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Pious Phalluses and Holy Vulvas: The religious Importance of Some Sexual Body-Part Badges in Late-Medieval Europe (1200-1550)

By Ben Reiss, National Museums, Scotland

Introduction

To earlier historians, sexual body-part badges were both shocking and surprising. Carefully molded images of a phallus on an anvil, a pilgrim-vulva, and a bier bearing a vulva being carried by several phalluses¹ puzzled and provoked prudishness throughout the 20th century. Frequently these badges were termed “Roman,” “heathen,” or “late antique” (the latter the description of two medieval winged phallic badges).² Similar items were sometimes described as children’s toys, such as a wooden phallus found in Norway.³ Occasionally they simply refused to categorize these badges at all, claiming they were “unclear” when a badge showing a woman forging a phallus was anything but.⁴

However, thanks to A. M. Koldewij’s and Malcolm Jones’s work in the 1990s there has been a greater willingness to address these fascinating and varied items in a more

¹ These badges have largely been found in the Low Countries and date from the early thirteenth century until c.1550. A. M. Koldewij, “‘Shameless and Naked Images’: Obscene Badges as Parodies of Popular Devotion” in Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (eds.), *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles* (Leiden, 2004), p. 493.

² H.-U. Haedeke, *Zinn*, Cologne, 1976, p. 56; Koldewij, “‘Shameless and Naked Images,’” p. 500.

³ A. E. Herteig, *Kongers havn og handels sete* (Osolo, 1969), fig. 18; Koldewij, “‘Shameless and Naked Images,’” p. 500.

⁴ M. & N. Flüeler, *Stadtluft, Hiresbrei und Bettelmönch* (Zurich, 1992), pp. 434-435; Koldewij, “‘Shameless and Naked Images,’” p. 500.

up-front fashion. Both have studied and suggested a variety of meanings applied to sexual body-part badges and both writers define these badges as secular objects, related to, but separate from the huge numbers of overtly religious badges found,⁵ although the two have often been found in close proximity.⁶ They suggest the sexual badges were used as amulets or charms⁷ or satirized religion,⁸ but they stop short of assigning them any pious Christian meaning.



Figure 1 *Pilgrim Vulva Badge*, 14th-15th century. Photo: after A.M. Koldewej, “A Barefaced *Roman de la Rose* and Some Late Medieval Mass-Produced Badges of a Sexual Nature” in Maurtis Smeyers and Bert Cardon (eds.), *Flanders in a European Perspective: Manuscript Illumination Around 1400 in Flanders and Abroad* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1995), p. 507.

Through re-evaluating sexual body-part badges in the light of work done by Caroline Bynum and Martha Easton (among others) this article will seek to

show that they were potentially strongly imbued with religious meaning and commentary.

When considered in the context of a late-medieval world where sexual imagery was not uncommon, even in religious contexts, and alongside the definitively religious pilgrim

⁵ Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Stroud, 2002), p. 249.

⁶ Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” p. 499.

⁷ Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 273.

⁸ Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” pp. 506-509.

badges⁹ with which they were sometimes found, the idea that sexual body-part badges could have had similar meanings to religious objects does not seem so far-fetched. Of course, a vulva dressed as a person is funny in any language, culture, or age so this article will not state that sexual body-part badges were purely religious objects, just that pious meaning was one of their many interrelated facets alongside scatological humor, religious satire, apotropaic protection, and fertility beliefs.



Figure 2 Hieronymus Bosch, (detail from) *Sketches of Beggars*, c.1470-1480, Royal Library of Belgium, S.II 133708. Photo: Wikimedia.

The Wider Cultural Context of Sexual Body-part Badges

The place sexual body-part badges hold should be considered within the context of a wider culture that easily mixed religious and lay issues, devotion and sexuality, even within the same visual or literary piece. For example, several sketches done by Hieronymus Bosch show a collection of beggars wearing pilgrimage badges from the shrine of Wilsnack (c. 1470-1480).¹⁰ That these are beggars (not primarily pilgrims) is clear from attributes which

⁹ Although these should not necessarily be taken purely at face value either, as shall be discussed further on.

¹⁰ Brussels Royal Library, Print Room; Vienna, Albertina, no.43.154; cited in A. M. Koldeweij, "Lifting the Veil on Pilgrim Badges" in J. Stopford (ed.), *Pilgrimage Explored* (York, 1999), p. 168.

identify them as street musicians and cripples (**fig. 2**).¹¹ The *Liber vagatorum* or *Book of Vagabonds* (c. 1510), describes “beggars who pin badges to their hats, especially Veronica of Rome, shells and other signs.”¹² Indeed, by the time of its publication, the notion that frauds wore pilgrim badges for personal gain is supported by the testimony of Michael von Dinkelsbühl, who affirmed that numerous criminals and beggars were personally identifiable by such badges.¹³ This suggests that, by the late Middle Ages, religious pilgrim badges were no longer solely associated with pilgrimage, though they were undoubtedly also used honestly. This demonstrates that people during the late Middle Ages were able to hold dual views about badges – that they could be both pious pilgrim signs and markers of disreputable beggars.

Culturally, late-medieval attitudes to scatological subjects were rooted in a long history of acceptance of graphic representations of sexual organs, toilet jokes, and racy tales, and so must not be immediately thought of as “rude” in the modern sense. This historic acceptance can be briefly summarized as follows. Ancient Greek vases show women carrying, planting, and watering phalluses in the same manner one might carry a basket of fruit or water seeds (**figs. 3, 4**) while others also display “winged phalluses, phallic bipeds and quadrupeds and unattached phalluses.”¹⁴ Further to these, an inscribed stone phallus has been found at the Roman military headquarters at Chesters,¹⁵

¹¹ Koldewej, “Lifting the Veil,” p. 168.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-4.

