo: author.

Although relatively little of the church of St. Thomas at Winchelsea survives today, being largely the remains of the chancel from a far grander church originally conceived on the scale of a small cathedral, the remaining fabric tells an almost identical story to that found at Blakeney. (Figure 8) Although early graffiti inscriptions are found all over the surviving structure, the instances of ship graffiti are, almost without exception, confined to the north arcade. The piers of what remains of the north arcade contain multiple examples of pre-Reformation ship graffiti, with a marked and distinct concentration occurring on the most easterly pier. These ships, many of which are shown with detailed rigging and anchors, again appear to respect the space of those around them, as at Blakeney, and are largely concentrated on the east and north-east faces of this particular pier. (Figure 9) These faces of the pier sit

directly facing the north aisle side altar, an area in which it is recorded a chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas once stood.\textsuperscript{21}

The Blakeney and Winchelsea ship graffiti strongly suggests a ritual and symbolic element in the creation of ship graffiti and its placement. The distinct concentration of the Blakeney ships around the area of the aisle altar and the empty image niche would suggest that this location or proximity to areas deemed spiritually important within the church building was an important part of its creation. The same is true of the Winchelsea inscriptions, where the main concentrations face in towards the chapel of St. Nicholas. The fact that, despite being created over an extended period of time, each inscription respected previous inscriptions, and was in turn respected, would also suggest that this practice was both accepted and acceptable to priest and congregation. This is further supported by the

\textbf{Figure 7} The south aisle of St. Nicholas church, Blakeney, Norfolk. The furthest pier is the focal point for much of the ship graffiti and the image niche is clearly visible on the south wall. Photo: author.

\textsuperscript{21} St Thomas’ Church, Winchelsea, was constructed as part of the planned town of Edward I and was designed to reflect the power of both town and monarch. The work was begun in 1288 and the planned church was of lavish proportions. However, a series of French raids, beginning in 1337, led to the decline of the town. Today only the chancel survives, which is used as the parish church, and it is a matter of some debate as to whether the whole church was ever completed. D. Martin & B. Martin, \textit{New Winchelsea, Sussex: A Medieval Port Town}, (English Heritage/HMP, 2004).
observation that none of the Blakeney inscriptions have suffered defacement, despite being very obvious to the casual observer, and church authorities, throughout the later Middle Ages and right up until the mid-sixteenth century when the church was lime-washed during the Protestant Reformation.

Similar parallels with ex-voto items and graffiti are to be found in relation to the distribution patterns identified with images of parts of the body, most notably hands, shoes, feet and faces. In like manner to the wax effigies, the instances of similar graffiti inscriptions on the very fabric of churches and cathedrals suggests that the relationship between inscription and votive objective was far closer than that related by Duffy as being the mere “furniture” of the shrines. These inscriptions appear to have become inseparable from the fabric of the very building itself. Images of faces have been discovered at many dozens of churches throughout East Anglia and range from the very simple, such as the priest-like profile discovered at Litcham, to the elaborate and confident execution of a demon’s profile at Troston. (Figures 10 & 11) However, despite their frequency these images of heads and faces are difficult to strongly link to any particular votive act. Whilst many of them appear ex-voto in nature, and are associated with similar examples of devotional graffiti, many others are much more ambiguous in nature, and may have the roots of their creation as much.
in mirth as in devotion. However, the same is simply not the case in relation to inscriptions of hands, shoes and feet. Inscribed examples of hands, shoes and feet have been identified in nearly half of the churches surveyed in Norfolk, and have been commonly recorded across the rest of the country and mainland Europe. In a few cases, such as the shoe inscription at St. Catherine’s, Ludham, (Figure 12) or the life-sized hand print at All Saints Litcham, (Figure 13) only a single example of a particular type may be present. However, it is far more common to come across sites where multiple examples of these inscriptions are all located on the fabric – and often in very close proximity to each other. At Morston on the North Norfolk coast, the majority of the interior is today so covered in lime-wash as to obscure most graffiti inscriptions. However, the base of the font, made up of a number of large flat stone slabs, was found to be covered in several dozen inscribed outlines of shoes. (Figure 14) The inscriptions were obviously created over a number of centuries, as identified.

