

OBJECTS OF PILGRIMAGE: THE AFTERLIFE OF PILGRIM BADGES IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

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Small, cast in lead, and often found discarded along rivers or roadsides, medieval pilgrim badges were once deeply personal tokens of sacred journeys. Worn on cloaks and hats, they marked not only a pilgrim's destination but their devotion, their suffering, and their hope for intercession. Today, these objects reside behind glass in museum galleries, labeled as artifacts, curiosities, or examples of medieval craftsmanship. Their relocation into museum collections strips these once deeply personal and spiritual objects of their original function and recasts them as historical curiosities. This paper argues that this transformation is not neutral: it reveals both the fragility of sacred meaning outside its devotional context and the interpretive power modern institutions hold over the medieval past. By tracing the badge's journey from sacred souvenir to museum artifact, this essay examines the shifting meanings of devotional objects and the ethics of curating lived religious experience.

Section I: Living Devotion — The Function of Pilgrim Badges in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, pilgrimage was more than an act of travel—it was a sacred performance of faith, endurance, and spiritual proximity to the divine. As the medieval pilgrim navigated roads, shrines, and border crossings, they often collected material tokens of their journey: pilgrim badges, small lead-tin alloy objects depicting the shrine, saint, or miracle associated with their destination. At first glance, these objects might appear crude or ephemeral, but to the medieval believer, they carried layered significance. Pilgrim badges were proofs of presence, emblems of devotion, and in many cases, vehicles of divine power. Their meaning was

not decorative or symbolic alone; the badges were active participants in the devotional economy of late medieval Christianity.

Cheap to produce and widely available, badges could be purchased for just a few pence, making them affordable across social classes. Pilgrim sites often supported bustling marketplaces where vendors sold badges alongside ampullae, small containers used to carry water or other substances associated with a shrine, and other devotional objects and tokens. Pilgrim badges were most commonly sold or distributed at the site of a major shrine—Walsingham, Canterbury, Rocamadour, Compostela—and depicted the saint or associated miracle in stylized, iconographic forms. The imagery was often direct and immediately recognizable: St. Becket shown beneath a sword, the Virgin of Walsingham enthroned with her child, or the scallop shell of St. James. These visual cues allowed even illiterate pilgrims to “read” the badge and identify its sacred associations instantly. Brian Spencer, whose work remains foundational to the study of these objects, describes them as “the medieval equivalent of mass-produced religious trinkets,” but ones that nevertheless “conveyed intense personal meaning” and served as a visible declaration of penitence or miraculous healing.¹

Badges were typically worn on the pilgrim’s cloak, hat, or bag, sometimes clustered with others to signal the completion of multiple journeys. For women, who often faced additional risks in pilgrimage, badges could also mark a rare moment of sanctioned mobility and spiritual agency. Meanwhile, for poorer pilgrims, a single badge might be worn for years, functioning as both devotional object and social currency. In one Canterbury miracle, a man cured of blindness is described leaving the shrine “bearing the token of the martyr’s grace upon his breast.” In an era where travel was dangerous and piety was public, they functioned as both personal talismans and social markers. In miracle collections, pilgrims are often described arriving at shrines in illness, leaving cured, and wearing a badge as proof of their saint’s intercession.² The badges functioned as a kind of vernacular relic—accessible, portable, and recognizable across regional boundaries. Wearing a badge was not only a sign of where one had been—it was a public declaration of having seen, prayed, suffered, and endured. As portable records of a pilgrim’s physical and spiritual labor, they turned the body into a site of witness. Medieval illustrations, such as those in the *Codex Calixtinus* or various psalters, often depict pilgrims covered in badges, visually emphasizing their journey as part of their identity. These visual cues communicated not only piety but the narrative of a life touched by sacred geography. In this sense, badges also served as evidence of divine contact, extending the power of the saint beyond the shrine walls.

¹ Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, New ed. 2010, Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 7 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010).

² Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

Many badges were believed to retain the virtue, or spiritual power, of the shrine. Some were dipped in holy wells or touched to relics, imbuing them with what Cynthia Hahn calls “contact devotion,” where holiness is believed to transfer through material connection.³ Pilgrims pinned them to their clothing for protection, some buried them with loved ones, while others even melted them down to fuse with candles, altar vessels, or other sacred objects, transforming them from portable souvenirs into new devotional tools.⁴ The act of melting a badge—of turning it from image to substance—was itself devotional. In some cases, it was believed the saint’s power could be intensified by fusing the badge into wax used in votive candles, blending visual memory with ongoing ritual use. The badge’s original form disappeared, but its presence was reincorporated into the life of the shrine or home altar. This fluidity of use meant that a badge’s “life” did not end with its alteration. It could be repurposed, broken, re-blessed, or even discarded in ways that reflected ongoing interaction with the divine. In short, they were not designed to last in a modern sense, but to be used, handled, and sometimes destroyed in ritual contexts.

