

# A United Europe of Things 2:

further consideration  
of medieval small finds  
from a pan-European  
perspective

Eds.  
Michael Lewis  
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*Editors*

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# Contents

- 7 Michael Lewis  
*Introduction.*
- 11 Milica Radišić  
*Why Did It Become So Popular? Twisted and braided jewellery from the formative period of the Hungarian state in the Carpathian Basin.*
- 33 Daniela Marcu Istrate  
*Keeping Memory, Fastening Clothes: two eight-pointed star-shaped brooches as funerary goods from the medieval cemetery in Alba Iulia (Romania).*
- 55 Péter Levente Szócs  
*Late Medieval and Early Modern Pins from Satu Mare County (Romania) and its Surroundings: variations of forms, decoration and function.*
- 75 Radosław Zdaniewicz  
*Dress Accessories from the 14th-15th century Motte and Bailey Castle of Ciochowice, Upper Silesia (Poland).*
- 83 Anastasia Fedorina & Nikolay Makarov  
*Suzdal (Russia) Archangels: between the symbolism and spatial distribution.*
- 103 Mette Højmark Søvsø  
*The Afterlife of Pilgrim Signs in Europe: use, re-use and ritual practice.*
- 127 Michael Lewis  
*Lettering on Late Medieval Lead Ampullae: English and Welsh finds within a European context.*
- 151 Rob Webley  
*Therein Lies the Point: a study of knife sheath chapes from cross-Channel Europe.*
- 163 Mária Vargha  
*Striking Impressions: tools of a metalworker from medieval rural Hungary.*

- 179 Dana Piessens  
*Gauged Stoneware Measures from the Low Countries: a lesser-known category of finds.*
- 187 Fabian Brenker  
*Everyday Objects: traces of wear as sources for daily use of artefacts.*
- 197 Jasmin Özyurt, Claudia Perstling, Bendeguz Tobias, Kathrin Siegl, Ralf Totschnig,  
Carla Warbanoff & Raphael Wedam  
*Out of Context: medieval small finds from Apetlon, Burgenland, Austria.*

# Lettering on Late Medieval Lead Ampullae: English and Welsh finds within a European context

## Abstract

*Medieval ampullae are common metal-detector finds in England and Wales; at least 2,350 have been recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) over the last 25 years or so. It is unknown how these small lead items - generally assumed to be vessels for 'thaumaturgic water' - entered the ground, though various theories have been proposed (Spencer 1990: 58; Anderson 2010 etc.). Particularly fascinating are the designs upon them, some including lettering, usually a single initial. It is often presumed that these identify ampullae with particular saints or cult centres (Spencer 1990: 60-61; 1998: 205; Anderson 2010: 190-193), but that is by no means certain. Indeed, this paper will offer an alternative view through examining the letters found on PAS-recorded ampullae within a European context.*

**Keywords:** *ampulla*, pilgrim badges, pilgrimage, letters, inscriptions.

## Late Medieval Ampullae

British finds of pilgrims' *ampullae* are invariably made of lead alloys,<sup>2</sup> although other materials, typically pottery, are attested in the archaeological record (Spencer 1998: 3). Their use in England likely started in the last quarter of the 12th century (Spencer 1971: 59; 1990: 58), most famously to hold 'Canterbury-water' - the diluted blood of the martyred archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket (d. 1170) - first captured in wood containers sealed with wax, thereafter leaden flasks (Spencer 1990: 58; 1998: 38-39). These 'early' *ampullae* are notably ornate (Fig. 1), especially when compared with the 'later' types (the subject of this paper). From about the early 14th century, badges began to replace *ampullae* as the dominant form of pilgrim souvenir (Spencer 1971: 59; 1990: 58; Anderson 2010: 183-184). Concurrently, from about the second half of the 14th century, *ampullae* became 'more functional, more stereotyped, less elaborate and less informative' (Spencer 1990: 58), perhaps even 'fairly uniform' (Anderson 2010: 184). It has been suggested that this transformation was brought about by 'changing theological and social circumstances, where the miraculous aspect of 'secondary relics' gave way to more ostentatious display of affinity with saints' (Anderson 2010: 184). If so, it is odd that motifs on later *ampullae* become 'less [rather than more]

