The Coat of Arms

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coatofarms@theheraldrysociety.com

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BOOK REVIEWS

INVESTIGATING MEDIEVAL AMPULLAE

PAUL A. FOX, F.S.A., F.H.S.

Abstract

The origins of certain ampullae purchased by pilgrims from religious sites have been shrouded in mystery, even though they may be decorated with coats of arms. Confusion has arisen between generic ampullae decorated with pseudo-heraldry, and ampullae which are marked with debased or incomplete versions of the arms of a particular monastery. A further problem is that many monastic arms went unrecorded, or existed in a previous form which was never recorded. Some archaeologists have tended to assume that the heraldry on them is bogus, but this paper will demonstrate that identifications can be made.

Introduction

The ampulla was a small container, originally made of tin, and later, primarily of lead, used to preserve holy water, holy blood or holy oil taken from sites of religious pilgrimage. The practice was popularised in Canterbury within a few years of the canonisation of Thomas Becket (d. 1170) in 1173. Gerald of Wales observed the wearing of these ampullae around the neck as early as 1179.[1] Small remnants of the saint's blood were mixed with large amounts of water, the consumption of which might lead to miraculous cures. From very early on the ampullae took the form of scallop shells, an idea copied from the shells given to pilgrims who visited the shrine of St James at Compostella in Spain. The shell, or heraldic escallop, was on its way to becoming a universal emblem of pilgrimage. The rather basic scallop shell was abandoned at Canterbury early in the thirteenth century in favour of ampullae with increasingly elaborate representations of St Thomas and his life. Ampullae were the only kind of pilgrim souvenirs available in the thirteenth century, and most surviving examples from that century are from Canterbury.[2] The scallop shell went on to be much used as a design for ampullae produced for other English sites of pilgrimage, most particularly at the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk.

Pseudo-heraldry

The earliest heraldic ampulla known to the author originated from Canterbury, and was found at the site of Vintry House in the city of London.[3] This fretwork piece carries three shields on each face placed back-to-back. The larger of the three shields sits on each face below the actual ampulla (or container), the container having a depiction of the saint. On one face the large shield has the three chevrons which would have been so well known to contemporaries as the arms of Clare, whilst on the other is quarterly plain and patterned, a bendlet overall, almost certainly for Despenser. Since the families of Clare and Despenser were allied in 1306 with the marriage of Eleanor de Clare and Hugh le Despenser the younger, the back-to-back shields might allude to the marriage. If so, the

[1] J.S. Brewer (ed.), Giraldi Cambrensis Opera, vol. 1 (London, 1861), p. 53.

[2] Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges – Medieval Finds from Excavations in London* (London, 1998), pp. 204-5; Michael Mitchiner, *Medieval Pilgrim and Secular Badges* (London, 1986), p. 14.

[3] Spencer 1998, op. cit., pp. 58-9, fig. 17.

Figure 1: The London Blackfriars barge T-shaped ampulla, of the generic type Museum of London 93. 215/2 ©Museum of London.

Figure 2: another generic T-shaped generic ampulla, *PAS* LIN-C1EB16, dimensions 46x39x8mm.

ampulla would date between 1306 and 1326, when Despenser suffered a traitor's death. What make this object particularly interesting is that the four smaller shields (two on each face of the container, again back-to-back) are entirely generic space fillers: a saltire, a chevron, two bends, and gyronny of four. The object then, was not commissioned by the nobility, but was created for the pilgrim market at a time when the two families concerned were prominent in English life. This usage of both heraldry and pseudo-heraldry as an aid to marketing persisted until the Reformation ended the trade in holy relics.

The next datable ampulla (**Figure 1**) from c. 1400, provides another example of pseudo-heraldry. Its inverted T-shape (or 'heater' shape) allowed it to accommodate three shields on each side, all of them bogus. It was found in the river Thames near Blackfriars during the excavation of a medieval barge.[4] This generic holy water container was likely devised in this manner so that it could be sold to a variety of different religious foundations, who might fill it and then sell it on to visitors. A similar example was found at Somerby in Lincolnshire.[5] Its six shields look rather more plausible as the sort of arms that a monastery might bear, and indeed the arms to the right in the left hand picture (**Figure 2**) are likely to be the authentic arms of a priory, as will shortly be discussed; while two religious foundations are known to have used the cinquefoil (as seen at the centre of the other face) as the main feature of their arms. These are St Mary de Pré in Leicester (*a cinquefoil ermine*) and Gerondon Abbey in the same county. Here once again there is a mixture of genuine and bogus heraldry.

