



## **Material and Meaning in Lead Pilgrims' Signs**

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Thanks to the increase in medieval archaeology over the last half century, pilgrims' badges, ampullae, and other wearable tokens of devotion, most often called "signs" in medieval documents, are now more numerous than any other type of surviving medieval image. Pilgrims acquired these at medieval shrines as souvenirs from pilgrimages accomplished. The vast majority of these small items are cast from lead. Lead is cheap, soft, and melts at a low temperature. It made the pilgrims' signs inexpensive and easy to produce. Lead also had signifying properties that made it ideal for pilgrims' signs. This essay discusses the contribution of the material to the meaning of pilgrims' signs in their medieval context. Various meanings attributed to lead in the Middle Ages are directly relevant to their use in pilgrims' signs. In short, lead had little value of its own, it received value from what it touched, and it was used to do exactly that in other contexts, such as in sealing documents.

Only a few medieval texts refer to pilgrims' signs. Most mentions of them are anecdotal, and their role is incidental. The greatest trove of mentions is in miracle collections, where pilgrims' signs sometimes appear in association with pilgrims who received miracles, for instance among the miracles of Henry VI, Thomas Becket, and Our Lady of Rocamadour. Critics also commented on them. Erasmus famously satirized a wearer of pilgrims' signs and the

author of *The Tale of Beryn* had Chaucer's Pardoner and Miller try to pilfer an armload of pilgrims' badges from a market stall.<sup>1</sup>

Canterbury leads other medieval shrines for textual evidence of its pilgrims' signs usage. In addition to having the largest medieval collection of miracle stories, which includes the most references to pilgrims' signs, the signs also make an appearance at the end of some of the lives of St. Thomas, where they demonstrate the growing popularity of the saint. In addition, there is a unique treatise by Herbert of Bosham that directly interprets the Canterbury signs. While Herbert's treatise gives us little in the way of practical information, his interpretive discussion opens a window into the conceptual value of pilgrims' signs and especially of the lead from which they were made.

For the origins of signs from European shrines, *The Pilgrim's Guide* of the late 1130s provides a touchstone.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of wearing pilgrimage signs in the high and late Middle Ages seems to have begun with the scallop shells acquired by pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, first mentioned in *The Pilgrim's Guide*, where the phrasing implies that they were already a well-established custom, "After the fountain is the parvis, as we have said, made of stone, where the small scallop shells which are the insignia of the Blessed James are sold to pilgrims. . .<sup>3</sup> In the third quarter of the twelfth century, pilgrims' signs began to be manufactured from metal, usually from lead or alloys of lead and tin. Badges from the shrine of Our Lady of

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<sup>1</sup>*The Tale of Beryn, with a Prologue of the Merry Adventure of the Pardoner with a Tapster at Canterbury, re-edited from the Duke of Northumberland's unique MS*, eds. F.J. Furnivall and W.G. Stone (London, 1909), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> The early use of the scallop shell as a badge worn by pilgrims is chronicled in Christopher Hohler, "The Badge of St. James," in *The Scallop, Studies of a shell and its influences on humankind*, ed. Ian Cox (London, 1957) pp. 49-70.

<sup>3</sup> *Post fontem habetur paradisus, ut diximus, pavimento lapideo factus, in quo crusille piscium id est intersigna Beati Iacobi uenduntur peregrines. . .* Paula Gerson, Annie Shaver-Crandell and Alison Stones, eds., *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela: Critical Edition*, Vol. II (London, 1998), pp. 72-73.

Rocamadour in France are the first known metal pilgrims' signs from a European context. Canterbury was another of the early sites to use metal signs, beginning perhaps in 1171, less than a year after Becket's death.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the introduction of metal signs, wooden containers seem to have been used.<sup>5</sup> No archaeological examples survive, but the Canterbury miracles include several relating to boxwood *pyxides* of "Canterbury water" that leaked, cracked, or otherwise lost their contents when in the possession of unworthy pilgrims.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the problem of water tightness, wooden vessels would have been made individually by hand. Metal had the advantage of being made in reusable molds, allowing faster and more uniform production. A miracle reported by Benedict of Peterborough and repeated by Herbert of Bosham tells that metal was substituted for wood after a young man was divinely inspired to make ampullae of tin and lead.<sup>7</sup> The earliest metal signs at Canterbury were tiny ampullae with scalloped ridges on one side that recall the shells of the Compostela pilgrimage. These gave way to larger ampullae with a widening range of imagery, mostly without the scallops. Around 1300, badges were introduced at Canterbury, and these came to outnumber and then to replace the ampullae. Metal became the standard material for pilgrims' signs at most shrines, so that by the fourteenth century, metal pilgrims' signs were commonplace throughout Europe. The signs from Canterbury

