

# Medieval pilgrims' badges in rivers: the curious history of a non-theory

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In enclosed social circles, a rumour can achieve the status of fact, especially if it provides a bit of exotic colour. The same thing can happen in scholarship, as a possibility is repeated as a suggestion, then as an assertion, until it takes on the mantle of fact.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this method of proof by gradual drift falls short of all academic disciplinary standards, and yet, this very process continues to take place, especially when scholars venture into neighbouring disciplines where they may rely disproportionately upon secondary sources.

One such rumour lately elevated to the status of truth concerns the suggestion that medieval and early modern pilgrims tossed their souvenir badges into rivers and other waterways at the conclusion of their journeys. Now is an appropriate time to address this question since, over the past decade, medieval and early modern scholars across a number of disciplines have become aware of pilgrims' badges and their rich interpretive potential. Badges, with their relevance to many areas of medieval culture, are increasingly coming to the attention of researchers who will not have followed every published assertion back to its primary source origin. The historiography on pilgrims' signs stretches back a century and a half, when antiquarians began collecting pilgrims' signs in the mid-nineteenth century. Their first publication was presented in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* in 1846.<sup>2</sup> Professional archaeologists and museum curators took an interest and began publishing widely on the subject in the mid-twentieth century. In 1994, the discipline of art history became involved, with the first doctoral dissertation in art history written on pilgrims' badges by Sarah Blick.<sup>3</sup> More recently, an anthology published in 2007 entitled *Beyond Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges: Essays in honour of Brian Spencer* brought together work by museum professionals, geographers, archaeologists, and university professors in art history,

<sup>1</sup> In this essay I refer to scholarship primarily in the humanities. A similar process has recently been illuminated in the sciences by Ole Bjørn Rekdal, 'Academic urban legends', *Social Studies of Science* 44, 2014, 638-654.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Roach Smith, 'On Pilgrims' Signs and Leaden Tokens', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 1, 1846, 200-212.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Blick, 'A Canterbury Keepsake: English Medieval Pilgrim Souvenirs and Popular Culture' (PhD Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1994).

archaeology, and English language and linguistics.<sup>4</sup> Access to the rich imagery of badges is now accessible to all thanks to the Kunera research project of the Radboud University in Nijmegen with its expansive database of badges and ampullae.<sup>5</sup> Given the rapid expansion of interest in pilgrims' badges and ampullae, those who research specifically on the topic of pilgrims' signs, as they are called in many medieval sources, need to be very careful to distinguish hypotheses from conclusions and facts from rumours, since this work is providing a foundation for many new types of enquiry.

The assertion to be investigated here is that pilgrims returning from their journeys often threw their badges into rivers as thank-offerings or when making a wish or prayer, much as modern tourists often throw coins into fountains. This pseudo-fact appears to have become well established, and has never been adequately questioned. Actually, there is limited evidence to support this claim, and what evidence there is proves rather complicated. When reconsidered, it may even lead to more interesting and contextualized possibilities.

When and where did the idea that pilgrims returning home to Paris, London, or any one of many northern European towns, removed the badges signifying their pilgrimage destinations from their garments and tossed them into a body of water accompanied by a prayer first arise? Its earliest expressions are found among French antiquarians in 1862, followed in 1863 by Arthur Forgeais' book of lead items found in the Seine, and then in a Dutch study of 1954.<sup>6</sup> It first appeared in reference to London, which will be the focus of this discussion, in 1956 in a book called *Treasure in the Thames* by Igor Noël Hume. Hume's study appears to lie at the root of the discussions of the past two decades. Hume writes:

The pilgrim gained prestige from his travels, and his signs were the ever-present proof of his journeying. Why, then, should he allow them to be lost into the water?

In attempting to answer this question, it is worth noting that pilgrim-signs have been found in other rivers, both in this country and on the Continent. But although they are plentiful in the Thames, they are rare in the City, save in the dry river silt south of Thames Street. One may well wonder whether these facts are significant. Does it mean that the signs were thrown into the river and nowhere else, or that the river alone has preserved them? The latter

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Blick, ed., *Beyond Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges: Essays in Honour of Brian Spencer*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The Kunera database of badges is accessible at <http://www.kunera.nl>.