¹⁴ Koldewej, “Lifting the Veil,” p. 185.

¹⁵ Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London, 1999), p. 146.

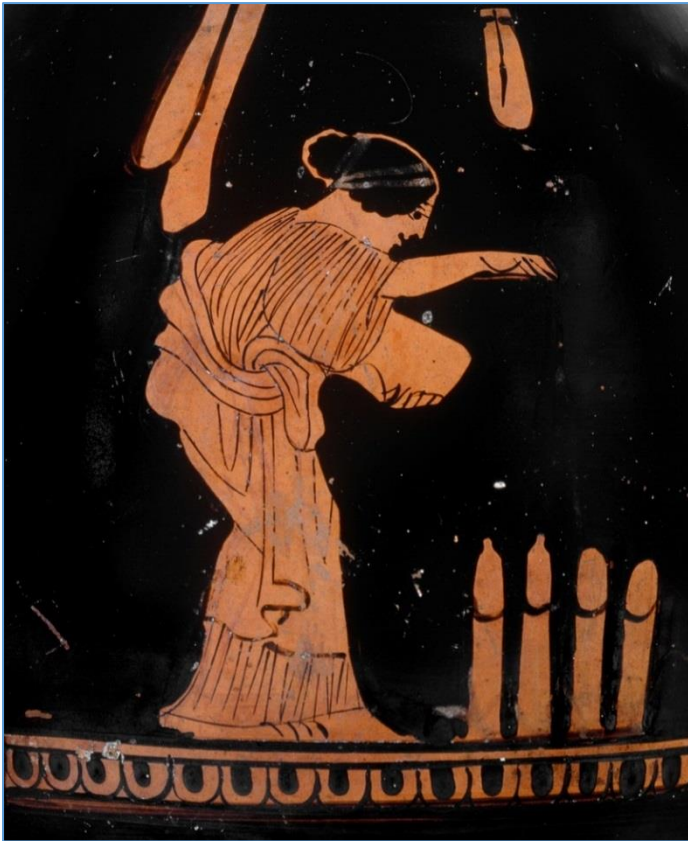


Figure 3 Flying Angel Painter (attr.), amphora with young man, fowl, and basket of phalli, c. 490 B.C.E. Photo: By Sailko - Own work, CC BY 3.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 4 Flying Angel Painter (attr.) Youth with basket of phalli, red-figure ware vase, c. 490, Greece. Photo: Wikimedia from the Petit Palais, Paris.



Even the Bible included the occasional saucy tale. Solomon's Song of Songs is full of subtle and explicit sexual images. From the rather sweet "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" (1:1)¹⁶ to the more overt "thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins" (7:3)¹⁷ and the very suggestive "I sat down under his shadow, whom I desired: and his fruit was sweet to my palate" (2:3),¹⁸ it is a section which engages quite openly with sexual themes, demonstrating that Christian thought and eroticism were not mutually exclusive.

During the early medieval period, riddles were composed with distinctly ambiguous answers, such as those found in the *Exeter Book* which was given to Exeter Cathedral library by Leofric, Bishop of Exeter (d. 1072). Probably written in the late-10th century, it includes ninety riddles on various subjects,¹⁹ and, of these, eight are of a decidedly ambiguous nature, suggesting eroticism.²⁰ They include a supposed onion which is plundered by a "handsome peasant's daughter" (74, K-D 25), a "key" which "hangs by a man's thigh...In front is a hole. It is stiff and hard" (75, K-D 44) and an alleged description of butter churning which is loaded with sexual suggestion (77, K-D 54).

Sexual images also appear on Christian churches shortly after the date of the *Exeter Book*. Sheela-na-gig is the name which has been given to the carvings of male and female exhibitionists found on churches across Britain, Ireland, and the Continent.²¹ Produced between c.1080 and c.1250, they peaked c.1150 on the Continent.²² A lintel over a Norman window in the tower of Whittlesford Church near Cambridge bears the image of a woman displaying her vulva and inserting her fingers into it,²³ with a similar image being present at Kilpeck Church (**fig. 5**). At Saint-Servais in Brittany a corbel can be found in the shape of an

¹⁶ This and all further Bible citations are from the *Douay-Rheims Bible*

¹⁷ *Douay-Rheims Bible*, <http://www.drbo.org/chapter/24007.htm>.

¹⁸ *Douay-Rheims Bible*, <http://www.drbo.org/chapter/24002.htm>.

¹⁹ Paul F. Baum (trans.), *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Durham NC, 1963), p. xii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60 for translations of the eight riddles Baum terms obscene.

²¹ Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, p. 11.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

