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Pilgrim Signs and other Badges in Bristol City Museum

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A Collection of Pilgrim Signs and Other Badges in Bristol City Museum

By SUSAN BARKER

THE MAJORITY of this small group of badges, were dredged up from the Floating Harbour of Bristol in 1892. They are one of the few surviving records of medieval pilgrimage, which was such a popular and everyday occurrence that there is hardly any reference to it in contemporary literature. The signs were made in vast numbers and as cheaply as possible, being cast in stone moulds; many of these moulds have been found and some could cast up to six badges at a time. Most badges were made of lead or low-quality pewter. They were usually worn on the hat, so were provided with loops for sewing or with a flimsy pin cast on the back, as on the badge of king Henry VI illustrated here. It is because they were so poorly made that so few have survived, and most of these have been found in rivers, such as the Thames or the Seine, or in harbours, as at King's Lynn or Bristol.

On arrival at the shrine, the pilgrim would buy one of these badges, in much the same way as tourists now buy stickers for their cars. However, it was more than just a souvenir. It marked him out as someone rather more special than his fellow men, for in order to undertake a pilgrimage he had first to be ordained in his local church and then to make a long and often difficult journey to pay his respects to the remains of the saint. A certain degree of sanctity was attributed to the badge itself, since it had usually been in contact with the relics, or, in the case of the ampulla, held holy water or oil which had touched them. Thus pilgrims' signs are sometimes mentioned in medieval wills and a few have been found in graves.

As mentioned above, pilgrimage seems to have been as commonplace as any other religious practice, which is obvious from the fact that Chaucer chose the Canterbury pilgrimage, one of the most popular of all, as the setting for his story. He shows also that it was open to everyone, regardless of class or profession—miller, priest, knight and housewife, all travelling and living together. Motives were equally varied; to seek a cure, to pay a vow made, for instance, when in danger of shipwreck, to pay one's respects, or simply for the fun of it; for some people it was probably the only opportunity to travel.

There were hundreds of shrines in England alone; indeed, at one time practically every parish church seemed to have had its relics. Some, such as that of Our Lady at Walsingham or St Thomas Becket at Canterbury, were of international fame (St Thomas was particularly popular in Sweden). Others were dedicated to local people of unusual piety or renown, many of whom, such as John Schorn, rector of North Marston in Buckinghamshire, who was supposed to have conjured the devil into a boot, were never officially canonized. Unfortunately, however, very few pilgrim signs bear the saint's name; often there is just a picture of some incident in their life or some object representing this, the significance of which is now completely lost, so that only the well-known saints can be identified. Thus Henry VI is shown as a king, but there are innumerable royal saints and it is only because one or two of these badges have been found in dateable contexts that this king can be recognized.

Adventurous pilgrims went abroad, to the great shrine of St James at Compostella, to SS Peter and Paul at Rome and even to Sinai and Jerusalem. It seems that Bristol played an important part in this overseas traffic, for it was the main port of embarkation for pilgrims bound for Compostella. The merchants of Bristol shipped them over in lots of thirty to a hundred at a time, which gives an

indication of the popularity of this shrine. In time of war, merchants had to obtain special licences, allowing them to carry pilgrims, 'providing they do not take with them anything harmful to the realm, any gold or silver in mass or money beyond their reasonable expenses, nor reveal any secrets of the realm'. Margery Kempe, an inveterate pilgrim of the 15th century, whose autobiography survives, came to Bristol in 1436 on her way to St James. After a great deal of trouble in finding a vessel, 'she took her ship in the name of Jesus and sailed forth with her fellowship, to whom God sent fair wind and weather, so that they came to St James on the seventh day'.