Beyond spiritual function, badges also served as social proof—a way for poorer pilgrims to emulate their richer counterparts. Eamon Duffy points out that a pilgrimage badge marked not just the completion of a journey, but the successful performance of a penitential act.⁵ They indicated piety, mobility, and sometimes social transformation. For peasants or urban laborers, a badge may have been one of the few ways to visually align themselves with elite patterns of religious devotion. Contemporary records and even satire reinforce this idea. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, portray pilgrims with distinct social identities, many of whom proudly wear badges—sometimes comically so—to perform their piety. While the Host praises the Knight’s honor, he jests at the Pardoner’s overflowing relic-bag and badges, highlighting how these objects both marked and sometimes exaggerated spiritual identity.

The meanings attached to these small objects were thus multiple, and deeply tied to bodily experience and spiritual imagination. Sarah Blick and Laura Gelfand, writing on medieval object interaction, emphasize how items like badges were part of a larger tactile and emotional encounter with sacred matter.⁶ In material culture theory, such objects are often understood not merely as passive artifacts but as active agents—what Alfred Gell calls “indexes” of human relationships. In this view, the badge doesn’t just reflect pilgrimage, rather helping to enact and transmit its meaning. They weren’t simply worn; they were touched, kissed, pinned with prayer. Many pilgrims did not remove their badges immediately upon returning home. Some wore them to Mass, used them in household

³ Cynthia J. Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400-circa 1204* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

⁴ Hahn.

⁵ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*.

⁶ Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand, eds., *Push Me, Pull You*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions, volume 156 (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004215139>.

devotions, or touched them during prayer, allowing the badge to continue an ongoing relationship with the saint or site long after the journey's end. They occupied a place between object and act, becoming an embodied trace of a sacred journey. Unlike formal relics guarded by clergy or indulgence documents issued by church authority, badges were more democratic and mobile—accessible to laypeople, shaped by their physical use, and embedded in ordinary devotional life. They were part relic, part souvenir, and part wearable narrative.

It is this complexity—of meaning, use, and emotional charge—that is often flattened or lost when badges are viewed today purely as archaeological finds or museum artifacts. To understand what is at stake when these items are displayed behind glass, we must first recognize how vibrantly alive they were in their original context. They were not just “objects of pilgrimage”—they were pilgrimage itself, in miniature.

Section II: Lost and Found: Pilgrim Badges in Museum Collections

In the glass cases of museums, medieval pilgrim badges lie still. No longer clinking on the cloaks of wayfarers, brushed by hopeful fingers, or pinned to hats, they now rest in trays marked by accession numbers and labels. Their small scale and worn surfaces mark them as humble, but their presence in museum collections transforms them. Once instruments of personal devotion, they now serve as data points for material culture studies: as markers of trade routes, examples of mass production, or evidence of popular piety. This shift—from lived faith to curated artifact—is not accidental. It reflects a broader institutional practice of assigning new meanings to sacred objects, meanings that often prioritize the historical, and the secular over the spiritual.

Modern museum narratives tend to foreground archaeological and typological concerns: where badges were found, what they depict, how they were made. The British Museum's entry for a 14th-century badge depicting the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket offers a clear example.⁷ Its record details its findspot (the River Somme), material (lead alloy), and iconography (St. Becket struck by knights in a chapel) but gives no commentary on how such an image might have shaped a pilgrim's spiritual life.⁸ This curatorial emphasis produces a kind of devotional silence: rich in metadata, poor in lived meaning.

Such absences do not erase belief entirely, but rather retranslate it into language aligned with institutional priorities through terms like “popular devotion,” “folk piety,” or “religious belief systems.” In the catalog entry for badge 1955,1001.1, also depicting St. Becket, the British Museum notes that it was found in a coin hoard and dates it to around 1320–1350, but again, makes no

⁷ *Pilgrim Badge Depicting the Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket*, 1400 1320, Lead alloy, Length: Length: 5.91 millimetres Width: Width: 2.92 millimetres, 1400 1320, Museum no. OA.4652, British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_OA-4652.

⁸ *Pilgrim Badge Depicting the Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket*.

mention of its ritual potential or emotional resonance.⁹ Curatorial language, as Sharon Macdonald observes, often “constructs distance” between contemporary viewers and past belief systems to preserve a framework of scholarly neutrality.¹⁰ But that very distancing risks neutralizing the sacred meaning these objects once carried.