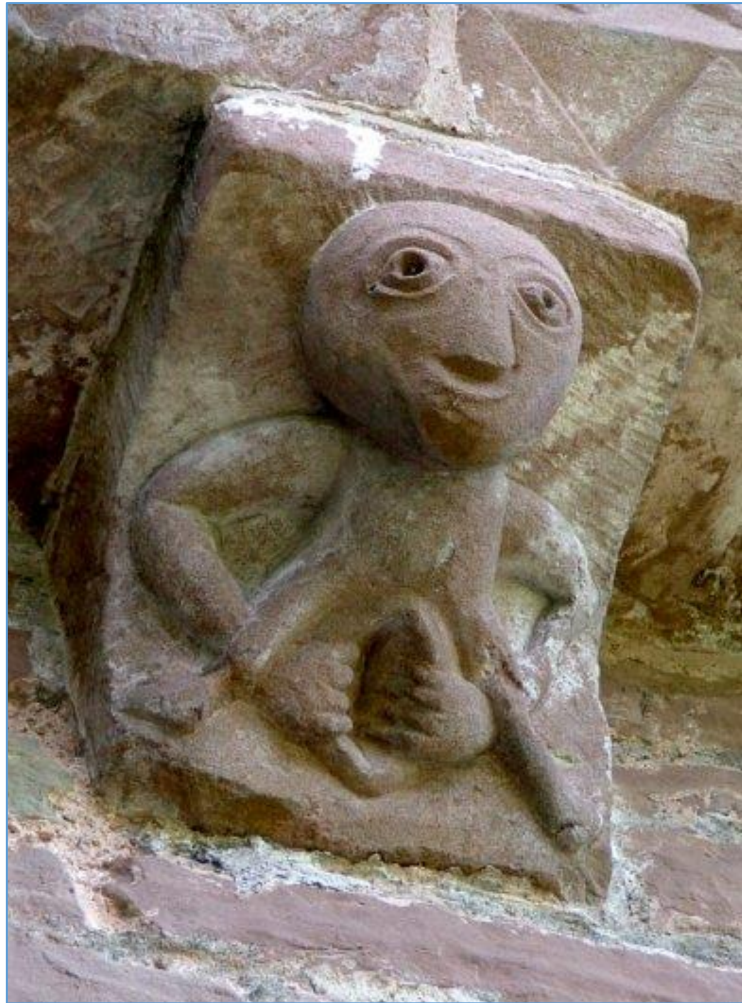


Figure 5 Sheela-na-gig on the church at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England, 12th century.
Photo: Wikipedia.

acrobat, upside down and with his genitals clearly displayed.²⁴ These figures are not intended to be erotic – they have been interpreted as either a moralistic warning (in the case of the exposed woman) or Christian man, fallen and burdened with sin (the acrobat).²⁵ They could also have links to protective imagery – exposing the vulva had long-standing apotropaic associations.²⁶ They are clear examples of sexual imagery placed side-by-side with religious imagery, and were intended for serious religious comment as much as amusement. While Jean Gerson (1363-1429) complained of “shameless and naked images displayed for sale in

²⁴ Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, p. 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23, 42.

²⁶ Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 251.

churches and during church festivals,”²⁷ others did not complain, for there was a long tradition of the parallel presentation of religious and sexual imagery.

This relaxed attitude can be seen in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a collection of 420 songs in praise of the Virgin Mary compiled between 1257 and 1283 by Alfonso X King of Castile and Leon. Alfonso wrote that he made the collection partly for his own salvation and there can be little doubt that the entire piece was meant to be a serious and devotional work.²⁸ Still, contained within it is a story (Song 327) about a priest who steals an altar cloth and makes underwear out of it to “cover his sinful parts,” implying he is guilty of some form of sexual sin. As a result of this, his legs are turned backwards, he confesses his sin to the Virgin and is forgiven.²⁹ A second (Song 68) concerns the wife of a merchant who learns her husband has taken a mistress and prays to the Virgin that her rival will come to harm.³⁰ Neither story seems appropriate for a book in praise of the mother of Christ (although the latter would not look out of place as a plot for Eastenders), but their inclusion suggests, like the Song of Solomon, that sexual imagery and stories were not mutually exclusive of religious ones. A similar lesson can be taken from the inclusion of stories in the late-14th century *Canterbury Tales* of bed-hopping Millers, bottom-kissing Reeves, and promiscuous wives alongside more pious stories such as those of the Pardoner and Prioress.³¹

It is not just in medieval texts that sexual imagery occurs, but the marginalia of these texts were sometimes rife with it as well. The marginalia in a manuscript of the *Roman de la*

²⁷ Johannes Gerson, *Opera Omnia* (Antwerpen, 1706), III cols. 291-2; Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” p. 498.

²⁸ Connie L. Scarborough, “Laughter and the Comedic in a Religious Text: The Example of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*” in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences* (Berlin, 2010, pp. 281-283.

²⁹ Scarborough, “Laughter and the Comedic,” p. 285.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, c.1400.

Rose, c. 1350, (fig. 6) contains ten drawings of sexual imagery which often seem to have little to do with the specific text they accompany.³²



Figure 6 Detail from *Roman de la Rose*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. francais 25526.

Even tableware was not immune. These include a late-14th -century Flemish plate decorated with a phallus found in Aardenburg, a copper plate engraved with sexual images found in Italy (late 15th century), and German drinking glasses in the shape of phalluses (first half of the 16th century) found at Mainz (fig. 7).³³ It is hard to know if these items would have

³² *Roman de la Rose*, Paris, c.1350. – Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. Fr. 25526; A. M. Koldewij, “A Barefaced *Roman de la Rose* and Some Late Medieval Mass-Produced Badges of a Sexual Nature” in Maurits Smeyers and Bert Cardon (eds.), *Flanders in a European Perspective: Manuscript Illumination Around 1400 in Flanders and Abroad* (Leuven, 1995), pp. 504-506. See pp. 508-516 for phalluses on trees (fol. 106v and fol. 160), poking out of a monk’s habit (fol. 132v), being handed to a nun (fol. 160), and being used to fight a horned beast (fol. 130v).

³³ Koldewij, *Roman de la Rose*, p. 502.

been for public display or private use, but they do demonstrate an ease with explicit imagery that is perhaps surprising today.