<sup>6</sup> Eugène Grévy, 'Notice sur quelques enseignes et médailles en plomb trouvées à Paris dans la Seine', *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de France* 25, 1862, 118; Arthur Forgeais, *Collection de Plombs Historiés trouvés dans la Seine*, vol. 2, Paris: 1863, 11; Arnoldus J.G. Verster, *Tin door de Eeuwen*, Amsterdam: De Bussy, 1954, 42.

suggestion cannot be ignored, for the signs are very thin and the soil beneath London attacks metals with considerable vigour.<sup>7</sup>

At this point, he explains that entire lead coffins left underground for less than three hundred years can be reduced entirely to powdery lead oxide, and that if an entire lead coffin can disintegrate in a few centuries, then a small badge from the Middle Ages would leave no trace at all.

He continues:

Returning to the still unexplained reason for the signs being thrown away, we must consider the literary evidence of Chaucer and Langland, which clearly shows that pilgrims did not cast their badges aside when they reached home. We have seen in an earlier chapter how the Romano-British inhabitants of London threw coins from the bridge and how Victorian barge-masters bought wind by the same token. It therefore seems possible that pilgrim-signs found their way into the Thames in a similar way. Each pilgrim may have bought a number of badges and have thrown one into the river on his return either for good luck or as a half-understood thank offering for a safe journey.<sup>8</sup>

Hume's musings were reasonably founded upon archaeological evidence to be discussed below, though he also draws upon literary and folkloric sources that he used with less critical caution. One ought to ask just how much the literary characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* tell us about real medieval pilgrims; Hume uses the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Tale of Beryn* as though they were historical examples of real pilgrims pervasively throughout his book. Also questionable is whether what Romano-British Londoners and Victorian barge-masters did with coins is really evidence for what medieval Christians did with their badges. Nevertheless, Hume's proposition is enticingly universal, which may explain why it has been adopted with more assurance than the writer actually expressed. Even superstition can look like common sense if made sufficiently familiar. His suggestion that the disproportionate number of badges found in the Thames might equally be the result of soil conditions not conducive to preservation in the dry regions of the city seems to have been overlooked.

A deeper look into the archaeological context in which pilgrims' signs have been unearthed is warranted. Important to the understanding of the use of the Thames in Medieval London are the waterfront excavations at Trig Lane carried out from 1974 to 1976. In the published account of the excavations, Michael Rhodes,

<sup>7</sup> Igor Noël Hume, *Treasure in the Thames*, London: Frederick Muller, Ltd, 1956, 144.

<sup>8</sup>Hume, *Treasure in the Thames*, 144-45.

editor of the section discussing the finds, essentially dismissed Hume's suggestion that the badges were deposited by returning pilgrims as an informal ritual act. Rhodes wrote:

The frequent discovery of medieval pilgrim badges from Thames-side building sites has led to the suggestion that they could have been used as votive offerings, tossed into the river by thankful Londoners arriving home after their pilgrimage (Hume, 1956, 144-5), but the presence at Trig Lane of so many complete small objects in deposits where a votive significance can be discounted argues against this. Furthermore, of the twelve pilgrim badges and two ampullae recovered at Trig Lane, only five were recovered from the foreshores, which suggests that the majority of previously discovered badges are equally likely to have been removed from rubbish layers.<sup>9</sup>

Rhodes' view is informed by the fact that he has looked at the complete range of objects found in the river, rather than simply at the distribution pattern of badges alone.

Most speakers of English who today espouse the ritual deposition theory probably got it, directly or indirectly, from Brian Spencer, whose extensive work on pilgrim-badges has reached a wider readership than anyone else's to date. Spencer was responsible for opening pathways of communication between British and continental badge researchers, guaranteeing wide reception for his ideas. He also forged cooperative links between professional archaeologists and the amateur treasure hunters and metal-detector users who collect badges and other small archaeological finds from sites around London and especially from the foreshore of the Thames. Spencer was an archaeologist and curator of the medieval collections at the Museum of London. It was he who analyzed the pilgrim badges from the Trig Lane excavations, and his preliminary notes on them are printed as a subsection of the finds analysis introduced by Rhodes' comments above, so he was surely familiar with Rhodes' assessment. Yet, later in his career, Spencer returned to the theory of ritual deposition in water, using essentially the same cross-cultural comparisons Hume had suggested, along with analogy to the modern practice of tossing coins into water. This theory evidently captured Spencer's imagination, and it was certainly colourful enough to intrigue his various lay audiences. It also conformed to the image of the pre-Reformation laity as superstitious, gullible, and quaint, an impression of medieval folk culture that often seems to lie behind his ever so slightly condescending language throughout his work.