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<sup>4</sup> The invention of metal ampullae is reported in Book three of Benedict of Peterborough's *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*. The chronology of the early cult reconstructed from the miracle stories is inexact, but the inclusion of a story set on the Sunday before Ascension in 1171 also in Book Three suggests a similar date for the change in pilgrims' signs. Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis, Auctore Benedicto, Abbate Petriburgensis* 3.18, ed. James Craigie Robertson, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury* vol. 2 (London, 1876), p. 129. Metal signs are also mentioned in a life of St. Thomas composed between 1172 and 1174. Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (London, 1998), p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis* 3.22, ed. Robertson, pp.134-5.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis* 3.21-25, ed. Robertson, pp. 131-36.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis* 3.22, ed. Robertson, pp.134-5. See also, Herbert of Bosham, "de pixidibus prius gestatis," in James Craigie Robertson, ed., *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury* vol. 3 (London, 1877), p. 252.

retrieved from archaeological excavations form a long sequence spanning the entire duration of the Canterbury pilgrimage, from the spring following Thomas Becket's assassination on December 29, 1170 until the destruction of the shrine by emissaries of King Henry VIII in 1538. The most direct discussion of pilgrims' signs from any medieval author is the meditative document called the *Liber Melorum* written by Herbert of Bosham shortly after 1186. Thus, Herbert's text falls near the beginning of the long evolution of pilgrims' signs at Canterbury. The pilgrims' signs of Herbert's day were small metal ampullae adorned with low relief imagery, made to be filled with "Canterbury water," a mixture of water tinged with a drop of Becket's blood, which was distributed at the shrine. These ranged in scale from tiny thumbnail sized ampullae to larger examples of about four inches. Pilgrims wore these as pendants, hung around their necks.

Herbert was a scholar and advisor to Thomas Becket.<sup>8</sup> He is better known as an exegete, Hebraist, and participant in the Archbishop Becket's dispute with the crown. He was an unfailing advocate of both Thomas Becket the politician and Thomas Becket the saint. As a writer during the years when the pilgrimage cult of St. Thomas was taking form, he represents a learned insider's perspective on what has often been conceived as a popular phenomenon. A look into Herbert's text yields significant insight into clerical ideas about the new pilgrims' signs in the developing pilgrimage cult at Canterbury.

Herbert of Bosham was one of Thomas Becket's more than half a dozen early biographers. The *Liber Melorum*, or "Book of Harmonies" is an exegesis that functioned as a

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum*, in *Herberti de Boseham S. Thomae Cantuariensis clerici a secretis opera quae extant omnia/ nunc primum edidit I.A. Giles*, vol. 2, ed. John Allen Giles (Oxford, 1845-6). The date 1186 as a terminus post quem is discussed by Deborah L. Goodwin, "Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew." *Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism* (Leiden, 2006), p. 35.

pendant to Herbert's Life of St. Thomas. In the *Liber Melorum* Herbert creates an extended metaphor of Christ as a "commander in chief" (*Imperator*) and the martyred archbishop as a knight or "soldier" (*miles*).<sup>9</sup> Within this framework, Herbert enters into a lengthy discussion of the meaning of the Canterbury ampullae, in which he compares them to the crosses worn on the back and thigh by soldiers, by which he means crusaders. Herbert constructs a parallel between the sign of the cross as a visible sign of the crusaders' triumphal death and vessels of water and blood that are signs of the Thomas Becket's triumphal death as a martyr.<sup>10</sup>

Herbert is most explicit about pilgrims' signs in the section entitled "On the mystery of the vessels that the pilgrims of the martyr wear" ("*De vasis mysterio quod martyris peregrini gestant*").<sup>11</sup> Herbert distinguishes three signs in the ampullae: lead, water, and blood. In lead he sees gravity (*gravitas*), in water, purity (*puritas*), and in blood, the power and beauty of death through martyrdom (*mortis virtus et forma per martyrium*). He then doubles the signification of the three elements by saying that old age (*vetustas*) is expressed in the lead, youth or newness (*novitas*) in the water, and the fortitude of martyrdom (*fortitudo martyrii*) in the blood. He follows this with yet a third level of signification in which he interprets the three elements as symbolic of three ages of man and three modes of life on earth: the old man in the court, in the new man in the Church, and the third mode, that of living strongly in the present. These three modes simultaneously express three phases in the biography of Thomas Becket and three general

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<sup>9</sup> "Commander in chief" and "soldier" are Giles' terms, in keeping with a Roman theme. Giles, "Preface," p. v.