Figure 9 An example of ship graffiti recorded in St. Thomas’ church, Winchelsea. Although not greatly detailed, the image suggests a clear medieval design of a single-masted, sea-going vessel. Photo: author.

Figure 10 Profile face from All Saints’ Church, Litcham, Norfolk. Its location opposite the pulpit has led to suggestions that it may well be a caricature of a former parish priest. Photo: author.
Figure 11 Elaborate and completely executed depiction of a demon’s head recorded on the eastern face of the chancel arch. Troston, St. Mary, Norfolk. Photo: author.

by the changing fashions in the outlines of the impressions, and were never obscured by later lime-wash. Similar concentrations of shoe or feet imagery can also be seen in the cloisters of Canterbury Cathedral, where many dozens of inscriptions are to be found. At Troston, Suffolk, the mass of graffiti recorded contain many examples of hands, feet and shoe inscriptions, all jumbled amongst a wide variety of other inscriptions, many of which are clearly devotional in nature. (Figure 15) The chancel arch contains two or three clearly outlined impressions of medieval shoes, one of which is closely associated with a depiction of the head of a demon. (Figure 16) whilst the tower arch contains three very clear depictions of hands. (Figure 17) Perhaps most interestingly, the porch at Troston still contains a great deal of the original internal medieval plaster surface. Close examination of this surface identified numerous outlines of human hands inscribed into the plaster. Several of the hands depicted are clearly life-sized, and suggest that they were created by inscribing around the outline of a real hand. However, many of the others, like those found on the tower arch, were clearly too small or stylized to have been traced around a real hand. (Figure 18)

The examples from Troston porch are particularly intriguing. Their survival may simply be the result of the original medieval plaster still being present in the porch, which is in itself quite unusual. However, Troston is already well known for the survival of a superb series of medieval wall paintings in the nave. These too have so well preserved because the medieval plaster surface has also survived on the nave walls, but close examination shows no signs of any other imagery inscribed into the plaster. The clear suggestion must be that the concentration of graffiti hand imagery was a deliberate act, and that the porch was a location deemed significant.

Although today most of these images and inscriptions are difficult to see with the naked eye, requiring specialist lighting to make them visible, this would not have been the case at the time of their creation – or in immediately subsequent years. It has long been recognized that the interior of the medieval parish church, almost without exception, was painted.\textsuperscript{23} Although attention has largely focused upon the elaborate and formal devotional paint schemes that would have adorned the upper section of the walls, there is much evidence that even the lower sections, and arcade piers, were also treated with pigment. In the case of a

\textsuperscript{23} Roger Rosewell, \textit{Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches} (Boydell, 2008).
Figure 15 A small section of the north side tower arch from St. Mary’s, Troston, Suffolk. The full-length figure, like others in the church, is shown in profile with her hands raised in prayer. Close examination of the extremely busy surface gives some indication of the mass of graffiti inscriptions recorded at Troston. The pencilled numbers were created by the bell ringers, recording the changes being rung. However, even these now have a certain historical value, as the bells at Troston were removed from the tower several decades ago. Photo: author.

Figure 16 A clear shoe impression of recorded on the chancel arch at St. Mary’s, Troston, Suffolk. Although only about one-quarter life-sized, the image shows the distinctive outline of a late-medieval shoe. The small demon’s head is thought to be associated with the shoe. Photo: author.