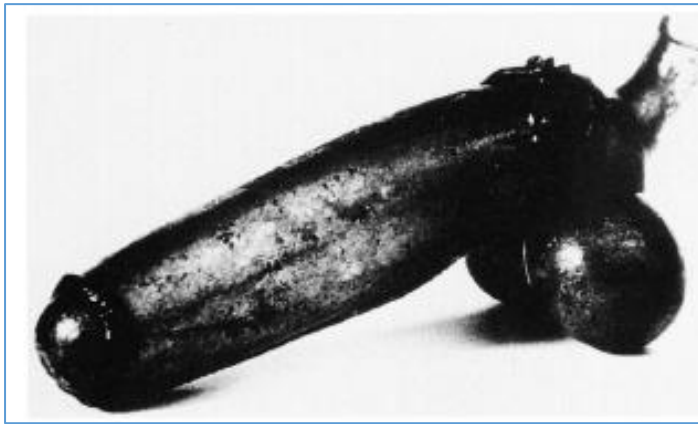


Figure 7 Phallus Glass, c. 1500-1550, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, inv. no. GG 735. Photo: after Koldeweij, “Lifting the Veil,” p. 171.

These examples show that sexual subjects and imagery were prevalent in a variety of cultural contexts before and throughout the Middle Ages. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that late medieval badges – a widely produced, cheap and flexible medium³⁴ – should also carry such subjects. Furthermore, the Song of Solomon, the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, sheelana-gigs and similar carvings suggest that “rude” stories/images and religious ones were by no means exclusive. Indeed, perhaps sexual humor was intended to make the Virgin (or other religious subjects) more accessible by bringing her into the worldly realm.³⁵ These, then, provide examples where something apparently crude might have been informing something pious.

Sexual Body-part Badges in their Superstitious Context

It is into this contemporary context of dual meanings and widespread scatology that we must place sexual body-part badges, starting with their clear superstitious interpretations, briefly summarized as follows. One, which has its roots in Roman iconography, is the idea of

³⁴ Jennifer Lee, “Material and Meaning in Lead Pilgrims’ Signs,” *Peregrinations*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (2009), p. 152.

³⁵ Scarborough, “Laughter and the Comedic,” p. 284.

protection from some sort of evil eye. We know from the writings of Plutarch (d.120) that “obscene” images were considered perfect to ward off the evil eye because they were a mixture of the bizarre and the shocking.³⁶ Similar ideas were found in medieval iconography. For example, the sexual marginalia in the *Roman de la Rose*, discussed briefly earlier (**fig. 6**),³⁷ makes a powerful connection between swords, cudgels, and phalluses, wielded by both men and women. One obvious example from this manuscript is that of two men facing down a mystical beast, wielding between them a sword, a cudgel, and one enormous erection.³⁸ Throughout the 15th century, all sorts of buckles, rings, and beads, often made of unworked stone, were worn as apotropaic charms.³⁹

Sexual body-part badges as wearable protection fall under this notion, working as excellent apotropaic charms. Winged phalluses, for instance, are suggestively pointed and clearly self-propelled, the perfect protection against demons and devils. Exposing the vulva by raising the skirts (in the manner of the sheela-na-gigs) was also considered apotropaic, dating back to ancient Greece,⁴⁰ so, again, badges of this body-part probably conveyed similar powers. The badges may not even have been worn publicly, but instead placed under layers of clothing,⁴¹ offering private protection. The badges were often found in water⁴² and for many people in the later Middle Ages, water (particularly holy water) was believed to have the power to protect from all manner of devils, demons, and spirits.⁴³ While the placement of badges in rivers could be due to causes other than deliberate disposal for

³⁶ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Convivales*, V.7.3; Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 249.

³⁷ Koldewey, *Roman de la Rose*, p. 510.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 505-506. Fol.130v bears the relevant image, illustrated on p. 515.

³⁹ John R. Decker, “‘Practical Devotion’ Apotropaism and the Protection of the Soul’ in Celeste Brusati, Karl A.E. Enekel and Walter S. Melion (eds.), *The Authority of the Word: Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe, 1400-1700* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 376-377.

⁴⁰ Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 251.

⁴¹ Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 249.

⁴² Michael Garcia, “Medieval Medicine, Magic and Water: The Dilemma of Deliberate Deposition of Pilgrim Signs,” *Peregrinations*, vol. 1, issue 3 (2005), p. 4.

⁴³ R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), p. 37.

apotropaic or votive purposes, the link between the protective power of both water and sexual symbols is strongly suggestive.



Figure 8 *Phalluses Carrying a Vulva on a Bier Badge*, 14th-15th century. After: Koldewej, “*Roman de la Rose*,” p. 507.

The humor inherent in winged penises and pilgrim vulvas may not have been intended to be simply funny or to have bestowed superstitious protection, but likely had a satirical import as well, as seen in a badge depicting three phalluses carrying a vulva on a stretcher (**fig. 8**).⁴⁴ It parodies a common form of popular devotion, the procession of relics through towns on biers or stretchers. Examples of this devotion can be seen in marginalia in the

⁴⁴ Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” pp. 506-507; Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 255.

Bellville Breviary with priests bearing the shrine of St. Dominic (early 15th century, Paris)⁴⁵ and the fourth tapestry from the series of *Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van de Zavel* (woven 1517-1518, Brussels)⁴⁶ depicting the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V carrying the crowned Virgin Mary. It has even been suggested that badges such as this should be viewed in the context of both pre- and post-Reformation Protestant processions that attacked Catholicism.⁴⁷ Instances of these processions occurred in Cologne where an inn-keeper was punished in 1441 for parading with an imitation reliquary and later, in 1543, in Hildesheim, when relics of the Virgin were paraded through the streets and mocked.⁴⁸ It cannot be coincidence that the vulva in the badge is of similar shape to the mandorla that surrounded images of the Virgin used during such real processions. In a satirical context, the mandorla shape of the vulva would reinforce the connection to, and satire of, processions of the Virgin.