<sup>10</sup> "*Imperatoris igitur visibilis palma triumphalis mortis vexillum est crucis quod etiam vitae suae in carne signum est et imago: similiter et triumphalis mortis militis vexillum est vas aquae et sanguinis, et idem ipsum etiam vitae suae in carne hac [sic] signum et imago pariter. . .*" Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, p. 53. N.B. Herbert's text divisions become amorphous between *notula* 9 and *notula* 15. My citations follow those in Giles' edition.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, pp. 57-60.

arenas in which any given man might carry out his life.<sup>12</sup> The meanings multiply and branch out from there, drifting farther away from the ampullae themselves, before Herbert returns to restate that the pilgrims' ampullae are comparable to the crosses worn by soldiers in the crusades.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, he has nothing to say about the images on the signs—only about the materials of which they consist.

Throughout the *Liber Melorum* that Herbert consistently writes about the ampullae as lead, “*plumbum*,” when in fact the known ampullae made during Herbert’s lifetime were cast in alloys of lead and tin (*stagnum*), often with the tin content exceeding that of the lead. From this it is clear that lead was the element with symbolic importance. Metallurgic facts aside, the pilgrims' signs were perceived and discussed as objects of lead.

Lead is perhaps the least precious of all metals. Herbert implies that the humility of lead is integral to its significance. Here, he seems to draw on the Christian idea that the least exalted may be the most exalted.<sup>14</sup> He writes, “No one would grumble if indeed I said that our lead is necessary to us. Of course, it would be more glorious and even better and more suitable if our lead were turned to silver, or if it were completely purified—only completely pure silver

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<sup>12</sup> “*Vide igitur, et attende, quia in isto vasis signo tria sunt, sicut supra in crucis signo quattuor distinximus. Sed in hoc signa tria. Plumbam videlicet aqua et sanguis. Tria haec, tria mystica, in plumbo quippe gravitas, in aqua puritas, in sanguine vero mortis virtus et forma per martyrium. In plumbo itaque vetustas, in aqua novitas, in sanguine vero martyrii fortitudo exprimitur. Ecce vetus homo et gravis, ecce novo homo et purus, ecce martyr fortis et strenuus. Et haec sunt, sicut ex historiae praecedentibus aperte liquet, tres viri vitae, tres videlicet ipsius vivendi modi in vita carnis hac. Primus vitae modus, quasi primus homo vetus in aula: secundus vitae modus quasi secundus homo novus in ecclesia: tertius vero vitae modus iam quasi tertius homo fortis in palaestra cuius tertii hominis fortitudo non solum tunc coepit, quo exiguo illo tempore quod supra descripsimus animam suam exposuit, sed potius ex quo ad exponendum paratus fuit.*” Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> “*Jam ex parte audivimus conformitatem ut mihi visum sic multam signi ad signum vexilli ad vexillum, signi et vexilli crucis imperatoris ad signum et vexillum vasis militis.*” Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 18.14.

shines—otherwise it is scarcely worthy to be put in the treasury of a great king.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to say that the lead is as suitable as the blood and water because silver must be purified by lead.<sup>16</sup> His meaning here becomes clear when one consults medieval treatises on metalworking, such as *De Diversis artibus* by the pseudonymous Theophilus. In his section on silver processing, Theophilus explains how lead can be used to remove impurities from silver.<sup>17</sup> Herbert here draws a contrast between lead and silver, in which the value and sheen of silver accentuates the humility of lead.