As might be expected of such a prosperous city, Bristol had a shrine of its own. This was the chapel of St Anne's in the Wood at Brislington, erected by one of the Lords de la Warr, whose family held the manor of Brislington from the late 12th to the mid-16th century. William of Worcester, writing about 1480, noted that it was nineteen yards long by five yards wide, and that it contained two huge four-sided candles, of the unlikely height of eighty feet. These were renewed annually and cost those responsible, the Cordwainers' and Weavers' Guilds, £5 a year. There were also thirteen other square-sided candles before the image of St Anne and thirty-two ships and little ships hung up as offerings, probably by sailors who had escaped shipwreck, as well as five silver ships worth about 20s. each. For Bristol, one of the busiest ports in the country and exporting in particular wool and woollen cloth, St Anne, in her capacity as protectress of seamen, was the natural choice of saint. This description shows that she was well supported by those whose prosperity depended on overseas trade.

The shrine was well known long before William of Worcester's time and became so famous that Henry VII made a special pilgrimage there on his first visit to Bristol in 1486. The remains of the chapel were excavated in 1914 by W. J. Pountney, who published the results in *Old Bristol Potteries*, reprinted in 1972.

THE BADGES

1. An ampulla, or flask, made of high-quality tinned pewter. Most ampullae take the form of the scallop shell, originally the sign of St James of Compostella, but later incorporated into many other signs, possibly because it is a useful shape for holding holy water or oil. Ampullae were worn on the hat or round the neck, as the other badges. This one is from Canterbury; the head on one side probably represents St Thomas and the form of the mitre dates it to the early 13th century. On the reverse is depicted the murder of the saint, unusual in that he is shown between the two knights rather than to one side of them. This small scene incorporates a remarkable amount of detail, even down to the knight's spurs.

An identical one was found recently during excavations in Tooley Street, Southwark, near the foot of Old London Bridge.

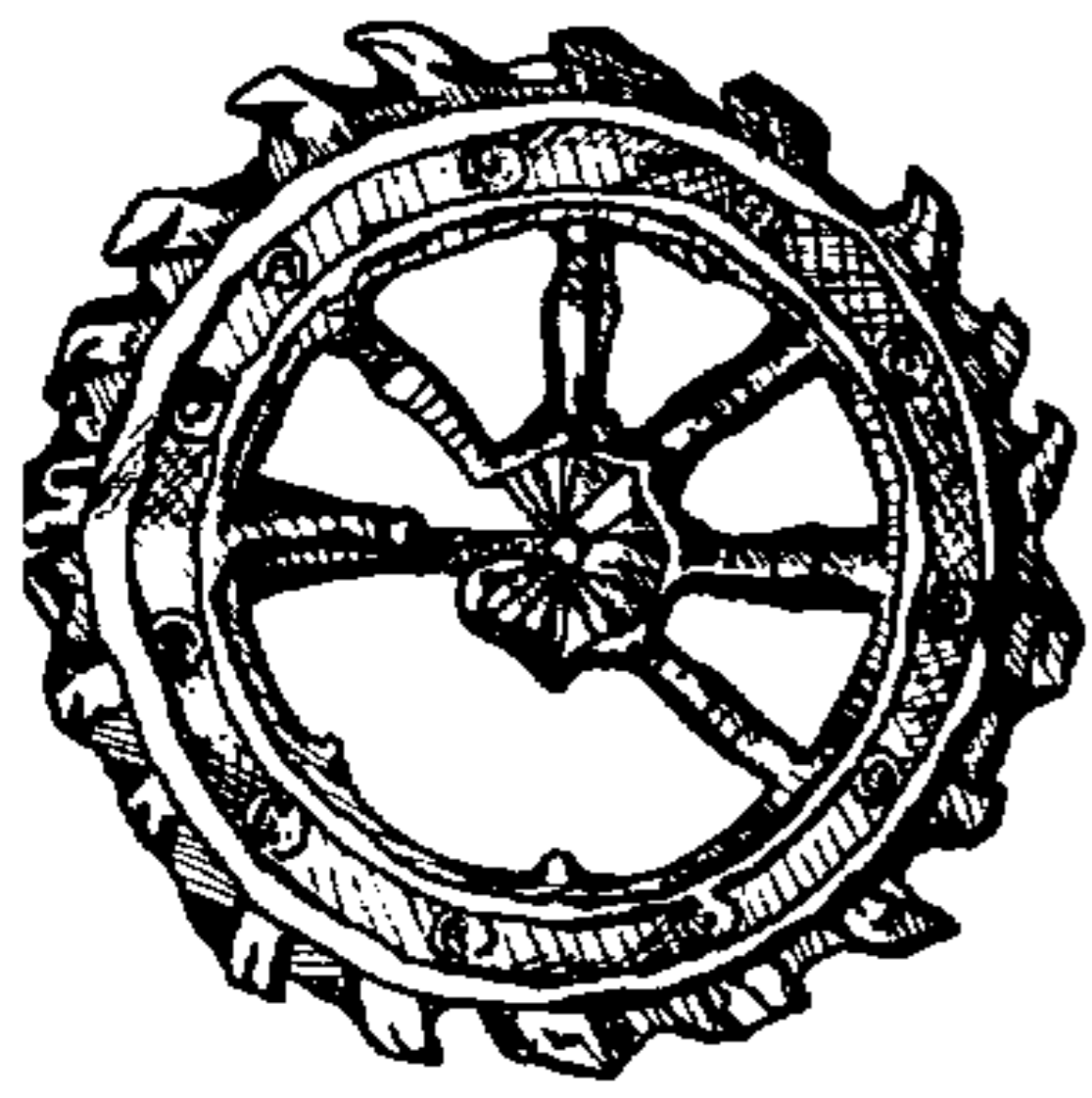
BCM no. G 2772. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

