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Badge dug up in field linked to Cult of St. Ursula



The badge, the only one of its kind ever found in Britain, provides a link 500 years ago between this corner of rural Lancashire and the great pilgrimage sites of mainland Europe. It shows one of the companions of St Ursula, one of the most popular mystical legends of medieval Europe. She was said to be a British princess who sailed with 11,000 virgin companions to marry a pagan prince in Brittany, but diverted to go on a pilgrimage to Rome - and in some versions of the story, Jerusalem. After many adventures they came to Cologne, where all were slaughtered by Hun tribesmen. When a large cemetery of Roman era bones was found in the city in the 11th century, they were declared the remains of the saint and her companions, and her cult spread across Europe.

King, a member of the South Ribble metal detecting club, found the silver plaque at the end of April in a field some miles from his home in Walton-le-Dale, where he had already found several hundred Victorian coins, but returned with the blessing of the landowner for a sweep with his new more high-powered metal detector. "I knew immediately she was something special," he said. "I think she was hidden deliberately - she was folded over, not damaged by a plough strike in any way. It is extraordinary and moving to think how much history is locked up in this little piece of metal."

Although a church in Cologne holds her shrine and a whole chapel still decorated with the supposed bones of her companions, there were so many bones that the relics spread across Europe and beyond. Some of the most beautiful reliquaries, life sized busts of fashionably dressed young women, were made to hold the bones. The badge from Lancashire is a representation of just such a shrine (and so close in style and early -16th-century date that it may come from the same Bruges workshop that made the original reliquaries). These reliquaries displayed gently smiling young women with their hair in a modish plaited style. The badge would have been bought as a souvenir by the Lancashire pilgrim from just such a shrine.

British Museum curator James Robinson said he was "beside myself with excitement" when he saw an image of the find. "To be honest if I hadn't been working on the exhibition it might have taken me a while to clock it - as it is I recognized her immediately as one of the

companions of St Ursula. I hesitate to call it a miracle, but it is a most extraordinary coincidence that this should turn up just at this time."

Re-written from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/jun/20/badge-dug-field-medieval-treasure>