For Herbert, the three elements of the sign—lead, blood, and water—work together. The lead of the ampulla is sanctified through what it signifies, and through contact with its contents. Even the water in the ampullae is only sanctified through contact with the blood, rather like a touch relic.<sup>18</sup>

The way mundane materials became sacred is a question central to the working of the Christian sacraments. Medieval theories of signification stemmed largely from sacramental theology, with baptism often serving as the test case. The leading sacramental theologian in the twelfth century was the Parisian scholar Hugh of St. Victor. When Herbert wrote about the ampullae, it is likely that he had Hugh of St. Victor’s *De Sacramentis* in mind. Herbert had studied extensively in Paris and may have been a student at Saint Victor. His intellectual debts

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<sup>15</sup> “*Nec murmure quis si etiam plumbum nostrum nobis necessarium dixerim. Tanto quippe gloriosius et quidem melius, commodius, si plumbum nostrum in argentum versatur, aut si ipso expurgato omnino, solum purum argentum examinatum refulgeat, minime alias in magni Regis thesauro reponi dignum.*” Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, p., 59.

<sup>16</sup> “*Tria igitur nobis necessaria haec, tam plumbum videlicet quam aqua et sanguis. . .Nunc vero manent nobis tria haec; et commode quidem inter tria haec plumbum, quia non nisi per plumbum emundatur argentum.*” Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Theophilus Presbyter, *De Diversis artibus* 3.23, ed. and trans. Charles Reginald Dodwell (London, 1961) p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> “. . .aqua videlicet ex tactu sanguinis sanctificata per sanguinem. . .” Herbert of Bosham, *Liber melorum* 2.9-14, ed. Giles, p. 56

to Hugh are evident in other examples of his writing, and throughout the controversy between Becket and Henry II, his adamant positions were in accord with Victorine ideas.<sup>19</sup> *De Sacramentis* was widely disseminated in the twelfth century and should have been familiar to other literate men at Canterbury as well as to anyone studying in Paris. At least four surviving manuscript copies of it can be traced to the twelfth-century library at Christ Church. In the *Liber Melorum*, there are passages that suggest Herbert's familiarity with Hugh's *De Sacramentis*.

Word choice is a strong indicator that Herbert had Hugh in mind. The greatest number of references to Canterbury ampullae can be found in the collection of miracles written by William of Canterbury and Benedict of Peterborough, but these writers use the terms *ampulla* and occasionally *phiala*, to refer to the little containers.<sup>20</sup> Herbert, however, chooses the word *vas*, which is the term used by Hugh.

In *De Sacramentis*, Hugh of St. Victor described the sacraments as vessels—*vasa*—that contained God's grace and compared them to vials that contained a doctor's medicine. The vial, says Hugh, does not heal the patient, but rather the medicine contained in it does.<sup>21</sup> Hugh also used the medical analogy for the gifts of the spirit that serve as antidotes to evil.<sup>22</sup> The medical

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<sup>19</sup> Deborah L. Goodwin, "Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew": Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism (Leiden, 2006), pp. 9-43. Goodwin's work builds upon that of Beryl Smalley, *The Becket Conflict and the Schools* (Totowa, NJ, 1973).

<sup>20</sup> Benedict of Peterborough, *passim*. William of Canterbury, *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*, ed. James Craigie Robertson, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, vol. 1 (London, 1875), *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> "Postremo quinque discreta et distincta ab invicem ad cognitionem procedunt: Deus medicus, homo aegrotus, sacerdos minister vel nuntius, gratia antidotum, vas sacramentum. Medicus donat, minister dispensat, vas servat quae sanat percipientem aegrotum gratiam spiritalem. Si ergo vasa sunt spiritalis gratiae sacramenta, non ex suo sanant, quia vasa aegrotum non curant, sed medicina." Hugh of St. Victor, *De Sacramentis* 1.9.4, PL 176:323.

<sup>22</sup> "Deus medicus, dona Spiritus sancti antidota . . . per dona enim Spiritus sancti vitia sanantur." Dodwell, Introduction to *De Diversis artibus*, xxii.



analogy used by Hugh to explain the role of material things in the working of the sacraments is made manifest in the twelfth-century ampullae from Canterbury. These were literally vessels that contained a mixture renowned for its healing properties. The agency of the saint in cures brought about by the Canterbury water is made explicit in the inscriptions found on many of the larger and more complex ampullae, generally variations of the phrase, “Thomas has become the best doctor of the worthy sick,” (“*optimus egrorum medicus fit Thomas bonorum.*”)<sup>23</sup> **(Fig. 1)**

Here the material evidence of the ampullae parallels the two layers of interpretation offered by Herbert. The lead of the ampulla is sanctified through its contents, and the object’s lack of inherent sanctity highlights the salutary agency of God

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<sup>23</sup> Forms of this inscription vary from ampulla to ampulla. For published examples, see Brian Spencer, *Pilgrims Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (London, 1998), pp. 47-53.



