Pilgrim Badges & Obscene Iconography in the Late Middle Ages

Badges as Wearable Iconography

In the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500), badges were a popular form of wearable iconography. These ornaments were made from materials of various expense, making them accessible to the majority of medieval society. Such badges were a form of visual language, communicating messages of status, belief, and individual experience. A wide array of themes are expressed through these badges, both religious and secular, and ranging from decent to obscene. .

Fig 1: Pilgrim's badge - Head of Thomas Becket as Bishop
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

Fig 2: Winged phallus amulet
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

Badges: Religious to Secular, Decent to Obscene

The typical pilgrim's badge is both decent and religious, visually communicating one's pilgrim status, religious belief, and individual experience in relation to pilgrimage sites (Fig. 1). These badges have been discovered alongside secular badges of an obscene nature (Reiss, 2017). Obscene badges display explicit sexual content and are speculated to have had apotropaic and fertility-enhancing properties (Fig. 2) (Koldeweij, 1999; Naumann, 2006) While these two types badges function at opposite ends of the spectrum, a curious medieval phenomenon serves to marry the two typologies: the obscene religious badge. This research explores obscene religious badges, focusing on obscenity in medieval society and the function of badges in their spiritual, social, and economic contexts.

Scan for more info on obscene apotropaic imagery

Fig 3: Sheela-na-gig figure on Kiltinan Church, Ireland
Photo Credit to www.irelands-sheelanagigs.org

Figure 4: *Châtelaine de Vergi* copulating with her lover as the duke and her dog watch
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

Obscenity in Medieval Culture

- ❖ Obscene content was commonplace in medieval society, meaning obscene religious badges were not as conspicuous as they might seem to us.
- ❖ Obscenity could be found in a variety of secular and religious contexts.
- ❖ People in the Middle Ages would have recognized obscene images as part of a wider visual culture and language.

Scan for an elaboration on obscenity in medieval culture

Fig 5: Legend of Our Lady of the Sablon: The Statue of the Virgin Welcomed with Grand Pomp in Brussels, 1526-28, Bernard van Orley
Photo credit to Art & History Museum, Brussels, Belgium

Fig 6: Bruges Badge – Phallic figures carrying crowned vulva on a bier
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

Obscene Religious Badges as Satire of Christian Practice

- ❖ Certain badges seem to use obscenity as a form of visual satire of religious practices. These badges are recognizably religious yet made ridiculous by the use of anthropomorphic phalli and vulvas.
- ❖ E.g.: Fig. 6 satires "a common form of popular devotion, the procession of relics through towns on biers or stretchers" (Fig. 5) (Reiss, 2017, p. 162).
- ❖ The shape of the vulva mirrors that of the mandorla, an almond-shaped frame which commonly surrounds the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography, further tying vulvar imagery with religiosity (Reiss, 2017).
- ❖ E.g.: Fig. 7 is thought to be a satirization of the "crown of martyrdom," a crown bestowed upon saints when their life/spiritual journey was complete (Fig. 8) The phallus is thought to be dressed as a pilgrim to represent the metaphorical pilgrimage of the saint's life.
- ❖ The satirization of these religious practices has been linked by some scholars to early Protestant iconoclastic thought (Jones, 2002, p. 255 as cited in Reiss, 2017).

Fig 7: Woman crowning phallus dressed as a pilgrim
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

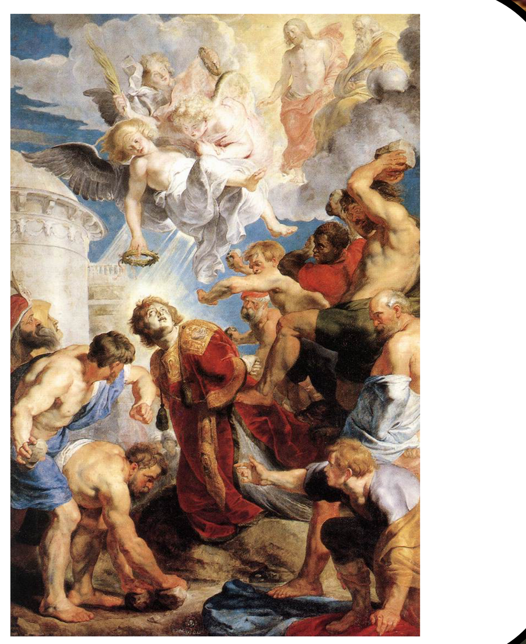

Fig 8: The Martyrdom of St. Stephen
Peter Paul Rubena (1577-1640)
Photo Credit to Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes, France

Medieval Pilgrimage and Sexuality

- ❖ In the Middle Ages, sexuality was inextricable from pilgrimage.
- ❖ Travelling in the public sphere was thought to make pilgrims vulnerable to sin, especially lust, as travel "provided opportunities to meet, and to carry out assignations with, inappropriate sexual partners" (Craig, 2009, p. 29).
- ❖ The recognition of these opportunities created a moral panic surrounding pilgrimage and its associated unbridled sexuality.
- ❖ The link between pilgrimage and sex is evident in the significant medieval manuscript, *Le Roman de la Rose*, where pilgrimage is explicitly used as an allegory for sexual union.