The other potentially satirical form that badges sometimes took was that of a vulva dressed as a pilgrim (**fig. 1**). At least ten versions of this popular badge are known, some with their very own phallic pilgrim badges, others with hats, rosary beads, or staffs.⁴⁹ A male version exists as well – a phallus carrying a staff and scrip (backpack) being crowned by a young woman.⁵⁰ These, too, might be satirical, with the “crowned” phallus, a parody of the “crown of martyrdom” which greeted saints at the end of their spiritual journeys.⁵¹ However, the presence of sexual body-part badges found alongside pilgrimage badges suggests that there was overlap in the wearers of these items, so it is also possible that these images were simply meant to be humorous teasing rather than genuine criticism.

⁴⁵ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms 104484, fol. 218v; Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” pp. 506-507.

⁴⁶ Brussels, Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis, inv.3153; Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” p. 507.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 255.

⁴⁸ Paul Vandenbroeck, “Jheronimus Bosch’ Hooiwagen: enkele bijkomende gegevens,” *Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen Jaarboek* (1987), p. 135 and Bob Scribner, “Reformation, carnival and the world turned upside-down,” *Social History* 3 (1978), p. 303ff.; Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 255.

⁴⁹ Koldewej, “Shameless and Naked Images,” p. 508.

⁵⁰ Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 256.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Another interpretation is that the sexual body-part badges were somehow linked to fertility – a complex issue, but there seems to be reasonable grounds to assume that there was indeed a relationship. Michael Garcia notes that the majority of pilgrim badges are found in rivers, particularly when the river borders a town.⁵² He posits the idea that, as pilgrims often bought more than one badge, they intended to keep one and deposit the other in water on their return home for purposes of cleansing, healing, or giving thanks for safe return.⁵³ As sexual body-part badges are generally found in the same watery contexts as religious badges, it is possible that they were also intended to be an offering and, given their forms, they might well have been offered for reasons of fertility.



Figure 9 *Phallus and Vulva Badge*. Photo: after Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages*, p. 248.

This idea would not have been new to the later Middle Ages. We have already examined Ancient Greek vases that show women carrying, planting, and watering phalluses (figs. 3, 4)⁵⁴ and some sexual body-part badges demonstrate similar scenes. In one, a woman

⁵² Garcia, “Medieval Medicine,” p. 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁴ Malcolm Jones, “The Sexual and the Secular Badges” in H. J. E. Van Beuningen, A. M. Koldeweij and D. Kicken (eds.), *Heilig en Profaan, vol. 2: 1200 Laatmiddeleeuwse Insignes uit Openbare en Particuliere Collecties, Rotterdam Papers*, vol. 12 (Cothen, 2001), p. 197.

is seen planting or picking a phallus (**fig. 10**),⁵⁵ while another shows a pair of phalluses in a distinctly arboreal context (**fig. 11**) like that of the phallus tree present in the marginalia of two pages of the *Roman de la Rose* (**fig. 6**).⁵⁶ While the precise forms vary slightly between these examples, the ostensible subject matter is undeniably similar.

Where such images might overlap is in the link between the blood of Christ, the Resurrection, and beliefs in blood as a bringer of life.⁵⁷ Blood was often associated with growth and arboreal imagery – in the 13th century, Gerhard of Cologne vividly linked the blood from Christ’s side-wound with wine from a vineyard.⁵⁸ The link between vulvas and phalluses, from where all human life comes, blood and fertility is obvious and the life-bringing symbolism of a phallus walking into a vulva is clearer still (**fig. 9**). Plausibly therefore, certain sexual body-part badges were linked with ideas of growth and fertility. This could explain why phallic badges are frequently found in water and may even explain why they were made and bought.

The theory that badges were intentionally deposited in rivers as offerings has, however, recently come under scrutiny by Jennifer Lee. She suggests that it is more likely they were either mixed in with other rubbish being used to fill in the river⁵⁹ or were simply cast away by people at the end of their pilgrimages who thus no longer needed to be identified as pilgrims.⁶⁰ She also points out that the conditions for preserving lead are particularly good in the damp soils of the Thames rather than dry conditions elsewhere,

⁵⁵ Malcolm Jones, “The Sexual and the Secular Badges,” p. 196.

⁵⁶ *Roman de la Rose*, fol. 106v and fol. 160, : Paris, Bibl. Nat.; Koldeweij, “*Roman de la Rose*,” p. 507, 510.

⁵⁷ See, for example, miracles in which blood brought about a return to life recorded in the *Historia inventionis et ostensionis vivifici Sacramenti in Wilsnack* (Lübeck: Stephen Arnd, 1520); in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, 2007), p. 155.

⁵⁸ Gerhard of Cologne, *Tractus de sacratissimo sanguine domini*, 1280; as cited in Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, p. 156.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Lee, “Medieval pilgrims’ badges in rivers: the curious history of a non-theory,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, vol. 11 (December 2014), p. 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

leading to a misleading number of badges being found in that context.⁶¹ For Lee, the presence of both religious and obscene badges in the same context supports her theory that these were thrown away as rubbish, rather than votive offerings.⁶²

Nonetheless, in the context of this article, I propose the reverse: that their presence together supports the idea that they may have had similar purposes. If we accept the theory that pilgrimage badges were thrown away at the end of pilgrimages having come to the end of their useful life, rather than as a votive offering, then it is possible to make a similar assumption about sexual body-part badges found in the same places. It would support the idea that these obscene badges also had a protective or symbolic use, rather than just being humorous gewgaws, and were thus disposed of once this specific purpose was over.



Figure 10 *Woman Planting Phallus Badge*, HP2 no. 1749. Photo: after Jones, ‘The Sexual and the Secular’, p. 196.