**Fig. 1.** Pilgrim's ampulla from Canterbury, early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

and His saint. At a time when magical properties were attributed to more precious materials, like gemstones, which were often placed on containers for relics, Gospel books, and Eucharistic vessels, the innocuous lead was the best material for expressing the theory behind Canterbury's healing water.

Lead, the quintessential material of humility and low inherent value, featured in another medieval discussion of sacramental efficacy, namely the covenantal model. According to this model, God chose to confer grace through the sacraments in accordance with a covenant He established. This denied any independent value to the material form of the sacraments (bread,

wine, water, gesture, etc.). The covenantal explanation was expressed in an exemplum first found in the writings of Richard Fishacre at Oxford around 1240.<sup>24</sup> The exemplum explains the efficacy of the sacraments through analogy with a coin stamped from lead, which would have little inherent value based on the worth of the material itself, yet which was still effective and valuable as a medium of exchange because it was manufactured at the command of the king.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it was the king's authority that imprints value into the lead. Indeed, most coins in this period bore an image of the king or an inscription of the king's name, like pilgrims' signs that bore images of the saint.

By the year 1300, pilgrims' badges had been introduced at Canterbury. They were soon produced in far greater numbers than the ampullae. Canterbury's badges took a range of shapes. The majority, however, were images of the reliquary bust displayed in the Corona Chapel at the extreme east end of Canterbury Cathedral. **(Fig. 2)** Like the ampullae, the badges were normally made of lead or an alloy of lead and tin. Unlike the ampullae, the badges were single-sided—often with a pin at the back—and contained nothing. They were commonly worn on the pilgrim's hat or clothes and offered visual testament to the fact that the wearer had made the journey to the shrine of the saint.

The choice of lead for the manufacture of pilgrims' signs has further resonances related to the encounter of pilgrim and saint at the shrine, based on the idea of the seal.

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<sup>24</sup> R. James Long, "Richard Fishacre (circa 1205-1248)," in *Medieval Philosophers (Dictionary of Literary Biography vol. 115)* ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992), pp. 195-200.

<sup>25</sup> William J. Courtenay, "The King and the Leaden Coin: The Economic Background of 'Sine Qua Non' Causality," *Traditio* 28 (1972), pp. 185-209.



**Fig. 2.** Pilgrim badge in the shape of St. Thomas Becket's head, second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. HIP/Art Resource, NY

Seals and pilgrims' signs had many things in common, one of which was the terminology used to denote them. Unless the ampulla form was being specifically intended, pilgrims' signs were most often indicated in medieval texts by the word *signum*. However, the range of terms used for pilgrimage souvenirs in general included not only *signum* but also *signacula*, and *sigillum*. This last word was most often used to refer to seals. Several continental European shrines issued pilgrims' signs with inscriptions that use the word *sigillum*. These include the early pilgrims' badges from Our Lady of Rocamadour and Our Lady of Le Puy following soon after. Both of

these shrines used badges in the *vesica piscis* or pointed oval form explicitly modeled on the designs of their church seals. The inscriptions reading “+ SIGILLVM BEATE MARIE DE ROCAMADOR” and “+ SIGILLVM BEATE MARIE DE PODIO” respectively insist on the direct connection, reinforced by overall shape and the image of the enthroned Virgin and Child found also on seals.<sup>26</sup> A handful of other French shrines also use the word *sigillum* in inscriptions on badges that did not take the overall shape of seals. These include Saint-Denis, Noyon, and Saint-Maximin.<sup>27</sup> In England, badges usually had irregular outlines that followed the contours of the image, rather than a *vesica piscis* shape. However, there are still visual similarities with seals. At Walsingham, for instance, many of the badges portrayed the statue of the Virgin and Child, which also appeared on the priory’s seal.<sup>28</sup>

Even where the word choice or shape of the badge did not invoke the idea of the seal, the use of impressionable metals for pilgrims’ signs implied the presence of both the pilgrim and the saint at the shrine in a manner comparable to the way presence was implied by a seal. Like wax, lead was also used as a material into which sealing images were pressed. After wax, lead was the second most common material for sealing documents. Lead *bullae* remain affixed to numerous medieval documents, and even more survive detached from the documents they once sealed. In addition to being a practical and inexpensive material, lead had semiotic associations with sealing that may have made it a desirable choice for the manufacture of pilgrims’ signs. The practice of making pilgrims’ badges in reusable molds, like the process of sealing documents,

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<sup>26</sup> Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, pp. 233-35.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>28</sup> J.C. Dickinson, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 118.

results in identical or nearly identical images that all attest to presence, both that of the pilgrim at the shrine and that of the saint at the site of his relics.