<sup>9</sup> Gustav Milne and Brian Hobley, *Medieval Waterfront Development at Trig Lane, London: An Account of the Excavations at Trig Lane: 1974-75 and Related Researches*, London: London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, 1982.

Spencer is undoubtedly the most widely read researcher of pilgrims' signs and his publications, especially his catalogue of *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* published in 1998 and describing the badges found in London, are often received as the ultimate authority on the subject. In the introduction in 1998, Spencer stated plainly that pilgrims threw badges in the water as a gesture of thanks.<sup>10</sup> The footnote here is to his own catalogue from 1990 of badges in Salisbury, where he says much the same thing, this time with a note to his article of 1978 on badges of King Henry of Windsor, where the argument is that the practice is folkloric, and the evidence is the practice of modern museum visitors tossing coins in a pool of water.<sup>11</sup> Going back a bit farther, in 1968 Spencer wrote, 'This curiously uneven pattern of distribution has led some writers to speculate about the habits of the wearers. . . most of their conjectures, however, conflict with historical evidence and perhaps the only tenable explanation is that these fragile objects have simply survived more successfully in muddy, waterlogged conditions',<sup>12</sup> expressing here a scepticism abandoned later in his career as he began to write for a wider audience. One of the conjectures he refers to is the edition of 1913 of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, which suggests only that badges in rivers were 'evidently dropped by the pilgrims from ferry-boats'.<sup>13</sup> Such a brief statement seems insufficient to imply intentional dropping. Other citations in the same footnote by Spencer lead only to vague comments on badges in general from early publications on the subject and not specifically to the manner of their disposal.

The argument about ritual deposition of pilgrims' signs in waterways is fundamentally an archaeological one. It is true that the majority of known pilgrims' signs have been recovered from wet places. In London, they have mostly come out of the Thames, and a similar pattern can be observed with the Seine, the Loire, the Somme, the Saône, the Scheldt, the Meuse, the Weser, the Stour in Canterbury, and the five rivers whose confluence is in Salisbury.<sup>14</sup> Of these, the most thoroughly excavated archaeological context is in London.

The Thames is tidal as it flows through London. At low tides, muddy flats are revealed along the edges—the foreshores—and these have often been scoured and dug by people hunting treasures. Countless pilgrims' signs have come to light this way, along with all manner of other debris from Roman London to yesterday. Hundreds of badges have also come from excavations near the edge of the river,

<sup>10</sup> Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, London: The Stationery Office, 1998, 18, 20, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Spencer, 'King Henry of Windsor and the London Pilgrim', in *Collectanea Londiniensia*, J. Bird et al., eds, London: London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, 1978, 250.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Spencer, 'Medieval Pilgrim Badges', in *Rotterdam Papers: A contribution to medieval archaeology*, Rotterdam: J.G.N. Renaud, 1968, 139.

<sup>13</sup> 'Pilgrimages', subheading 'Pilgrim Signs', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12, 1913, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Spencer, 'Medieval Pilgrim Badges', 139.

both from controlled archaeological excavations and from quick rescue archaeology and watching briefs during construction projects. The land that today is near the Thames was, in the Middle Ages, beneath the Thames, so objects found in these sites along the shore were also likely to have been deposited in the water. The tidal action of the river, along with its directional flow to the sea, means that the natural riverbed retains no meaningful archaeological strata. However, manmade structures from medieval London provide clearer, datable contexts. Between about 1150 and 1450, Londoners stabilized the river's banks and reclaimed about 20 metres of land for building and domestic and commercial use. This was done gradually by individual owners and tenants building a series of revetments successively farther out into the water.<sup>15</sup> The space behind each revetment was backfilled with whatever was available. This could be rubbish, dirt, manure, or whatever was readily available for free. There was always plenty of garbage in the city.

Most of these revetments were built with timber, and waterlogged timber allows dendrochronology—a very precise dating method for archaeology of the medieval period. The revetments also contained the river bottom material in an enclosed location, so the fill behind any given revetment can be dated by associated finds, particularly pottery and coins.<sup>16</sup> Pilgrims' signs from these deposits provide the comparanda on which the core of the 350-year sequence of Canterbury pilgrims' badges is based.