Figure 11 *Phalluses Among Greenery Badge*, 14th-15th century. Photo: after Koldeweij, “*Roman de la Rose*,” p. 507.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Furthermore, of course, that lead badges have largely not been found away from water is not necessarily proof that they were disposed in less-conducive conditions for survival and have disappeared. It may just mean that they were not disposed there at all. It has also been pointed out that inland locations where conditions would still have been suitable for preservation (such as wells and rubbish dumps) have yielded no badges⁶³ and nor have they been found in locations where pilgrims would have gathered in large numbers, such as hospitals.⁶⁴ It is notable that medieval rubbish dumps do not themselves seem to hold badges, only areas along river banks where rubbish has been dumped. Lee emphasizes that medieval people were “discerning” and “image-savvy,” capable of attributing images with different significances dependent on context.⁶⁵ It is in the context of a populace capable of seeing multiple layers of meaning in images that sexual body-part must be viewed – both humorous and protective, rude and religious.

If these phallic badges were bought at sites of pilgrimage, they might have been imbued with the same beneficial power “regular” pilgrim badges were intended to transmit from shrines and relics to the person wearing them.⁶⁶ If Koldewey’s interpretation of Gerson’s “shameless and naked images” as sexual body-part badges is correct, then this suggests phallic and vulvic badges were also available at shrines like pilgrimage badges.⁶⁷ Thus, by buying a phallic badge at a shrine, a pilgrim might have been purchasing a particularly potent symbol of fertility. By depositing it in water (another symbol of fertility), the pilgrim would be magnifying the power of the badge.

Of course, it is possible that the sexual body-part badges were being sold at church festivals simply because these attracted a large number of people who might purchase them.

⁶³ Garcia, “Medieval Medicine,” p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Lee, “Medieval pilgrims’ badges,” p. 11.

⁶⁶ Brian Spencer, “Medieval Pilgrim Badges,” *Rotterdam Papers*, vol. 1 (1968), p. 143.

⁶⁷ Although it is hard to know exactly where the sexual body-part badges would have been sold in relation to pilgrimage badges.

They still (according to Gerson) were sold within the church precincts, supporting the idea that religious institutions were comfortable with the use of obscene imagery, either for profit or for religious purposes.

The ubiquity and open nature of sexual imagery in the late medieval period gives rise to the possibility that these badges were not necessarily intended for wearing beneath cloth as Jones has suggested. While drinking glasses and plates might have been kept hidden away, their existence suggests some sort of display or use was intended for them, a supposition enhanced by a record from 1571 which attests to a West Ham brothel keeper being charged with offering “a glass like unto a pintle and a pair of ballocks” to her customers.⁶⁸ Sexually-explicit imagery on the outside of churches was clearly visible. Badges would have been more easily hidden than either of these, but it seems reasonable to suggest that as late-medieval people seem to have been comfortable with open sexual imagery in many other areas, they would not suddenly become squeamish when it came to sexual body-part badges.

Sexual Body-part Badges in their Religious Context

Given the contemporary culture of comfort with scatological themes, the relationship between sex and religion, and the clear use of sexual body-part badges as superstitious charms, it is no great step to believe these badges were also imbued with genuine religious meaning. For example, the similarity between vulvas and mandorlas might have been used not just as a parody, but as an evocation. Pilgrim badges from Our Lady of Rocamadour and Our Lady of Le Puy were cast in a *vesica piscis* (pointed oval) form,⁶⁹ which the pilgrim-vulva badges clearly resemble. Even more-traditional religious pilgrim badges utilized the form, such as found on a badge of Thomas Becket enthroned, surrounded by an oval shape

⁶⁸ Quoted in F. G. Emmison *Elizabethan Life: Morals and the Church Courts* (Chelmsford, 1973), p.21; Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 261.

⁶⁹ Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 233-235; Lee, “Material and Meaning,” pp. 163-164.

(in this case a stylized Lombardic T) and bearing a staff, much like the pilgrim-vulva.⁷⁰ It is possible that the vulva being borne on a bier by phalluses was both meant to be funny and to evoke genuine religious processions without necessarily criticising or satirising. The similarity between the vulvas and mandorlas opens up the chance for a deeper interpretation of the badges as partly religious objects.



Figure 12 *The Five Hearts of Divine Love and the Crucified Christ*, c.1460-70, Schr. 1805, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin. Photo: after Peter Parshall and Rainer Schoch, *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-Century Woodcuts and Their Public* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 262.

Vulvic body-part badges, in particular, can be linked to mystical devotional ideas of the veneration of Christ's side wound. That a link between the side-wound and the vulva might present itself in the late medieval context of sexual body-part badges, related as they

⁷⁰ Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs*, p. 123.

were to pilgrim badges, is plausible given that coquille is a French word which can mean both scallop shell (symbol of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela) and female genitalia.⁷¹ Bynum and Easton have also drawn parallels between vulvas and Christ's side wound. The disassociated wound of Christ was a reasonably common subject in manuscripts⁷² (**figs. 13, 14**) and, aside from their vulva-like shape, were occasionally explicitly linked to genitalia. For instance, *The Five Hearts of Divine Love and the Crucified Christ* – a German woodcut from c.1460-70 (Schr. 1805, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin) – overlays a heart, wounded with a suggestive slit, placed over Christ's groin (**fig. 12**).⁷³

Medieval accounts of spiritual encounters with the wound of Christ were also sometimes couched in erotic language, as when female mystics “drank from his wound, kissed it, penetrated it” and were penetrated themselves.⁷⁴ In the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen wrote that “the rivers of blood in the woman flow out inordinately in an improper time [a woman] is in pain like any man who is wounded by a sword.”⁷⁵ Several devotional texts also drew a link between the opening of Christ's side by Longinus's lance and giving birth. Vincent of Beauvais (d.1264) described Christ's side as “opened...the door of life was opened,”⁷⁶ and James of Klusa (d.1465), in a mid-15th-century prayer, suggested that the church was birthed from Christ's side-wound.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Sherry C. M. Lindquist, “The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: An Introduction” in Sherry C. M. Lindquist (ed.) *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Farnham, 2012), p. 20.