At Canterbury, badges of Thomas Becket's reliquary bust, or other less common images such as the saint's shrine or the archbishop on horseback returning to Canterbury before his passion, or miniatures of the sword that killed him, all referred to the saint's relics, through which the saint himself was understood to be present.<sup>29</sup> The clearest statement of the saint's presence at the place of his relics is the inscription on the fifth-century tomb of Martin of Tours, recorded by Gregory of Tours, "Here is buried bishop Martin of sacred memory, whose soul is in the hand of God. But he is present here, made manifest to everyone by the goodwill of his miracles."<sup>30</sup> The same concept centuries later motivated an image in the stained glass windows that surrounded Becket's shrine after the Translation of 1220, which depicts the saint emerging from his shrine to appear to a sleeping pilgrim. Thus, by depicting the reliquaries or the events that produced the relics, the badges referred to the continued presence of the saint at the pilgrimage center.

Lead was an ideal material for representing both the presence of the saint and of the pilgrim at the shrine. More durable than wax, it was similarly malleable, and both were used for sealing. For wax, medieval semiotic theory has been more fully articulated than for lead, but as it is based on its use for sealing, it could apply to both materials. The metaphoric value of wax has a long history in western thought. Medieval theologians were familiar with Aristotle's comparison in *De Anima* of the way the mind receives sensory impressions to the way wax

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<sup>29</sup> Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993), p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> Van Dam, p. 315.

receives the impression from a seal, but not the material of the seal matrix itself.<sup>31</sup> In keeping with the Aristotelian allusion to the wax receiving the seal's impression, wax features most prominently in discussions as a material for sealing documents.<sup>32</sup> The impression of a noble person's seal stamped into wax and affixed to a document testified to the presence of the seal's owner at the moment of sealing. The impressed image, then, derived its authenticity and meaning from the person who owned the seal, and served as a stand-in for the presence of the owner after the document had left his or her hands. By pinning a pilgrimage badge onto his or her clothing, the pilgrim was representing an encounter with the saint at the time when both the pilgrim and the saint were simultaneously present at the shrine. The badge was an approximation of the saint having stamped his seal onto the body of the pilgrim.

Sealing itself had a long association with pilgrimage. Cynthia Hahn has written on the use of the Greek term *sphragis*, meaning sealing or stamping, to describe the lasting psychological impact of pilgrimage on those who reached the holy sites.<sup>33</sup> She also relates the story of a pilgrim who awoke from a dream of his saint to find a wax seal impressed with the image of the saint in his hand.<sup>34</sup> There are even some surviving pilgrims' signs that take the form of clay lozenges made by the pilgrim holding soft clay in his or her hand while an impression was imprinted by pressing a seal matrix into the soft material. The result is a lozenge with an impressed image on one side and the imprint of the pilgrim's palm on the other. Hahn refers to

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<sup>31</sup>Aristotle, *De Anima*, 2.12.424.a17. Christine Göttler's work on wax "soul portraits" in the early modern period offers another relevant discussion of Aristotle and material images. Christine Göttler, "Seelen in Wachs. Material, Mimesis und Memoria in der religiösen Kunst um 1600" in *Ebenbilder. Kopien von Körpern—Modelle des Menschen*, ed. Jan Gerchow (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002), pp. 83-96.

<sup>32</sup> For a relevant discussion of the semiotics of seals, see Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, "Medieval Identity: A Sign and a Concept," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 1488-1533.

<sup>33</sup>Cynthia Hahn, "Loca Sancta Souvenirs: Sealing the Pilgrim's Experience," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana and Chicago, 1990), pp. 85-96.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 93.

this practice as “sealing the pilgrim’s experience.”<sup>35</sup> The resulting object is a direct document of the presence of the pilgrim at the holy site and as a participant in the ritual of sealing. Although these lozenges from sites in the Holy Land predate the manufactured metal pilgrimage souvenirs of western Europe by several centuries, the shared materials and designs used for both seals and badges conveys the same ideas of physical and psychological encounter.