In the nineteenth century, antiquarian archaeologists usually picked out discrete objects and studied them in isolation. This method is also popular among treasure hunters and looters today. Since the 1960s, archaeologists have focused increasingly on context. They look not just at the object they have found but also at the other objects found near it and even analyze the soil around it. It is true that pilgrims' signs are usually found in the river, but they are hardly found there alone. A bucketful of material from one of these revetment dumps might include not only a pilgrim's badge, but also a broken knife handle, a worn out shoe, a few sherds of broken pottery, some rivets, a bucket handle, used roof tiles, or half a harness buckle. Secular badges representing noble households or humorous badges with sexual content might turn up as well. Current archaeological method as well as Ockham's razor require us to accept that all these objects lying together probably got there in much the same way and for more or less the same reasons. The material in these contexts seems to have been dumped first and foremost as rubbish.

A very similar conclusion has been put forth by Carina Brumme for the pilgrims' signs found in the waters of Madgeburg and other locations in Germany

<sup>15</sup> Gustav Milne, 'Medieval Riverfront Reclamation in London', in *Waterfront Archaeology in Britain and Northern Europe*, Gustav Milne and Brian Hopley, eds, London: Council for British Archaeology, 1981, 32-36.

<sup>16</sup> For the most recent version of London's ceramic phases, see Lyn Blackmore and Jacqueline Pearce, *A dated type series of London medieval pottery: PART 5. Shelly-sandy ware and the greyware industries*, London: Museum of London Archaeology, 2010, 18.

and the Netherlands. Brumme convincingly argues that the distribution of pilgrims' badges in the water and their proximity to profane badges and to other small pieces of metal indicate that these items were lost cargo from vessels carrying used metal for recycling, a logical treatment of reusable material that is attested by both documentary and archaeological evidence.<sup>17</sup> The idea that these items were no longer valued by their owners and were intended for disposal is consistent between Brumme's study and the examples in the Thames. However, the presence of the London finds behind the revetments along the river's edge does not readily indicate that the material had been collected for recycling. The badges found in these locations appear to have been discarded with indifference to the potential for reuse of their material.

To be fair, there is more to the votive offering theory than the pure coincidence of lead pilgrims' signs showing up in the water. Some of them have been found folded or mutilated, indicating that someone deliberately made them unwearable before they went into the water.<sup>18</sup> However, it should be stressed that badges in mutilated condition are the minority, and it is not always clear whether damage was accidental, intentional, or even the result of post-deposition decay. In the aforementioned study, Brumme suggests that bending the badges was a way to test the tin content of the metal.<sup>19</sup> This may explain many of the instances, especially those in her sample, but it would not explain all the folded badges found in London, where some appear to have been more idiosyncratically crumpled. Prior to Brumme's work, it was often proposed that folding and tossing the badges into the water at the end of a pilgrimage was a practice parallel to folding a coin and vowing it to the saint at the beginning of the pilgrimage process.<sup>20</sup> Such coins were usually bent at the moment the vow to the saint was made, and then later offered as a gift at the shrine. Examples of this exist in medieval primary sources, for example one of the miracles of St. Thomas involves a man who vowed to make a pilgrimage to St. Thomas and bent a coin to signify his intention, thus bringing about the cure of his brother from severe illness.<sup>21</sup> Bending the coin marked it to ensure that it

<sup>17</sup> Carina Brumme, *Das spätmittelalterliche Wallfahrtswesen im Erzstift Magdeburg, im Fürstentum Anhalt und im sächsischen Kurkreis*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010, 39-40 and Brumme, 'Pilgerzeichen-Erhaltungsbedingungen und Verbreitungsräume' in *Das Zeichen am Hut im Mittelalter*, Hartmut Kühne, Lothar Lambacher, and Konrad Vanja, eds., Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008, 131.

<sup>18</sup>For example, Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, 18 and catalogue entries 85, 104, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Brumme, 'Pilgerzeichen-Erhaltungsbedingungen und Verbreitungsräume,' 132-133.

<sup>20</sup> Eamonn Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-1580*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, 183-4.

<sup>21</sup> [Ecce peregrinationis signum. Complicio nummum in nomine ejus; a me votum vel transgressio voti requiratur.] William of Canterbury, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*, James Craigie Robertson, ed., in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury* vol. 1, London: Longman and Co., 1875, 328.

would not be spent for other purposes. However, a pilgrim's sign was already identified with an individual saint, so it did not need to be marked again, and unlike most performed devotions to saints, which tended to be highly visible, thereby enhancing the saint's reputation and fame, tossing a badge into the river would not have benefited the saint or augmented the saint's cult in any demonstrable way.