⁷² David S. Areford, *The Viewer and the Printed Image in Late Medieval Europe* (Farnham, 2010), p. 230. For example, *Arma Christi*, manuscript illumination, 1320. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale Albert 1er, MS 4459-70, fol. 150v and “Measure of the Side Wound and the Body of Christ,” colored woodcut, c. 1484-1492. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 122-1 (Schr. 1789).

⁷³ Areford, *The Viewer and the Printed Image*, p. 259.

⁷⁴ Martha Easton, “The Wound of Christ, the Mouth of Hell: Appropriation and Inversions of Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages” in Susan L'Engle and Gerald B. Guest (eds.), *Tributes to Jonathan J. G. Alexander: The Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Art and Architecture* (London, 2006), p. 397.

⁷⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, *Causae et curae*, ed. Paul Kaiser (Leipzig, 1903), Easton, “The Wound of Christ,” p. 397.

⁷⁶ *Vincentius Speculum*, Historiale, bk 7, chap.46, p. 237; cited in Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, p.18.

⁷⁷ *Ancient Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by Carthusian Monks of the XIV-XVII Centuries* (London, 1895), pp.17-19; Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, pp.159-60. See also chapter 1, p. 2 for the full passage.

Easton points out that in medieval imagery and writings, the wound of Christ performs the same functions as the female body, particularly the vulva – bleeding, lactating and birthing.⁷⁸ She also draws a parallel between the story of Mary Salome putting her finger between the Virgin’s labia and the apostle Thomas putting his finger into Christ’s side-wound.⁷⁹ When combined with the semi-religious form of some sexual body-part badges and their discovery alongside pilgrimage badges, it is not too strong to suggest that the vulvic forms could have been meant to be at least partly interpreted as Christ’s side wound.

While this imparts a religious interpretation to the sexual body-part badges in their own right, it can also be taken further. Through the link between the vulvic body-part badges and the side wound, the badges could have also represented holy blood. Some medieval theories of physiology (such as that of John of Capistrano, d. 1456)⁸⁰ held that the fetus was formed of maternal uterine blood. Earlier, Abbot Berthold of Weingarten (d. 1232) described Christ’s body and Mary’s womb as so intertwined that Christ’s body almost became Mary’s blood, meaning that redemption was, indirectly, via her blood.⁸¹ Thus “the blood of the passion is the blood of birthing. Hence the fertile, separated blood from Christ’s side is female blood.”⁸² The vulva/side-wound/mandorla-shaped badges might have invoked Mary (through the her vulva) through which emerged the holy, female blood of Christ’s side-wound.

The intersection of gender could also explain a badge which shows a female smith forging a phallus. As well as simply being an amusing vignette, this could represent the idea of the male being born of the female, of Mary ‘forging’ Christ (represented by the male phallus). A badge showing a vulva dressed as a pilgrim, bearing a staff topped by a badge in

⁷⁸ Easton, “The Wound of Christ,” p. 397.

⁷⁹ *Protoevangelium of James*, 19.1-20.2; *Pseudo-Matthew* 13.3-5; Easton, “The Wound of Christ,” p. 400.

⁸⁰ John of Capistrano, *Tractatus de Christi sanguine pretioso*; as cited in Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, p. 158.

⁸¹ Berthold of Weingarten, *Annotatio qualiter officium de s. Maria per circulum anni die sabbati debeat celebrari*; as cited in Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, p. 158.

⁸² Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, p. 159.

the shape of a phallus (**fig. 1**) The intersection of gender could also explain a badge which shows a female smith forging a phallus. As well as simply being an amusing vignette, this could represent the idea of the male being born of the female, of Mary ‘forging’ Christ (represented by the male phallus). A badge showing a vulva dressed as a pilgrim, bearing a staff topped by a badge in the shape of a phallus (**fig. 1**) might be viewed as Mary (the holy



Figure 13 *The Measured Wound of Christ*, 1496-1497, Bibliothèque Royal de Belgique, ms. 10389, fol. 131. Photo: after Kathryn Rudy, “Women’s Devotion in Mechelen,” in Dagmar Eichberger (ed.) *Women of Distinction: Margaret of York and Margaret of Austria* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2005), p. 235.

female, represented by the vulva/mandorla) bearing Christ (represented by the male phallus). Popular veneration of Christ’s foreskin relic began in the 11th century and it (or versions of it) continued to perform miracles until the mid-16th century,⁸³ so the idea that Christ might be represented by a phallus in the humorous context of these badges is not far-fetched.

Another reading of the vulva bearing a phallus-badge on a staff is connected directly to holy blood. The staff is distinctly lance-like, with the point provided by the phallus. While the link between phalluses, penetration and weapons as already seen in the *Roman de la Rose*

⁸³ Robert P. Palazzo, “The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s) of Baby Jesus – A Documented Analysis” in James P. Helfers (ed.) *Multicultural Europe and Cultural Exchange in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; vol. 12) (Brepols, 2005), pp. 157-159.

was well-known, here the phallus-staff might be read as a religious image – Longinus’s lance. The phallus-staff badge is by no means alone in calling to mind a thrusting lance. In some, the phallus is anthropomorphized and appears to walk into a vulva, in others the phallus endlessly chases a vulva around a circle of lead. **(fig. 9)** These symbols of piercing recall the salvation achieved through the piercing of Christ’s side by the lance of Longinus.