A badge like BM 1855,0804.70—a lead-alloy object recovered from the Thames, depicting St. Thomas Becket seated within a Lombardic capital “T”—might once have operated as a devotional pledge, protective charm, or relic-substitute. Its form is rich with layered significance: the “T” not only references St. Becket’s name but may also evoke the Tau cross, often linked to pilgrimage and healing. In the medieval world, such a badge would have been worn close to the body, a portable conduit of sanctity. Yet within the museum, it is cataloged primarily in terms of material, typology, and manufacture. It becomes aesthetic and redundant: one of many in a long drawer, stripped of ritual agency and reclassified as an artifact of popular piety or medieval consumerism.¹¹

Findspot narratives, too, shape interpretation in subtle but powerful ways. Many surviving badges—including the Becket “T” badge—were not excavated from shrines or graves, but dredged from rivers, especially the Thames. While scholars have offered compelling explanations for this pattern—including ritual deposition, symbolic “return” of sacred objects to the water, or even disposal after a fulfilled vow—museum records sometimes describe these finds primarily in terms of their physical deposition, emphasizing where and how they were recovered rather than the circumstances that may have led to their deposition. When the circumstances of deposition are uncertain, such descriptions can leave little room for considering whether the badge was intentionally placed, accidentally lost, ritually deposited, or otherwise separated from its owner. The result can be a quiet desacralization: the badge is understood primarily through the circumstances of its deposition rather than through the devotional meanings that may have shaped its placement.

Some institutions are beginning to disrupt this secular curatorial frame. The Museum of London, for example, has developed interactive displays that allow visitors to digitally “pin” badges to a virtual pilgrim figure, prompting questions about where, how, and why these objects were worn. Other exhibitions incorporate speculative or reconstructed pilgrim narratives to restore affective and devotional context. These interventions—though modest—suggest how museum practice might begin to re-sacralize such objects: not by restoring their ritual function, which is impossible in a gallery, but by acknowledging and honoring the emotional and spiritual meanings they once carried.

⁹ *Pilgrim Badge Depicting Bust of Becket*, 1450 1320, Lead alloy, Diameter: 38.36 millimetres, 1450 1320, Museum no. 1955,1001.1, British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1955-1001-1.

¹⁰ Sharon Macdonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 1., Aufl, Blackwell Companions in Cultural Studies (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

¹¹ *Pilgrim Badge in the Form of a Lombardic “T” with St. Thomas Becket Seated*, 1350 1250, Lead alloy, length: 60.76 millimetres Width: 53.22 millimetres, 1350 1250, 1855,0804.70, British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1855-0804-70.

Section III: The Institutional Afterlife — Who Tells the Story?

When medieval pilgrims wore their badges, they participated in an act of storytelling. Each badge spoke to a journey made, a prayer offered, a vow fulfilled. That story was personal, embodied, and often fleeting—pinned to a cloak, dipped in water, touched in prayer. But once these objects enter museum collections, they no longer tell *pilgrim* stories. Instead, they tell *institutional* ones. Badges become part of a different kind of pilgrimage: one in which modern institutions curate not just the physical remnants of devotion, but also the narrative frameworks through which the medieval world is interpreted. The museum becomes a powerful author of the past.

Museums are not passive containers for the objects they house. They are ideological structures that reflect and reinforce particular values: preservation, rationality, secularism, cultural authority. When pilgrim badges are accessioned into a collection, they are subjected to classification systems that prioritize material taxonomy and historical categorization over experiential meaning. For instance, the British Museum’s label for a St. Becket badge simply describes it as “a pilgrim souvenir, 14th century, lead alloy.” The language is factual, but telling: the object is defined by form, date, and material—not by prayer, suffering, or spiritual touch. The result is a shift in how the badge is understood: its material characteristics and historical classification take precedence over the devotional practices, experiences, and meanings that originally shaped its use.

This is not accidental; it’s built into the structure of Western museology, which emerged alongside Enlightenment ideals of scientific objectivity and linear historical progress. As a result, sacred medieval objects are often stripped of their religious agency and reframed as “evidence” of an earlier, less rational time.

This framing subtly positions the museum—and, by extension, the modern viewer—as intellectually superior. The badge becomes a sign of what *they* believed, not what *we* might still believe. In this framework, medieval pilgrims are often portrayed as superstitious, quaint, or anonymous masses rather than as individuals making deliberate, meaningful spiritual choices.¹² This curatorial stance often masquerades as neutral, or even benevolent, but it reflects specific Enlightenment-era values: reason over revelation, progress over tradition, observer over participant. The institution redefines the badge rather than merely preserving it. What was once a token of intercession and bodily devotion becomes a disenchanting specimen, remade to serve modern categories: art, artifact, oddity. Scholars like Igor Kopytoff have argued for understanding things in terms of “object biographies”—recognizing that artifacts, like people, undergo shifts in identity as they move through contexts. A badge that once functioned as a channel of divine presence becomes, in the museum, a case study in metallurgy or medieval travel.