The question of badges ending up in rivers can be approached from another angle as well. Did waterways play a special role in devotions to St. Thomas of Canterbury or other pilgrimage saints? In 1919, Herbert Westlake wrote in his foundational study of parish guilds that the establishment of chapels associated with bridges was common among early guilds, and that the dangers of travel and the merit derived from pilgrimages made chapels at river crossings desirable, but that the practice of praying at river crossings might also be pagan in origin. As an example, he offers the Guild of the Assumption at Stamford, founded in 1210 at The Church of St. Mary By The Bridge, which held tenements to generate rents used for repairing the bridge.<sup>22</sup> In London, the Parish of St. Magnus, located near London Bridge, spawned one of the earliest guilds of St. Thomas. The guild kept a chapel to St. Thomas that was built on London Bridge.<sup>23</sup> To imagine pilgrims from north of the river pausing at this chapel on their way to or from Canterbury is irresistible. If there were a ritual tossing of badges into the river, would this not be the perfect place? A comparison of the find spots of badges in the river to the location of the old bridge, alas, reveals more about where archaeologists have dug than where badges were deposited. There do not appear to be more badges found downstream from the bridge, and it would be unfair to compare the oft-dredged and river-scoured central channel to the carefully excavated banks. Archaeology cannot substantiate any such ritual practice.

The collection of miracle stories from Canterbury is larger than that of any other medieval saint, and provides valuable textual evidence for normative practices among pilgrims to Canterbury in the early years of the cult of Thomas Becket. Some of the miracle stories do involve rivers or bridges, and presumably, all pilgrims used the roads. However, there is hardly evidence here sufficient to explain the huge numbers of Canterbury badges in the Thames. The two volumes of the *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis* compiled by Benedict of Peterborough and William of Canterbury contain only nine waterway miracles out of a total of 712 stories, and that includes one about a dead pig that resisted rotting after lying in the river a long time. What does appear strongly in the miracles, however, is an emphasis on the devotional bond between St. Thomas and his devotees. Consider this example narrated in a letter from monk, describing an event that occurred while he was on an errand. The pilgrim's sign in this story is an ampulla rather than a

<sup>22</sup> Herbert F. Westlake, *The Parish Guilds of Medieval England*, London: Macmillan Co., 1919, 15.

<sup>23</sup> National Archives, PRO C47/42/208 fol. 2. Also discussed briefly in Westlake, *Parish Guilds*, 15.

badge, since this story dates from the 1170s or 1180s when badges were not yet used at Canterbury, but their function was essentially the same and both are called 'signs' in contemporary texts. The monk writes:

. . .at the village of Marlow I was crossing the Thames . . .Around the middle of the bridge, the horse on which I sat fell through a hole, from his back end to his flank, with his legs hanging down under the bridge. Bystanders ran up from all sides, and tried to raise the dangling horse by placing poles beneath him. But there were either too few people for so much weight, or so many as to endanger the fragile bridge. Those who had come to me in help then left off their fruitless labor, leaving me with only one choice, that I should widen the hole and cast the creature down into the torrent. . . And so, left alone but for God, I looked around, but there was none to help. . . and then, . . .with a deep breath, I began to invoke the most blessed martyr whose sacred vessel I wore suspended from my neck. A wonderful thing! Immediately, in the manner of a revelation, without human support, at the invocation of the holy martyr, God stood the horse on its feet, and directed my steps, and put into my mouth a new song, a song to our God, who is blessed above everything in this age.<sup>24</sup>

In this story, rescue comes at the invocation of St. Thomas by a monk who was wearing the ampulla of the saint, indicating that he had been on pilgrimage to Canterbury. There is no suggestion that the ampulla was directly involved in the elevation of the horse. The pilgrim's sign's only role in this narrative is to indicate that the monk had an established relationship with the saint. This is a completely orthodox view of a saint responding to a devotee in need--no vestigial Romano-British superstitions are in evidence here.

