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_Pilgrim and Secular Badges:_
_Archaeological Finds in the Low Countries_

In the last three to four decades of the twentieth century, a spectacular amount of pilgrim and other religious and secular badges dating from the later Middle Ages, i.e. from the late twelfth century up to around 1550, were unearthed in the Netherlands. The majority of these are cast from pewter, lead, or a tin-lead alloy; some are made of bronze and, in a few exceptional cases, silver. Hand made and engraved badges, usually bronze or brass, occasionally tin-lead or silver ones, were found as well. Badges stamped out of wafer-thin sheets of metal, mostly soft brass, silver, or (rarely) pewter, dating from the late fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century have also survived. Most recently, attention has focused on an assortment of stamped badges discovered in the town of Malines, in a distinctive and typically Flemish devotional context: the so-called ‘enclosed garden’, small altarpieces made for private devotion, originating most probably from the town of Malines. The practice of displaying pilgrim badges and other small devotional objects in these ‘enclosed gardens’ is described in the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition ‘Faith & Fortune’ in the Gruuthuse Museum, Bruges (2006–2007). Flemish Books of Hours are another non-archaeological ‘Fundgrube’ of these thin and light stamped badges: sometimes they have survived in place, glued or sewn on the blank first or last leaves of the volumes; more frequently, they are preserved as imprints on the parchment where the badges had formerly been.1

The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, ‘Geloof & Geluk. Sieraad en Devotie in middeleeuws Vlaanderen’ (“Faith & Fortune. Ornament and Devotion in medieval Flanders”), also available in French2, constitute the most recent and broadest presentation ever of late medieval badges within a cultural-historical context. Some five hundred badges are shown in connection with a broad spectrum of other thematically related objects. All pins and badges on display – mostly trinkets but also some jewellery – are exclusively from Flemish finds, or souvenirs originating from the County of Flanders. Most of the pieces exhibited come from private collections, but a significant number are preserved in public institutions, such as museums, archaeological services, etc.


At the same time, this exhibition represents the latest research on medieval badges in the Netherlands, proceeding from a research project in this field at the Radboud University Nijmegen. The pilgrim badge database *Kunera*³ launched in early 1998 and jointly funded by the Netherlandish Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Radboud University, is another significant project of the Radboud research group. This extensive international database of both religious and secular badges currently contains some 14,000 badges. It is set up as a modern digital version of Kurt Köster’s *Pilgerzeichenkartei*, the German pioneer’s extraordinary documentation, now preserved in the Germanisches National Museum in Nürnberg. In 2006–2007 all badges inventoried by Kurt Köster were integrated in the Kunera database and are thus available online now.

The database continues to grow as ever more samples and types of badges are discovered by archaeologists and treasure hunters in the Netherlands and throughout Europe. Also, an increasing number of private and public collections have become accessible, while older publications from the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century have yet to be reviewed in the light of modern studies and finds. The large number of archaeological finds in the Netherlands primarily in the Scheldt Delta area in Zeeland prompted the rather ambitious research project at the Department of Art History at Nijmegen University: several Ph D dissertations are in progress⁴, as well as the free online database described above.⁵

The spectacular finds in the Zeeland Delta area from the seventies onwards were first highlighted in an exhibition in the Museum for Religious Art ‘Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent’ at Utrecht in 1982⁶, an exhibition presenting around 130 badges together with other, more modern mass-produced devotional objects. It was a great pleasure to describe and photograph these badges for Kurt Köster and to guide him through the exhibition. This tour was followed by a visit to some of the detector pilots, successfully active in the first Scheldt area campaigns. The future impact of this meeting upon the author of this contribution, briefly outlined above, was quite unforeseeable at that time …

A much wider range of medieval finds – mainly of metal – found in the East Scheldt river estuary, including both religious and secular badges, was subsequently exhibited in ‘Schatten uit de Schelde’ (“Treasures from the Scheldt”), Bergen-op-Zoom in 1987. The lewd and rather erotic subject matter of some of the profane badges caused a commotion at the time, triggering a revived interest in this material, some of which had actually been published in France in the nine-