church such as Blakeney surviving pigment suggests that the lower sections of the piers were painted a deep red ochre. The multiple ship inscriptions discovered by John Peake at Blakeney would originally have been inscribed through the red pigment to reveal the pale stone beneath. The resulting surface would have then appeared as a fleet of small white ships sailing across a deep red sea and, far from being hidden away and difficult to see, would have been one of the most obvious and prominent features for anyone entering the medieval church. (Figure 19) In addition, the lack of any obvious defacement of these images, created over a period of several centuries, would suggest that they were both respected and acceptable forms of devotion. Indeed, it is notable that of all the graffiti inscriptions studied to date it is largely only those heraldic inscriptions, which are associated with individuals rather than acts of devotion, that are subject to any systematic or deliberate defacement. Given the prominence of these inscriptions etched through the pigment, and their lack of defacement, it is difficult to argue that they were anything other than an acceptable and accepted form of lay piety.
These graffiti images, created by individuals at no financial cost to themselves, and of no obvious financial value to the recipients, can be regarded as of lesser value than traditional gifts or votive offerings. However, closer examination of the phenomena would suggest that the converse may actually be the case, and that these images, far from being the lesser valued of votive offerings, may well have been regarded as the more powerful and potent.

The value of the gift or offering was judged in more ways than simply financial. Kings and commoners may have made offerings of gold and silver but, as has been shown, they were also noted for making donations of wax and beehives. The hives in particular appeared to have been valued contributions – producing as they did not only on-going supplies of honey but also, as long as the hive thrived, an endless supply of precious beeswax.

Gold and silver gifts had intrinsic value, and the display of such items at shrines added a prestige that reflected upon both the donor and the recipient. However, it is worth considering that this intrinsic financial value was not, in most cases, something that the administrators of the shrine could immediately access. In the case of gold effigies and jewels, such as Henry III’s gift of a crown with four finials to the shrine of St. Edmund at Bury St. Edmunds in November 1252, or his gift of a “fine brooch ornamented with jewels” to the same shrine in 1254, the financial value of such gifts was forever locked away in the artifact.

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24 It is notable that hives of bees were regarded as valuable offerings in numerous recorded wills of the period and are often dedicated to specific altars and lights. Northeast, Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-1474 (2001).
itself. Indeed, such precious gifts, although obviously welcome, would be of little immediate direct financial aid to any site upon which they were bestowed.

In contrast, gifts of wax, in whatever form, could potentially have an immediate positive effect upon the finances of the site to which they were gifted albeit on a far more modest scale. The gift of wax itself could take many forms. For many of the lower orders a few pence towards a candle, or a candle itself, could be the limit of their available benevolence. The better off might leave a sum of money that would ensure the upkeep of a particular “light” for several years, even decades, whilst those of a more forward-looking disposition might leave a hive of bees, thereby ensuring a long term supply of wax. However, the immediate financial value of the wax offering may be a secondary consideration to both benefactor and recipient. King Edward I’s gift of a bird of prey modeled in wax, can have added little to the shrine’s store of wax. Although it must be admitted that a gift from the king would have had a certain prestige, the fact that the wax was chosen as the medium would have been regarded as symbolic. Blick, writing upon the symbolism of wax as an offering, states that “accounts of gifts offered at the tomb and shrines… are careful to mention the numerous candles and objects composed of wax not only because of their popularity, but because of the intrinsic symbolism of the medium which was associated with the power of God to make and change the world.”

The creation of this permanent graffiti imagery which parallels the devotional gift giving associated with the more major shrines, would suggest that in the minds of the medieval parishioners the potency of the votive image was directly related to the permanence of the act. By directly interacting with the fabric of the church building the petitioner was ensuring, either consciously or unconsciously, that their votive gift or image would endure long after all vestiges of wax had been scrapped from the altar.

These images represent a personal interaction between the individual and the church, as both a building and institution that perhaps, most significantly, did not require the intercession of a priest, bishop or pope. They represent a direct and personal appeal to God. It must, therefore, be concluded that the medieval parishioner did not necessarily regard the involvement of a priest as adding either legitimacy or potency to their prayers. Whilst the presence of a priest was clearly required, and valued, during fundamental ceremonies such as the Mass, marriage, administration of the last rites and burial, it would appear that, upon specific, and arguably less-legitimate, occasions the priest as intercessory was not only deemed as unnecessary, but could also be thought of as an obstacle to direct intercession.