The evidence from the miracle stories taken in combination with the archaeological evidence argues for an interpretation of the use and disposal of medieval pilgrims' signs that requires no recourse to anachronistic folklore. Pilgrims' signs were cheap and sometimes quite flimsy. They were worn around pilgrim's necks or pinned on their hats, publicly announcing their status as religious travellers and their special devotion to St. Thomas or to whichever saint whose badge they wore. The badge proclaimed a relationship between pilgrim and saint, and it was this relationship that ensured ongoing protection. Did the badge have value when it was no longer displayed on the body of a pilgrim? For some people the answer was surely, yes, but for others, probably less so. There are historical accounts of individuals using pilgrims' signs in ways that could be called folkloric. A fifth-century man was recorded as having attached one to his bed to ward off

<sup>24</sup> William of Canterbury, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*, 415.

demons. There is a written report of a farmer burying one in the field to prevent weeds.<sup>25</sup> But against these isolated written accounts one must weigh the thousands of badges found in the river along with the trash. Most importantly, there are no written medieval references to badges being intentionally tossed into the river.

There are more medieval pilgrims' signs extant today than any other type of medieval image. They number in the tens of thousands. Medieval pilgrims who bought and wore them numbered in the hundreds of thousands if not the millions, and they traveled seeking intensely personal religious experiences through their pilgrimages, many of which were likely unregulated and unsupervised by clergy. There is no reason to assume that all pilgrims held identical ideas and performed the same acts. Some pilgrims might well have paused by the river to toss in their badges quite deliberately. However, the assertion that this was a standard practice cannot be supported by either textual or material evidence.

On the other hand, those pilgrims who disposed of their badges when they were finished wearing them represent a new attitude toward images arising perhaps earlier in the Middle Ages than has been generally considered. Medieval art historians are familiar with a wide range of devotional acts focused on images, especially cult images. Medievalists also know of the power of images on seals to represent the presence of an individual, and have seen dangerous images scratched out of the pages of manuscripts. Historians of Byzantine art have offered theories explaining the authority of icons and the equally authoritative status of copies. One could easily imagine from all this that medieval people fetishized or venerated all images, were it not that the disposal of badges as trash indicates something different.

These images in the river are the first evidence of images treated as unimportant objects. Their work as labels on the bodies of pilgrims finished, the badges became items to be disposed of as refuse. This is a characteristically modern way to regard images. This is especially significant given the work of scholars like Gary Vikan and Richard Krautheimer, who have demonstrated how in some important contexts, copies retained the significance of the original. In distinction to their examples, it is intriguing to think of a medieval pilgrim tossing away a leaden image that replicated, perhaps, a miraculous image such as Our Lady of Walsingham or Notre Dame de Boulogne-sur-Mer, for this is exactly the type of image one might expect someone to treasure.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, 18. Kurt Köster, 'Pilgerzeichen und Pilgermuscheln', in *Sankt Elisabeth: Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige: Aufsätze, Dokumentation, Katalog: Ausstellung zum 750. Todestag der hl. Elisabeth, Marburg, Landgrafenschloß und Elisabethkirche, 19. November 1981- 6. Januar 1982*, Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1981, 453.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Vikan, 'Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium', in *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, Washington D.C: National Gallery of Art, 1989, 47-58. Richard Krautheimer, 'Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5, 1942, 1-33.

Documentary evidence indicates that there were other images made for ephemeral use, such as banners and stage sets, but these have tended not to survive. The discovery of so many metal pilgrims' signs in rivers need not be interpreted as a vestige of ancient pagan tradition or as a timeless superstition, but could instead be taken as tangible evidence of a development in image theory, specifically a de-veneration of images that first developed for this category of wearable images, which were more important as signs of a temporary social role (that of pilgrim) than as representations of the object of the pilgrim's devotion. The evidence of the badges in the rivers suggests that many pilgrims did make a clear distinction between the venerable images at the pilgrimage centres and the cheap, mass-produced copies that they bought to wear, and then to throw away. From this perspective, the assertion in Charles Roach Smith's first nineteenth-century publications of pilgrims' signs that they were evidence of medieval superstition is reversed. Instead, the pilgrims' signs retrieved from waterways become evidence of medieval pilgrims regarding these particular images without any lasting reverence at all.

The assertion of the ritual deposition theory appears to have gone hand in hand with publication for a broad audience of lay readers, as though a recognizable and traditional act would be more palatable to non-specialists than the complexities of archaeological interpretation. However, the public's imagining of the past can develop along with, and ideally informed by, that of dedicated researchers. Perhaps it is time to replace the idea of medieval pilgrims as superstitious with another impression also recognizable from today's image-laden culture, as people able to distinguish between different types of images with mutable and context-dependent significance. Envisioning such a discerning, image-savvy medieval populace lays the groundwork for cross-disciplinary inquiry spanning visual culture studies and medieval studies, surely to the advantage of both and other disciplines.

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