[4] Museum of London 93. 215/2, see Spencer 1998, op. cit. no. 214d, pp. 205-6.
[5] *PAS* LIN-C1EB16

Figure 3: ampulla perhaps from Anglesey Priory, top: *PAS* DUR-694C08, below: *PAS* LVPL-822AD8. Dimensions 57x51x10mm.

The arms of Anglesey Priory?

The final example of an ampulla of this type which will be cited bears rather unusual looking arms of *A bend with in base a demi-bend sinister and an annulet, and in chief a canton sinister* (**Figure 3**).[6] This is close enough to the crudely executed shield on the previous example to suggest a commonality. The shield placed in the central position is surmounted with a crown, indicating that the abbey was dedicated to the Queen of

[6] *PAS* DUR-694C08 found Burneside, Cumbria and PAS LVPL-822AD8 found Marbury, Cheshire.

Heaven, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The adjacent arms are probably *Three bends sinister* to the left and *A chief* to the right: these might be generic; although the left shield is somewhat eroded. and might originally have been three chevrons. On the other side are the priory's initials A.P., with its arms repeated to the right, as can be seen on a second example of the ampulla which has this face better preserved.[7] The arms on the other side of the initials comprise a plain cross. The findspots for the two vessels are unhelpful: Burneside in Cumbria and Marbury in Cheshire, with no priory holding the requisite initials having existed in the north-west. The only plausible candidate would appear to be Anglesey Priory near Cambridge, which was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. The priory having enjoyed the patronage of Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady Clare, Dugdale recorded from its ruins the Clare arms *Or three chevrons gules* impaling those of de Burgh, *Or a cross gules*.[8] It is to be wondered whether the intention of the inverted Y-shape form by the arms was to imply the letter A. Anglesey Priory was not a major centre of pilgrimage, but it did have some powerful supporters, its patron in the mid-fifteenth century being Richard, duke of York, who was also patron of Walsingham Priory.[9]

The various arms of Walsingham Priory

Walsingham Priory was second only to Canterbury as a centre of pilgrimage, and it is not therefore surprising that a very large number of ampullae have been found from all over the country bearing its characteristic markers of the letter W and the crown.[10] Relatively few have been heraldic. Walsingham was the quintessential Marian site in England, being one of the key places where the Blessed Virgin is believed to have appeared. The primary arms used were *Argent on a cross sable five lilies argent*, the lilies sometimes rendered as billets.[11] A feature of ampullae in general is the somewhat cursory rendition of arms, so that on the two Walsingham ampullae illustrated here (**Figure 4**) the crosses are plain. The upper example illustrated, which has another crown on the reverse (a common feature of many Walsingham ampullae) is very fine.[12] Above the priory arms is the letter W which stands both for Walsingham and for Maria, depending on which way round it is read. It is composed of two interlocked Vs which also stand for *Virgo Virginium* (Virgin of Virgins). Above the letter W, around the neck of the vessel are the lilies of purity, an attribute the Blessed Virgin. Above the crown on the other face the decorative border matches the upper part of the Holy House at Walsingham as it is seen on pilgrim badges.[13] The second heraldic example is much more basic, with the Virgin's crown placed above the arms.[14]

Monasteries sometimes changed their arms with the passage of time. Being under the authority of the Church they required no permission to do so, excepting if they wanted to use the royal arms. Different priors and abbots with an interest in heraldry might have their own ideas. Walsingham has another shield type associated with it on

[7] *PAS* LVPL-822AD8 found Marbury, Cheshire**.** 57x51x11mm.

[8] Sir William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 2nd ed, 6 vols in 8 (London,1817-31), vol. 6, pp. 394-5.

[9] VCH Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely, vol. 2, pp. 229-34.