2. The head of St Thomas, made of lead. Badges of this type survive in great numbers and it seems that they are all copies of the reliquary containing the top part of the saint's skull, which was cut off at his martyrdom. Very few come from the same mould, although they were all made at Canterbury. By the 14th century this head had replaced the ampulla as the Canterbury sign.

BCM no. G 2775. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

3. Two parts of a lead crucifix. There are many different styles of crucifix surviving and it is impossible to attribute them with any certainty to a particular shrine, if, indeed, they are pilgrim signs at all. Among the more likely candidates are the Rood of Grace at Boxley—a mechanical model of the crucified Christ which grimaced or smiled according to the value of the offering presented—Christ's Blood at Hailes, believed at the Reformation to be the blood of a duck, renewed periodically, and part of the True Cross at Bromholm on the Norfolk coast. This cross bears the letters

PILGRIM SIGNS AND OTHER BADGES



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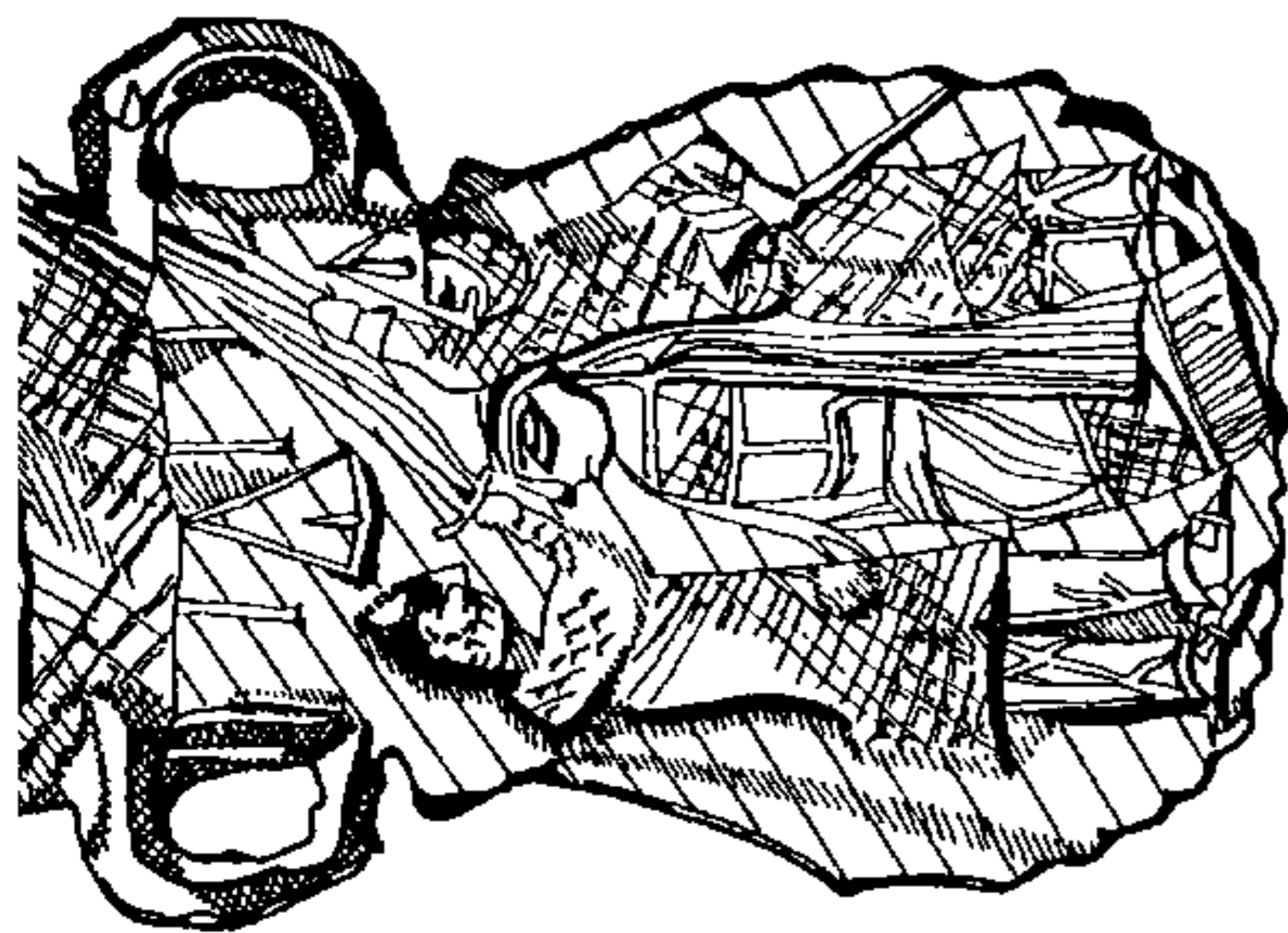
