

Pilgrim's Badges

William Talbot (The artist formerly known as Talbot Mac Taggart)

In the middle ages pilgrimages were among the most popular of devotional activities. The wealthy would go on pilgrimages on a regular vacation. Just as today people take vacations in the middle ages vacations often came in the form of a pilgrimage. Pilgrimages were a status symbol. if you could afford to go on a long trip then you were either truly pious or rich. in either case it reflected well on the pilgrim. We can see through Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, that most people went on pilgrimage as a sort of vacation. A chance to go a long distance in an age when most people never traveled farther than they could see on a hazy day.

Not all pilgrims went on pilgrimages for such cynical reasons. many pilgrims were deeply religious and they went to the shrine of a saint to pray for the future or to give thanks for the past. Chaucer tells us in the prologue to his Canterbury tales that the shrine of St. Thomas of Becket, for example, was a common place to go after recovering from illness.

When people went on pilgrimage they usually brought back a token of their devotion, much in the way that people now bring back key chains and other souvenirs from their vacations. These tokens usually took one of two forms wither a pilgrims badge or a pilgrim's flask called an ampullae. The badge would be made of lead and would bear the likeness of the saint whose shrine the pilgrim had visited. This would usually be sewn to hat or hood. sometimes. The ampullae were small lead flasks filled with holy water from the shrine. Both types of tokens were often brought back to family members and friends who were unable to make the pilgrimage themselves. These were often believed to have recuperative and spiritual powers for the wearer and were often among the most prized possessions of the pious and were often buried with them.

Pilgrim's badges and ampullae were also status symbols in and of themselves. If a person were covered in these badges it could not help but make them look more important for the aforementioned reasons.

Common English pilgrimage sites were to Canterbury cathedral to see the shrine of St. Thomas of becket, whose badge was usually in the form of a bust of the saint in his archbishop's miter, and Westminster abbey to the shrine of St. Edward the Confessor whose badge was typically in the form of a crown. Other popular pilgrimage sites included Compestella to see the shrine of St. James the Greater whose badge was in the form of a scallop shell, and in northern Europe to Kirkwall in the Orkneys to the shrine of St. Olaf, the only Viking saint.

However, as the fashion of wearing pilgrimage badges took hold of Europe another fad took hold as well--naughty badges! Like modern people, our medieval ancestors loved a good joke and pornographic badges began to be produced in parody of religious badges. It was clear to the common person in the middle ages that not everyone who went on a pilgrimage was deeply religious. Consequently badges making humorous statements about the people who wore religious badges were fashioned and sold. Most of these badges were in the form of personified sexual organs. One example features a caricature of female genitalia wearing a pilgrim's hat, carrying a pilgrims staff, and holding a rosary. Others were not for sale just anywhere but had to be acquired by making "a pilgrimage" to a specific "shrine". A notable Paris brothel sold a badge in the form of a penis with legs and wings, wearing a crown and with a bell tied about it's "neck." Other examples featured chickens copulating, a wild man urinating into a mortar and pestle and similar motifs.

If you are interested in learning more about, or would like to see artistic representations of, these naughty badges please see Talbot with two pieces of identification showing proof of age. (After

all this is a family publication.)