[10] Brian Spencer and Nicholas Griffiths, *Salisbury Museum medieval catalogue. Part 2, Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges* (Salisbury, 1990), nos 180-184, pp. 60-62, 89-90; Mitchiner, op. cit., pp. 138-141.

[11] John Goodall 'Arms of religious corporations', in Steven Ashley (ed.), *At the roots of heraldry: collected papers of John Archibald Goodall*, Harl. Soc, N.S. vol. 21 (2018), p. 132.

[12] *PAS* BUC-386E55 found Slapton, Bucks

[13] Mitchiner, op. cit., p.101.

[14] *PAS* WMID-89AAA2 found Rugby, Warwicks 54x34x7mm.

Figure 4: ampullae of Walsingham Priory, Norfolk. Top, *PAS* BUC-386E55; below, *PAS* WMID-89AAA2.

Figure 5, the second shield type of Walsingham Priory as found on ampullae, left, *PAS* SWYOR-E92C12 dimensions 40x30x8.4mm; right, *PAS* PUBLIC-F47330 dimensions 23x30x7mm.

ampullae (**Figure 5**).[15] Here is *A fess*, *on a chief the letter M between two lilies*. Below the fess is unspecified hatching. If, as seems likely, this shield was used within the priory it might well have included additional elements. The shield is once again surmounted by the Virgin's crown, with another crown decorating the reverse.

From the above examples it must be concluded that Brian Spencer was overstating the case when, in commenting on an ampulla charged with a shield bearing a simple cross, he opined "it is unlikely that basic shields-of-arms such as the cross … could have any true significance."[16] If an ampulla charged with an apparently basic shield can be matched with another that provides more information, then a provenance might be determined. In any event certain major institutions bore plain unadorned crosses for their arms, including Norwich Cathedral Priory, St George's chapel Windsor and St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, whilst various others (including Canterbury Cathedral) had plain cross bearing charges which might be missed off a design. For ampullae carrying shields with plain bends we need to consider whether there might have been a charge on the bend which has not been depicted, as would be the case, for instance, with Ramsey Abbey in Huntingdonshire (*Or on a bend azure three ram's heads argent*).

[15] *PAS* SWYOR-E92C12 found Harrogate North Yorkshire and *PAS* PUBLIC-F47330 found Winterbourne Whitechurch, Dorset; for a better example see Mitchener 1986 p.141, no.402.

[16] Spencer 1990, commenting on fig.170 pp. 59, 85.