³ »http://www.let.ru.nl/ckd/kunera/«.
⁴ Dr. Elly van Loon-van de Moosdijk, Drs. Hanneke van Asperen, Drs. Katja Boertjes, Drs. Marieke de Kroon, Dr. Marjolijn Kruij.
⁵ Mainly realised by Drs. Willy Piron, Drs. Hanneke van Asperen, Drs. Angelique van den Eerenbeemd under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Jos Koldeweij.
⁶ *Vroomheid per dozijn* [Exhibition catalogue], Utrecht 1982.
teenth century. Stéphane Vandenberghe, curator at the municipal museums of Bruges, published several articles on badges in Belgium mainly in the nineteenth-seventies; the historian Antoon Viaene from Bruges, who has written numerous articles on pilgrimage in general, also wrote some on badges. For a publication and an exhibition in 1987/1988 entitled “Saints from the Mud”, shown at the Zeeuws Museum in Middelburg and the Museum for Religious Art in Uden, an inventory was compiled of all religious badges found in the province of Zeeland. For some years, the former Provincial Archaeologist of Zeeland, Dr. Robert van Heeringen, documented the Zeeland finds in the Archeologische Kroniek van Zeeland. Over a period of many years, the great Dutch connoisseur and private collector H.J.E. van Beuningen built up his own extensive and valuable documentation of Netherlandish and Flemish badges (from his and other collections), which has been partly digitalized and made available online. The best specimens from the Van Beuningen collection and a first inventory of badges found in the Netherlands from other collections, private and public, were published in two volumes entitled ‘Heilig en Profaan’ (Sacred and Secular), in 1993 and 2001 respectively. A third volume is in preparation and will be published in the near future. The first volume of ‘Heilig en Profaan’ (1993) provided the basis for an exhibition in the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam displaying a selection from the 1.036 published badges of the Van Beuningen collection, while the second volume accompanied a selection of badges shown in the Hieronymus Bosch exhibition in Rotterdam in 2001. Several essays on badges were included the Festschrift for Hendrik Jan van Beuningen, published in commemoration of his eightieth birthday in 2000.

7 Arthur Forgeais, Priapées, no place, no date, probably Paris 1858; I am indebted to Dr. Denis Bruna for providing me with a photocopy of this extremely rare booklet; Thomas Wright, The Worship of the Generative Powers during the Middle Ages of Western Europe, 1866, reprinted in Richard Payne Knight – Thomas Wright, A History of Phallic Worship, New York 1992, II, pp. 59-65 and plates IX-X.
9 Medieval Badges Foundation: »http://www.medievalbadges.org/«.
12 Gevonden Voorwerpen, opstellen over middeleeuwse archeologie voor H.J.E. van Beuningen / Lost and found, essays on medieval archaeology (Rotterdam Papers 11), ed. by Dory Kicken – Adrianus Maria Koldeweij – Johannes Rein ter Molen, Rotterdam 2000.
Local or more regional groups of badges have been published as well, only some of which can be mentioned here. Excavation campaigns from 1992 onwards and detector hunting on the Belgium coast near Oostende resulted in an interesting collection of 190 badges from the former fishing village Raversyde. A study of this interesting site was published in 1997/1998. Construction work for a new shopping centre with underground parking garage in the old city of ’s-Hertogenbosch unexpectedly brought hundreds of badges along with other late medieval finds to the surface, that will be published in detail in late 2007. From a thematic point of view, badges and ampullae from Canterbury found in the Netherlands were published in a volume on Thomas Becket in Flanders, some erotic badges in an exhibition catalogue on Carnival, and various articles on pilgrim badges and the iconography of saints, ampullae from Vendôme, and erotic badges as parodies of popular devotion. Badges cast on medieval bells from the duchy of Brabant were presented in a doctoral dissertation, and many badges excavated in the Netherlands went to exhibitions all over Europe, for example to Lisbon, Antwerp, Rome and Frankfurt.

Finally and most recently, three contributions on Dutch pilgrim badge research appeared in the memorial volume for Kurt Köster’s colleague, the British pioneer of pilgrim badge research: Brian Spencer. Just as Arthur Forgeais before them in nineteenth-century Paris, these distinguished scholars devoted their energy with great enthusiasm to the examination, documentation and publication of these small, grey, rather inconspicuous objects, the trinkets of medieval men and women, and to passing on their passion to future generations.