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Image References

Fig 1: Object 00364. (c. 1400-1449). *Head of Thomas Becket as bishop between swords on round badge decorated all around with flower ornaments and large circles* [Image of Pilgrim Badge]. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 1216 Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Fig 2: Object 06929. (c. 1325-1374). *Winged phallus* [Image of Badge]. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 3582. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Fig 3: (2015). [Sheela-na-gig on Kiltinan Church, Ireland]. Ireland's Síle na Gig. http://www.irelands-sheelanagigs.org/sheelas/kiltinane-church-2/

Fig 4: Object 00611. (c. 1375-1424). *Lady of Vergi: Copulating couple between trees, the duke and his dog watching, scroll above their heads* [Image of Badge]. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 0954. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

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Fig 6: Object 00652. (c. 1375-1424). *Procession of three phallic figures carrying crowned vulva on a litter* [Image of Badge]. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 0967. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Fig 7: Object 05698. (c. 1375-1424). *Woman crowning phallic animal dressed as pilgrim carrying bag and staff* [Image of Badge]. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 3146. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Fig 8: Rubens, P. P. (c. 1616-1617). The martyrdom of St. Stephen [Painting]. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes, France. https://valenciennesmusee.valenciennes.fr/

Fig 9: Object 06930. (c. 1325- 1374). *Standing phallic and vulva dressed as pilgrims.* [Image of Badge]. Ypres, Belgium; Stedelijk Museum Ieper, inventory no. SM 2957. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Fig 10: Bedford Master. (c. 1440-1450). Saint James as a Pilgrim with a Purse and a Staff [Illumination]. Getty Images. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/3540/workshop-of-the-bedford-master-saint-james-as-a-pilgrim-with-a-purse-and-a-staff-french-about-1440-1450/?dz=0.4972,0.4972,0.32

Fig 11: Object 11347v. (c. 1300-1349). Walking pilgrim wearing cloak holding pilgrim's staff in left hand and bare phallus in the other, on base [Image of Badge]. Kortemark, Belgium; The Immovable Heritage Agency, inventory no: 98-I V W-2-DH3-467. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Fig 12: Object 06541. (c. 1375-1424). *Vulva figure dressed as pilgrim with rosary in one hand and pilgrim's staff in the other, to left and right on the shoulder a phallus*. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 3301. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

Background: [Green, yellow, and red tapestry] [Photograph]. (n.d.). Winding Stream Word Press. https://windingstream.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/tapestry.jpg

QR 2 Images: Object 00611. (c. 1375-1424). *Lady of Vergi: Copulating couple between trees, the duke and his dog watching, scroll above their heads* [Image of Badge]. Rotterdam, Netherlands; Museum Boijmans, collection: Langbroek, Familie Van Beuningen, inventory no. 0954. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from https://www.kunera.nl/kunerapage.aspx?From=Default

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Obscene Pilgrim Badges

- ❖ The most overt example of the link between pilgrimage and sexuality comes from the iconography of obscene pilgrim badges, where "we encounter pilgrims both male and female, overt sexual organs which have come to life as erotic travellers" (Koldeweij, 2005, p. 507).
- ❖ Obscene pilgrim badges allude to anxieties surrounding pilgrimage as being inherently sexually motivated rather than devotional.
- ❖ The increased use of obscene pilgrim badges in the 14th and 15th centuries coincided with economic and social changes associated with the bubonic plague. This correlation is likely because obscene pilgrim badges were used to address or satirize social anxieties, heightened during this tumultuous time (Craig, 2009; Naumann, 2006).

Fig 9: Standing phallus and vulva dressed as pilgrims
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

Fig 10: St. James as a pilgrim, denoted by the wide-brimmed hat, bag, and staff
(Paris, 1440) Photo Credit to Getty Images

Phallus and Vulva Pilgrims

Badges depicting male pilgrims with their erect penises exposed were one version of obscene pilgrim badges (Fig. 11), but the most prolific and telling image was that of the "the Vulva Pilgrim," (Fig. 12) an anthropomorphic vulva dressed in pilgrim's garb. (Craig, 2009; Naumann, 2006). During the Middle Ages, women were perceived as inherently wayward and fickle, a continuation of biologically determinative thought stemming from classical medical texts (Craig, 2009). The Vulva Pilgrim is an elaboration of this "wandering woman" archetype. Most commonly, the Vulva Pilgrim is depicted wearing a wide-brimmed pilgrim's hat and possessing a bag, a rosary, and a phallic staff. Sometimes, the vulva figure is "anatomically equipped with a penis and testicles" (Naumann, 2006, p. 10). Other times the Vulva Pilgrim wears phallic pilgrim badges (Koldeweij, 2005; Naumann, 2006). The Vulva Pilgrim's ridiculous and explicit appearance is humorous and outlandish, allowing the Vulva Pilgrim to effectively satirize social anxieties surrounding women's mobility in an era of dynamic social change

Fig 11: Colaked male pilgrim with a staff in one hand & erect phallus in the other
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

Fig 12: Vulva Pilgrim with hat, staff, rosary, and a phallus on each shoulder
Photo Credit to Kunera Database

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