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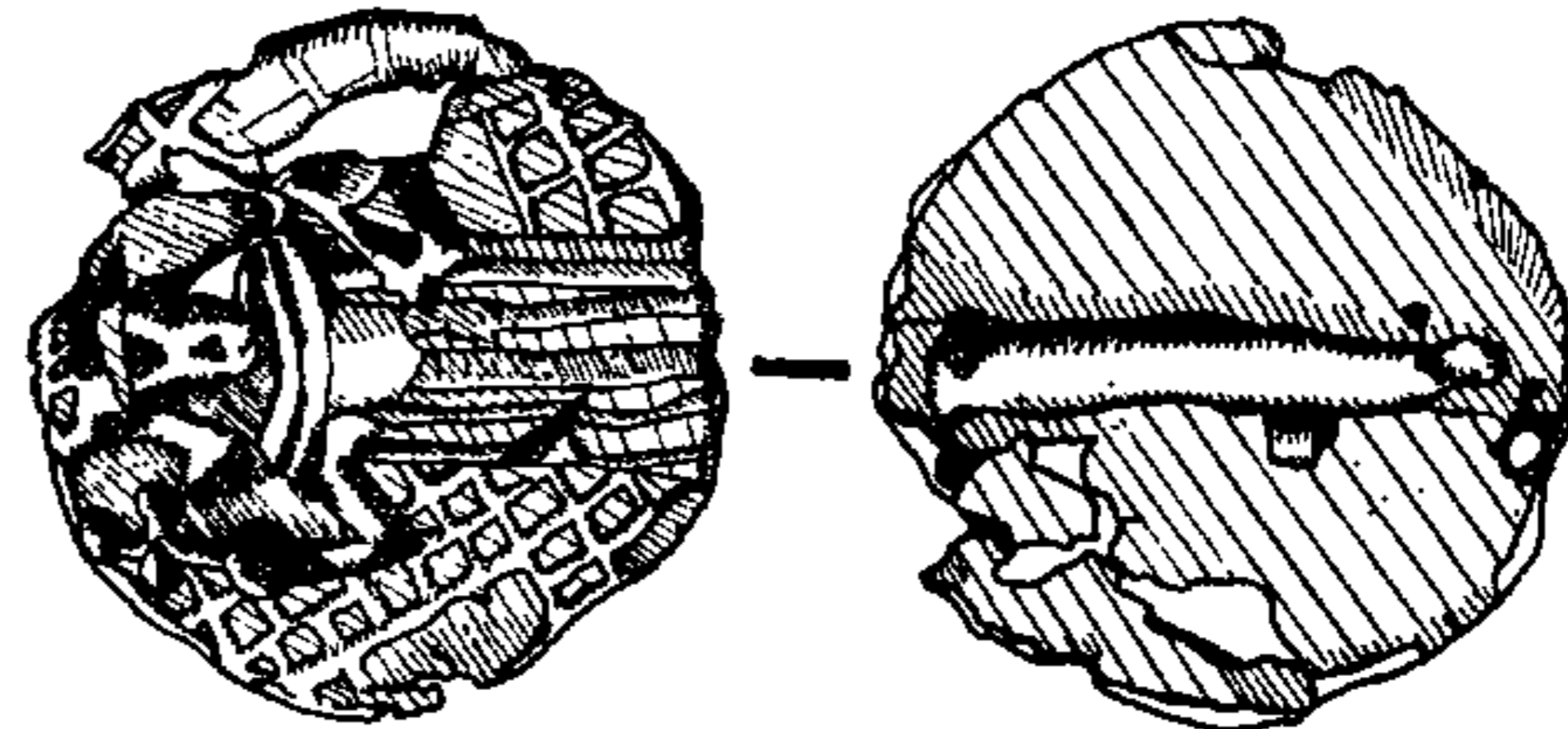
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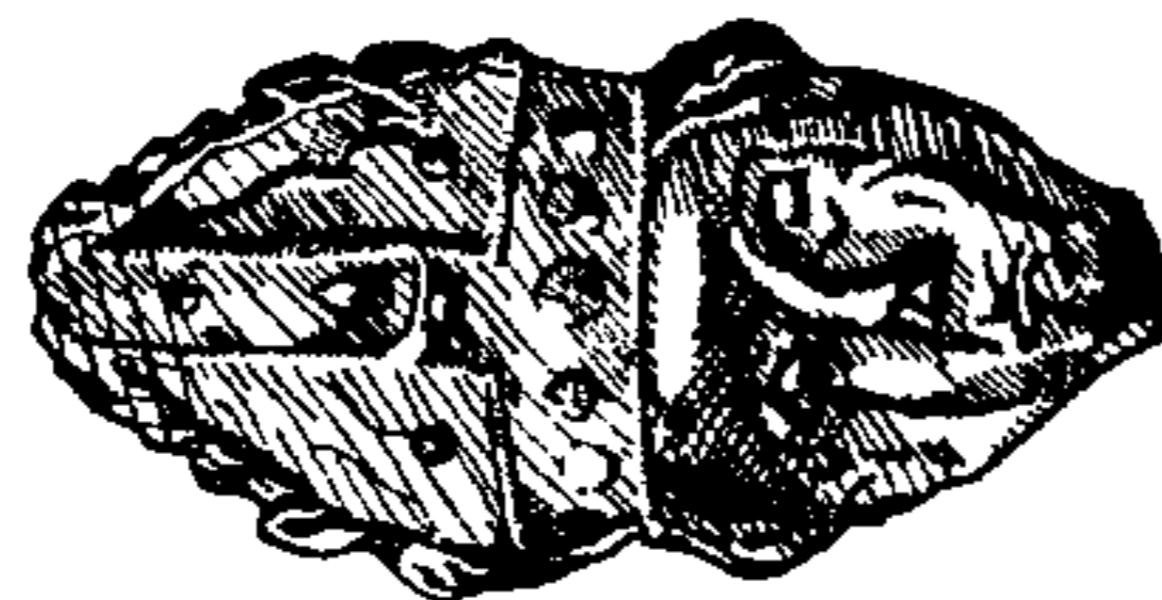
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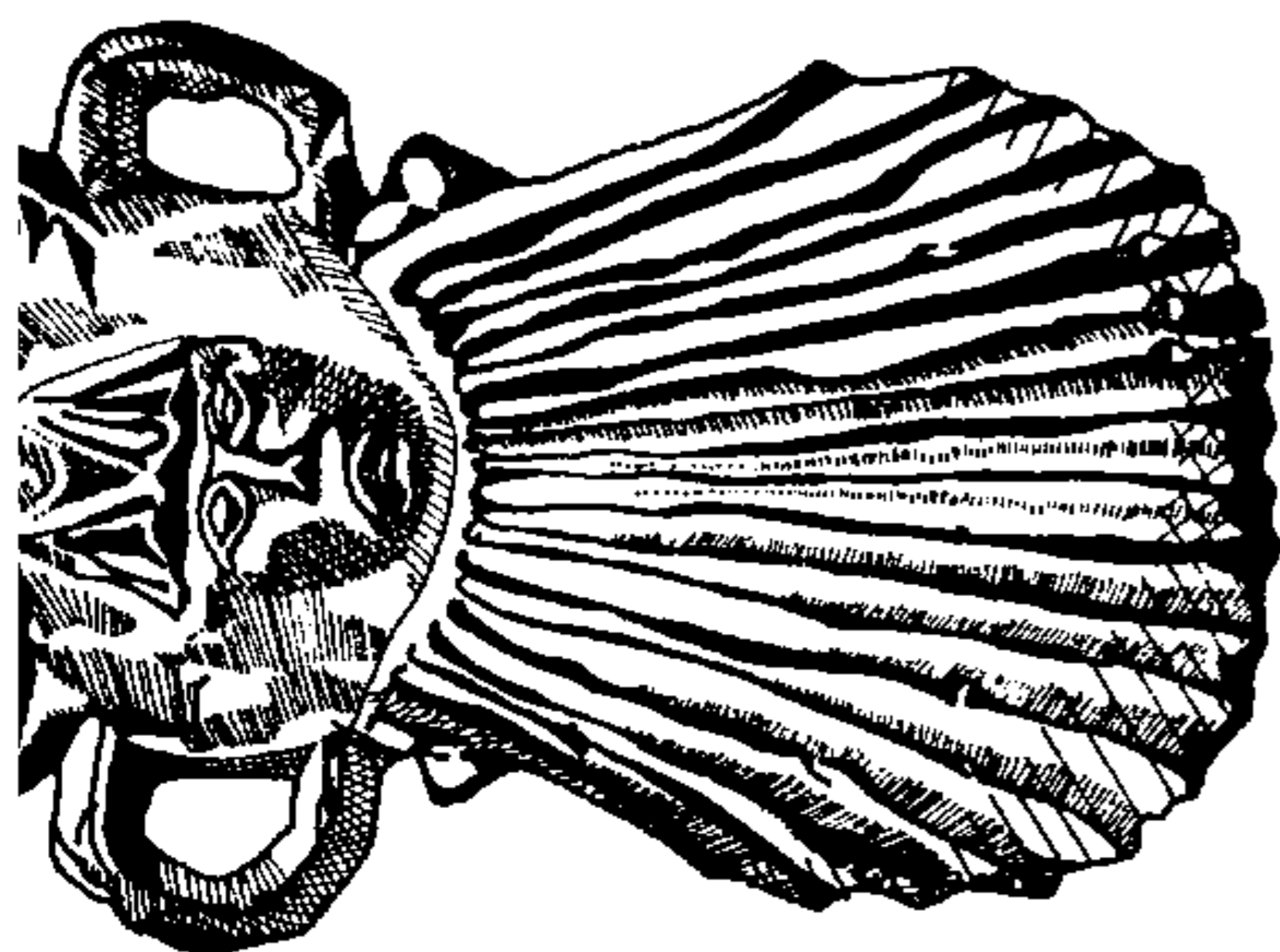
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4