A further religious reading of these phallus-approaching-vulva badges is perhaps less-obvious, but still worth noting. Easton has noted medieval parallels between vulvas and Hellmouths, particularly in light of their shape and occasional placement between Satan’s legs.⁸⁴ She also discusses one of Boccaccio’s stories where a man describes the act of sex as “putting the devil back into hell” in order to trick a woman into having sex with him.⁸⁵ As genitalia, both male and female, had demonic associations to the medieval mind,⁸⁶ it is possible to see two Hellmouth-related layers of meaning in the phallus-approaching-vulva badges. Firstly, they were warnings or reminders to not fall into sexually loose ways, to avoid the Hellmouth of the vulva, and, secondly, the combination of the Christ/phallus imagery with the Hellmouth/vulva might be a veiled reference to Christ entering a Hellmouth to commence the Harrowing of Hell.

A final interpretation of the combined phallus and vulva badges comes from the tantalising suggestion of touch inherent in having the two sexual organs so close together and, occasionally, directly linked. Pilgrim badges were important because they were a representation of having been touched by the relevant saint, an act which bestowed the benefits of visiting their shrines. Pilgrims would also touch relics, statues, oil or water to try and bring and bring away some of the benefit of the holy place.⁸⁷ In light of the Christ/phallus

⁸⁴ Easton, “The Wound of Christ,” p. 403.

⁸⁵ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, p.318, 3rd story, 10th day; as cited in Easton, “The Wound of Christ,” p. 403.

⁸⁶ Michael Camille, “Obscenity Under Erasure: Censorship in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts” in Jan M. Ziolkowski (ed.), *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 144-148.

⁸⁷ Lee, “Material and Meaning,” p. 167.

relationship, the act of touching suggested by the phallus-vulva badges may have had a similar religious connotation, particularly when sexual body-part badges were found with pilgrimage ones.⁸⁸



Figure 14 “The Measured Wound of Christ,” c. 1320, The Villers Miscellany, Brussels Koninklijke Bibliotheek, ms. 4459-70, fol. 150v. Photo: after Kathryn Rudy, *Rubrics, Images and Indulgences in Late Medieval Netherlandish Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 56.

The materials associated with sexual body-part badges connected them, too, to devotional ideas. The *Liber Melorum*, a treatise by Herbert of Bosham written in 1186,⁸⁹ although written some

time before the bulk of the badges under discussion have been dated, features some potentially useful ideas with regard to the later sexual body-part badges. For Herbert, there were three key elements to ampullae containing holy water – lead, water and blood. He found varying levels of significance in each of these materials: gravity and old age in the lead, purity and youth in the water, and the power, beauty and fortitude of martyrdom in the blood.⁹⁰ Herbert also linked the use of lead to Christian ideas of humility and the Christian idea that “the least exalted may be the most exalted.”⁹¹ Vulvic body-part badges can

⁸⁸ Even nominally non-religious beliefs would still have had a place in contemporary religious thinking – John R. Decker notes that, for Christians in the 15th century, apotropaism was viewed as a rational belief which worked because God allowed it to work, “Practical Devotion,” pp. 160-161.

⁸⁹ Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum*, in *Herberti de Boseham S. Thomae Cantuariensis clerici a secretis opera quae extant omnia/ nunc primum edidit*, I.A. Giles, vol. 2, ed. John Allen Giles (Oxford, 1845-6), p. 57; Lee, “Material and Meaning,” p. 153.

⁹⁰ Herbert of Bosham; cited in Lee, “Material and Meaning,” p. 156.

⁹¹ Lee, “Material and Meaning,” p. 157.

potentially be linked to these three areas of significance as well. Their material is lead, their form invokes the idea of blood, and they are often found in water. Therefore, they could have been intended on some level to invoke Christian ideas of humility through lead, purity through water, and martyrdom through blood.

Conclusion

That Herbert writes about multiple layers and meaning is key to the proposed argument. Medieval people read varied thoughts and ideas into single objects, images and stories. Therefore, they would have had no problem viewing sexual body-part badges in a similar way. The badge of a vulva dressed as a pilgrim and bearing a staff topped with a phallus (**fig. 1**) could, to different people, be an apotropaic symbol of defence, a symbol of growth and fertility, a satirical jibe at pilgrims, and a crude joke all at once.

As well as all of these meanings, this badge might also have had a whole host of religious significances – the pilgrim-vulva badge (and other sexual body-part badges) might have been a very genuine way of relating to religion. Sexual images and stories were everywhere in the late Middle Ages, from manuscript margins and drinking glasses to the religious context of the Bible and churches. Not everyone always viewed pilgrimage badges as bona fide religious objects and there are many parallels between pilgrim badges and sexual body-part badges, not least where they were sold and where they were found. Representations of sexual body-parts on badges and personal holy experience further links these badges with their more-popular religious examples. Ultimately, their humor carried their meaning and, as Jones noted, humor is a key part of apotropaic protection.⁹² The *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, the Song of Solomon and the erotic/religious experiences of medieval mystics demonstrate that humor and sexuality were both much a part of the late-medieval approach and understanding

⁹² Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, p. 273.

of religion, despite their ostensible incompatibility. As Camille wished to avoid using the term secular exclusive of the term sacred when interpreting marginal imagery,⁹³ so too should we look at and understand sexual body-part badges. These humorous, sexual objects were certainly not purely religious, but it seems entirely reasonable to place them in the liminal area between secular and popular religion.⁹⁴ They engaged with and related to religion through the prisms of satire, sex, and scatological humor, in a very genuine way. 🐣

⁹³ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992), p. 36.

⁹⁴ Scribner, *Popular Culture*, pp.17-18 for a discussion on popular religion as opposed to institutional or philosophical religion.