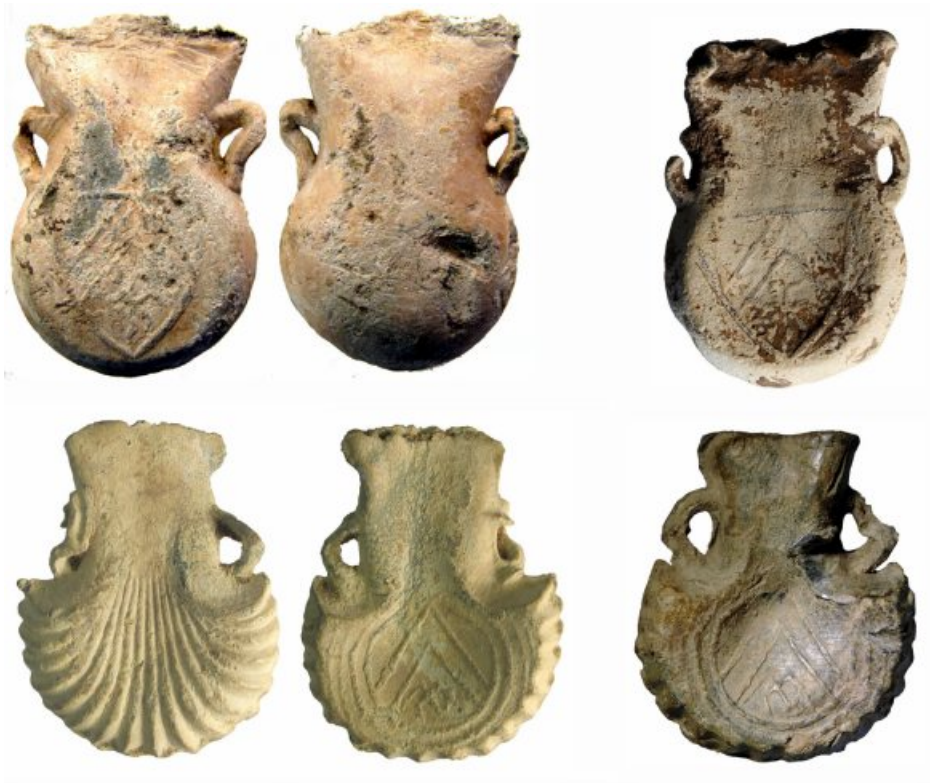

Figure 6, a series of ampullae identified by the author as being of Kyme Priory; top left 6a: *PAS* SWYOR-BA44D1 found Selby,Yorkshire 44x31x11mm; top right, 6b: *PAS* NMS-9349E5 found Watlington, Norfolk 45x31x8mm; bottom left, 6c: PAS LIN-13E791 found Nettleton, Lincolnshire; bottom right, 6d: PAS LINC5FADF found Hogsthorpe, Lincolnshire 44x31mm.

Kyme Priory

Metal detectorists have been repeatedly turning up in recent years a type of heraldic ampulla charged with a chevron (**Figure 6**) with a distribution centred on Lincolnshire. Detectorist Tom Redmayne has postulated that the source is a pilgrimage site within that county.[17] The occurrence of bogus heraldry on ampullae has become such an established fact that the reporting finds officers assumed that this must be another example. The heraldry is, however, quite distinctive: *A chevron and in base an estoile*. The estoile subsequently became stylised and so its origin as an estoile was obscured in these examples (**Figure 6c** and **d**). Other examples miss the estoile from the shield completely, as in **Figure 7** where it has been placed on the reverse side of the ampulla. But these arms are known from a thirteenth-century seal belonging to Philip de Kyme, son of Simon de Kyme of Lincolnshire.[18] Kyme Priory was a small Lincolnshire foundation under the

[17] As was noted in the finds report for PAS LIN-C5FADF.

[18] *BM Seals* no. 11140; *DBA* vol. 2, p. 279.

Figure 7: another Kyme Priory ampulla type, *PAS* WMID-E813DA found in Mickleton, Gloucestershire, dimensions 42x27x3mm.

patronage of the Kyme family, from which no arms were recorded by antiquarians, but there can be little doubt that its arms have been revealed by this series of ampullae, even though the tinctures remain lost.

Bromholm Priory

There are two known versions of the arms of Bromholm Priory in Norfolk, one of which is *Argent a patriarchal cross sable fimbriated and in border or*.[19] The double-armed patriarchal cross was brought back from Constantinople in 1220, and it was understood that it contained part of the True Cross of Christ. The priory, with the additional attraction of its 'Holy Rood', soon afterwards became a popular centre of pilgrimage. The importance of this example is that on the known ampullae the primary element of the arms is not presented on a shield, perhaps because its usage as an emblem pre-dated the heraldic usage. Such an ampulla was recently found in Norfolk (**Figure 8**). The decoration of the other side cannot be discerned, although previously published examples featured the Holy Rood on the reverse.[20] Two horse pendants with the patriarchal cross

[19] Goodall, op. cit., p. 86.

[20] The recently found ampulla PAS NMS-6458D3 is further discussed in Andrew Rogerson and Steven Ashley, 'A Bromholm Ampulla from Beeston St Andrew', *Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society Newsletter* Spring 2023, pp. 7-8. The published examples are Spencer 1998, op. cit., nos 180, 180a, pp. 162-5.