Closely related to sealing is the idea of the touch relic. Touch relics were objects not initially sacred in their own right but sanctified through contact with the body of a saint. Items such as clothing worn by a saint, places a saint had been, or objects a saint had handled were touch relics, and could achieve a status equalling that of primary, corporeal relics. Relics of Christ or the Virgin Mary were mostly secondary relics of this sort, since the tradition of their bodily ascensions into heaven (leaving only foreskin, breast milk, and other such remnants) negated the possibility of large primary relics on earth. Touch relics could also be created by pilgrims at a shrine. It appears that sometimes pilgrims sanctified objects by bringing them into contact with shrines. This practice has been documented at sites such as Chartres, where pilgrims touched cloth to the relic of the Virgin’s *Sancta Camasia*.<sup>36</sup> Pilgrims at other sites may also have touched their pilgrims’ signs to shrines, reliquaries, and miraculous images. In one instance, a fifteenth-century testimony from the context of an ongoing dispute over the rights to manufacture and sell pilgrims’ badges declared that badges sold without the approval of the monastery could not be touched to the image of the Virgin.<sup>37</sup> It is possible, though it would have left no visible evidence, that this was a widespread practice. If it were standard to create touch

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 85-96.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Challine, *Recherches sur Chartres* (Chartres, 1918), pp. 178.

<sup>37</sup> The text of the testimony is printed in Esther Cohen, “*In Haec Signa*: Pilgrim-Badge Trade in Southern France.” *Journal of Medieval History* 2 (1976)213, n. 29.



relics from lead pilgrims' signs, it would be in keeping with the associations of lead as a material ideal for receiving the imprint of ephemeral presence and would be another way that the badge recorded the pilgrim's encounter with the saint.

From these ideas of sealing and making touch relics, it becomes evident that a badge that was authorized by the custodians of Becket's shrine and that bore an image of the saint's reliquary would not have needed any material value in its own right in order to be a sign of the power and authority of the saint. When these signs were affixed to the body of a pilgrim, much as a seal was affixed to a letter or other document to represent the authority of the person who had sealed it, the pilgrim's sign indicated the saint's authority and protection over the wearer, as well as signifying the wearer's having been present at the site of the saint's relics. Indeed, the comparison with wax seals accents the likelihood that the materiality and process of manufacture were not merely incidental to the signs' meaning, but in fact may have substantiated these meanings through a centuries-old tradition of signification. In this case, the lead would not have been considered a poor substitute for more expensive materials, but rather an ideal material for conveying concepts essential to the pilgrimage experience.

I would not go so far as to suggest that the interpretations discussed here were the sole or even primary motive for the shift at Canterbury from wooden *pyxides* to metal for pilgrims' signs at Canterbury or for the choice to produce tin and lead ampullae and badges at the many shrines throughout Europe. The practical advantages of durability, speed of manufacture, malleability, and low cost were more likely the major reasons for the choice. However, it was characteristic in this period for medieval thinkers to find religious significance throughout the material world. Lead was cheap and easy, but that did not mean it was not subject to spiritual interpretation. The attention given to the lead of the pilgrims' souvenirs by writers such as Herbert of Bosham

demonstrates that the material was given serious attention. Lead was important because of what it is—malleable and associated with seals—and because of what it is not—valuable and scintillating. Lead and its alloys with tin were the materials of choice for the vast majority of ampullae and badges worn by pilgrims from the twelfth century onwards. Regarding the elite few pilgrims who chose to forgo the more humble associations of pilgrim's costume and were able to commission instead badges in silver or gold, it is entirely likely that they too found the materials from which their badges were made to be meaningful. These precious metals would evoke a different set of meanings entirely. To quote Thomas Aquinas, "Objects are corporeal metaphors of things spiritual."<sup>38</sup> This approach to the material world could be applied to both silver and lead equally. However, given the much greater attention that images of sumptuous materials have received in art historical literature in general, the intention here has been to consider the range of meanings available for the material of the ubiquitous pilgrims' objects at inexpensive end of the spectrum.

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I qu. I, art. 9c.