Whilst such concepts may well have carried a formal determination as heretical, or heterodox at the very least, certain accepted and recognized lay practises, such as the informal marriage arrangement known as hand-fasting, would appear to suggest that certain church rituals for which a priest was required, such as the solemn act of marriage, could be approached by


individuals on a pragmatic level outside the confines of formal church ceremony. In the case of the hand-fasting ceremony, recorded in a number of variants throughout medieval England, the presence of a priest was not required to produce a union between two individuals that would, in the eyes of the church at least, be marriage in all but name. However, what is clear is that in all recorded variations of the hand-fasting ceremony it was not simply an easy and simplistic way in which to avoid church intervention or local condemnation of an otherwise unauthorised sexual union. Such agreements and understandings carried as much ceremony and ritual, often undertaken in full view of the whole parish, as the marriage ceremony itself. It can be argued that the ritual itself was the important element of the act rather than the person who directed it. If we accept such a concept in regard to many of the graffiti inscriptions found in medieval parish churches then it is possible to suggest that they represent aspects of lay piety at its most basic level – the informal dialogue between an individual and their God.

Perhaps the fundamental question must be, did the medieval parishioner believe that a prayer was more likely to be answered when issued from the lips of a bishop or pope than from those of a poor man? Did the hierarchical authority of the medieval church also represent a clearly defined progression towards enhanced access and benevolence of the
creator? Putting aside the recognised heresies of the Lollards, who eschewed formal church authority and hierarchy, in the minds of the medieval parishioner, was Jack really as good as his master?  

It is certainly true that the medieval parishioners placed value in the rites of the Mass and Trental and, in the wills of all those who could afford it, such ceremonies were stipulated to be performed by those of the religious orders. The implication is most certainly that these ceremonies, when performed by certain religious, had “added value.” However, in the later Middle Ages we do begin to glimpse a possible change in emphasis. Analysis of the wills of the archdeaconry of Sudbury in Suffolk, show a marked inclination for testators to stipulate that the masses for their souls, and the Trentals of St Gregory, be carried out by the “poor friars” of the houses of Thetford (babwell) and Barnwell.  

Whilst this may be no more than a reflection of local tradition it is worthy of note that the larger religious houses with which the area abounded, such as the great abbey of St. Edmund at Bury St. Edmunds, are rarely recorded as receiving such bequests from those of the lower orders. The suggestion is that the testators at least, in some informal and unspecified manner, believed that their bequests would be more potent when undertaken by the “poor friars” than by the inhabitants of the rich and prosperous religious houses of the local vicinity.

The graffiti inscriptions that are now being discovered in such quantities in medieval parish churches, as well as at some of the surviving centers of pilgrimage, would appear to reflect one aspect of this emerging or evolving system of belief. Whilst the images may mimic the votive gifts of the better off it would be wrong to assume that their simplicity and lack of financial value would demean their potency as offerings or prayers. As we have seen, a votive gift of gold or silver might have no immediate financial gain for the recipient and, likewise, even the richest benefactor might put aside the obviously valuable precious metals in favour of more humble wax images. We must then begin to accept the idea that the value of a votive gift bears little relation to its value or potency as an act of piety in the eyes of the gift-giver. These simple graffiti images can then be regarded as having a new significance.

For those who created these images they represented a permanent and demonstrable appeal to the almighty. These inscriptions were perhaps envisaged as very direct and personal appeals: appeals that would last well beyond the saying of a Mass or the burning of an entire beehive’s worth of wax. Their very permanence upon the fabric of the church structure was a mark of their potency, for both their creator and those who viewed them afterwards. Indeed, this potency may well account for the respect that these inscriptions demonstrably received from their contemporaries. Despite their prominence within a church building they were not defaced, they were not covered over, they were not destroyed. Indeed, in cases such as Blakeney and Winchelsea it can be shown that there was significance in their placement and that those who applied later inscriptions deliberately and conscientiously avoided defacing

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earlier inscriptions. In the case of these coastal parishes the very act of creation would appear to have become a centuries-long ritual amongst the lay community that can be seen as paralleling the ritual of the established church itself. However, this was a ritual which was a personal interaction between inscriber and the Almighty-- A ritual that put aside the need for the perceived legitimate intercession of the church hierarchy. In cases such as these, the medium really was the message, and the message was being delivered in person.