2



3

cms ins

cms ins

FIG. 1

'ter' on its surviving arm, presumably the last letters of the name of its place of origin. There is a very similar example in the London Museum, without the inscription, which shows that the figure is wearing a full-length robe.

BCM no. G 2773 and G 2774. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

4. A much damaged leaden badge of king Henry VI, whose shrine at Windsor became a place of national pilgrimage in the reign of Henry VII. Henry Tudor naturally found it advantageous to his cause to promote the cult of a man supposedly murdered by his predecessor and by 1500 Windsor was the most important shrine in England, with the possible exception of Walsingham. Various different styles of badges seem to have been sold there, but the only ones which can be recognized with complete certainty are those showing the king with sceptre and orb and standing on an antelope. However, several badges of the type illustrated here have been found in recent excavations and can be dated by the associated material to about 1480 to 1520. It thus seems probable that Henry VI, whose shrine was so popular at this time, is the king depicted on them.

BCM no. G 2778. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

5. A Vernicle, or 'vera icon', a copy of the True Vernicle, from Rome. St Veronica, after whom this is named, is said to have handed her handkerchief to Christ as he was carrying the cross. He wiped his brow and returned it, whereupon it was discovered that his image was miraculously preserved upon the cloth. This was the 'vera icon' kept at Rome. The sign often worn by pilgrims consisted of this face painted on a piece of cloth to represent the kerchief, but this has survived only in the pictures of pilgrim signs often painted in the margins of books of hours. This medallion form is late, probably late 14th or 15th century, and its unevenness illustrates the poor quality of the examples being produced at Rome at this period. The badge is inscribed *IESVS NAZARENVS REX [IUDEORUM]*—'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews'.

BCM no. Q 1557. No history.

6. A fine example of a Katherine wheel. Although the shrine of St Katherine at Mount Sinai was much visited, this sign, like the others surviving in this country, is almost certainly English. In this case, the wheel is probably not a pilgrim sign at all, but the badge of the Bristol Guild of Weavers, a very important and wealthy guild who adopted St Katherine as their patron saint and dedicated to her their chapel in Temple church.

BCM no. G 2779. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

7 and 8. Two belt studs, bearing the sacred monogram IHC, an abbreviation of 'IHSOUS, Jesus in Greek. In the middle ages, a belt was a status symbol; the rich man's was studded with gold, while the ordinary person had to make do with pewter ornaments such as these. The IHC (or IHS) monogram has always been popular in both religious and secular art and it appears on rings and brooches, as well as such domestic articles as pottery and firedogs.

BCM no. G 2776 and G 2777. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

9. A small leaf, pierced for suspension and probably of no religious significance, although it may be a retainer's badge.

BCM no. G 2780. Floating Harbour 1892. A. Selley 1903.

Acknowledgements

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