¹² Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

McDannell has shown that the secularization of sacred objects in modern institutions often results in a flattening of their spiritual power, reframing them as artifacts rather than as active agents in devotional life. As McDannell notes in *Material Christianity*, even overtly sacred objects like crucifixes or relics, once displayed in museum settings, become “mute symbols of belief” rather than vessels of ongoing faith practice.¹³ This is especially true for objects like badges, whose meaning relied on belief, context, and ritual practice.

Cataloguing practices reinforce this transformation. Consider how museums describe badges in digital databases: a badge is “a small lead alloy cast,” “depicting St. Edmund,” “found in the Thames,” “c. 14th century.” Nowhere is the moment of vow-making, the pilgrim’s hope for healing, the emotional climax of arrival at a shrine. A badge might instead be described as: “Token worn after a vow made in desperation, carried hundreds of miles, and believed to bear the healing power of St. Edmund’s intercession.” This silence is not neutrality, but rather a curatorial choice. As theorist David Lowenthal argues, “heritage is not history but a selection of pasts chosen to suit present purposes.”¹⁴ In this case, the “present purposes” are academic or preservational— not devotional. As museum theorist Tony Bennett has shown, the modern museum doesn’t simply preserve—it governs how knowledge is produced, who gets to speak, and what counts as history.

This has ethical stakes. When museums remove sacred objects from living or remembered contexts and reinterpret them for display, they exercise curatorial sovereignty: the power to define what an object is, what it was, and what it means now. Stripped of explanation, a badge shaped like a saint or shrine could be mistaken for costume jewelry or decorative bric-a-brac—a devotional object reclassified as quaint or naïve. This sovereignty is especially acute in the case of pilgrim badges, which are small, plentiful, and easily overlooked, making them vulnerable to being misunderstood as trivial. To treat them as insignificant is to erase the deep networks of faith, hope, and bodily experience they once embodied—and to mistake material smallness for spiritual triviality.

Furthermore, institutional authority is often invisible to the casual museum-goer. Visitors may assume that what they see—and how it’s labeled—is simply “the truth.” Yet each label, each choice to group badges by region or by saint or by artistic style, is a *narrative act*. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill notes, museums “do not simply reflect knowledge, they produce it.”¹⁵ And what they often produce is a version of the medieval in which objects are understood primarily as historical artifacts rather than as participants in lived religious experience.

¹³ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Paul Graves-Brown, “The Past Is a Foreign Country — Revisited,” *Heritage & Society* 9, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 102–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032x.2016.1246157>.

¹⁵ Sharon Jeannette Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203553336>.

Still, there are signs of institutional self-reflection. Some museums are beginning to interrogate their own authority. Projects that involve community consultation, re-sacralized storytelling, or visitor-generated interpretations are slowly challenging curatorial hegemony. For instance, digital tools now allow museums to offer layered narratives: a badge can be accompanied by a 3D model, a historical description, and a first-person imagined account. These approaches encourage visitors to consider pilgrim badges not merely as archaeological artifacts, but as objects embedded in the lived religious experiences of medieval people.

This section argues that museums should be more explicit in acknowledging the devotional lives of pilgrim badges and the interpretive choices involved in their display. While historical and material analysis remains essential, it should not come at the expense of the spiritual, emotional, and experiential meanings these objects once carried. The afterlife of the badge is not just about where it ends up, but about who gets to speak for it. In the museum's voice, we hear less about the pilgrim's longing and more about our own desire to organize, display, and know the past.

Conclusion

Medieval pilgrim badges were never meant to last forever. Though made from inexpensive materials, many continued to serve devotional and commemorative functions long after a pilgrimage had ended. Their power came not from durability but from context: worn on the body, blessed at a shrine, kissed, dipped, touched, and believed in. In their original settings, they were charged with meaning—emblems of presence, participation, and divine connection.

Today, those same objects sit quietly behind glass. Their journey has not ended, but changed course. In museums, badges are no longer acts of devotion but objects of observation. They tell different stories—about craft, culture, or commerce—but rarely about faith. This transformation is not merely logistical; it is deeply interpretive. As this paper has argued, the movement of badges from roadside and riverbed to catalog and vitrine reveals two powerful forces at work: the fragility of sacred meaning outside its original context, and the institutional authority that shapes how the past is known, seen, and valued.

Pilgrim badges, in their institutional afterlife, challenge us to ask: What is lost when sacred things are redefined as historical ones? What stories become possible, and which are silenced? And most importantly, who gets to answer these questions?

To engage seriously with the medieval past—and with the devotional lives of its people—we must attend not only to objects, but to what those objects were allowed to mean. Museums must continue to question their own frameworks, offering space for layered, plural interpretations that reflect the spiritual as well as the historical. Only then can we begin to recover something of the medieval badge's original power: not just as a piece of lead, but as a vessel of longing, memory, and belief.

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