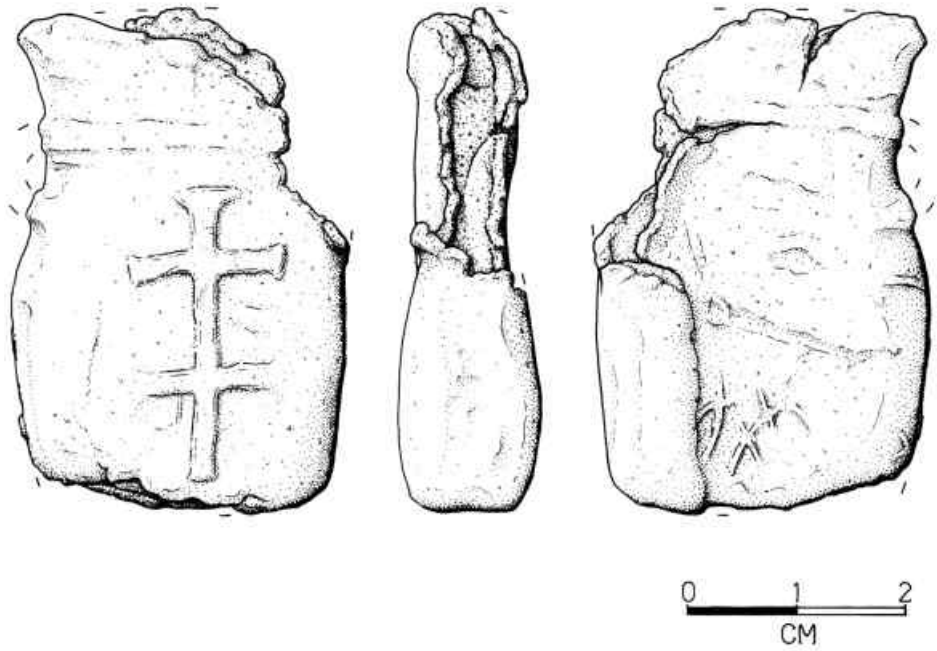

Figure 8: a Bromholm Priory ampulla with the patriarchal cross, found in Norfolk PAS NMS-6458D3.

have been found in the vicinity of the monastery.[21] In the fifteenth century the religious focus of the priory became the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and this largely replaced the cross on the ampullae.[22]

Personal arms on ampullae

Brian Spencer, noting the presence of the distinctive arms of Mortimer, *Barry a chief paly the corners gyronny and over all an escutcheon*, on an ampulla in the collection of his museum in Salisbury, stated "this is one of the few instances where the arms on an ampulla are identifiable."[23] He concluded that it might be a special commission from that noble family. Given the tendency to manufacture ampullae with somewhat imperfect versions of monastic arms, it seems more likely that these are the arms of Winchcombe Abbey in Gloucestershire, which bore the arms of Mortimer differenced with a cross crosslet fitchy on the escutcheon.[24]

[21] One of these is PAS NMS-7EB4D5.
[22] Mitchinor, op. cit., pp. 142-3.
[23] Spencer 1990, op. cit., fig. 173, pp. 59, 86.
[24] Goodall, op. cit., p. 136.

Figure 9: an ampulla of the personal type probably made for Sir Thomas Cooke (d. 1478), *PAS* YORYM-181F63, dimensions 59.5x34x11mm.

Only one case has been identified in which an ampulla is charged with the shield of a single individual rather than a monastery. The arms thereon appear to be *A chevron compony between three roses or cinquefoils*. This design (**Figure 9**) is only known to have been used by the Suffolk family of Cooke, from which one individual stands out. He was Sir Thomas Cooke (d. 1478), a fabulously wealthy London merchant who became mayor of that city in 1462[25], and who bore *Or a chevron compony gules and azure between three cinquefoils azure.*[26] He was a native of Lavenham in Suffolk, which is not outlandishly far from South Cave in the East Riding of Yorkshire where the ampulla was found.[27] This example was most likely created as a means of granting personal largesse to those of modest means, or perhaps as a donative to some religious foundation.[28]

[25] Anne F. Sutton, 'London Mercers from Suffolk', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* vol. 42 (2010) pp.162-185.

[26] Joan Corder, *A Dictionary of Suffolk Arms*, Suffolk Record Society, vol. 7 (1965), p. 170. The same arms are ascribed to his descendants in *DBA*, vol. 2, p. 349.

[27] *PAS* YORYM-181F63 found South Cave in the former East Riding of Yorkshire.

[28] The author wishes to thank Steven Ashley for reviewing this paper and for providing the example of the recently discovered Bromholm ampulla.