<sup>1</sup> The PAS is a project to record archaeological finds made by the public: see <https://finds.org.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchiner (1986: 138) made the (chronological) distinction between early large tin ampullae, largely from the Thames foreshore in London, and those later mixed lead alloy examples, considered by him to be rural finds. Kate Rennicks (2019: 166; following Mitchiner & Skinner 1983; 1984) notes that 'lead' tokens were usually made of pewter until the early 14th century, when the composition changed from 62% tin to pure lead, perhaps due to a shortage of tin or changes in manufacture. Tin use was restored in the 1480s. Recently (2024), as part of the AHRC Medieval Ritual Landscape project (Reading University and British Museum), some PAS-recorded ampullae have had their composition tested, showing them to be primarily lead (the majority) or tin.



informative' (Spencer 1990: 58) unless medieval people were better experts (than us today) at deciphering their seemingly enigmatic imagery, including letterings.



Fig 1: a) 'Early' *ampulla* associated with the relics of St James and St Philip at Reading Abbey found at Wraxall, North Somerset (GLO-03558D), and b) another evoking St Thomas of Canterbury from the River Thames foreshore, London (SUR-8124A7); both found in 2020. (Images courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)

William Anderson (2010: 183) dates 'later *ampullae*' to the 15th to mid-16th centuries, at least two generations later than suggested by Brian Spencer (1990: 205), i.e. from 1350, the apparent disparity in their chronology being explained by the fact that few have been found within discrete (therefore datable) archaeological contexts. Mette Søvsø (2023: 407 & 422, Fig. 4f) highlights an *ampulla* mould from Denmark (ASR 2391X516) from Ribe, Jutland, dated to the 13th-14th century.<sup>3</sup> It is an interesting find as Ribe is not recorded as a pilgrimage destination before the mid-15th century (Søvsø 2023: 408).

Besides holding thaumaturgic water – perhaps even including compounds, such as dust or stone from holy items or places or that had been in contact with relics (Spencer 1990: 58) – it is also possible *ampullae* contained other liquids, such as oil (Boertjes 2007: 57-58; see also Mitchiner 1986: 138). Such holy liquids could have been used for a range of purposes, including to protect and cure, and could be drunk or used as balsams or ointments (Spencer 1971: 59 & 65; 1998: 38). *Ampullae*, like other pilgrims' signs, also had the very practical role of providing proof of pilgrimage, and therefore rights to certain associated privileges (Spencer 1971: 59). Longevity in the use of individual *ampullae* is probably explained by the fact they had an additional function as secondary relics (see also Søvsø 2023: 423). Like badges (ibid.), they had potential agency as items that had been in contact with holy substances – badges might be especially valued if they had been touched to saint's relics. In contrast, *ampullae* contained 'tangible material [i.e. holy liquids] from holy places' (Boertjes 2005: 451). William Anderson (2010, following Mitchiner 1986: 138) has even suggested that *ampullae* were deposited in the ground as part of field-blessing ceremonies, though other factors might equally explain their loss in what are now ploughed fields (as well as other contexts, see Søvsø 2023: 413-414), not least because metal-detectorists commonly search cultivated land

3 Intriguingly, the reverse of this mould has been used to produce two pendants, one bearing the letter A and the other a V.

(Lewis 2023: 39). Indeed, their deposition is not much different to other medieval finds (Clark 2010), so it might be that casual loss is just as likely to explain their deposition in many instances.

Most common by far in the PAS dataset are later medieval *ampullae* of ‘flattened flask shape’ (see Fig. 2-6), sometimes described as having ‘long necks’ to distinguish them from *ampullae* with more rounded bodies, seemingly more common in Continental Europe than in Britain (see below). These usually have a rounded base and a lentoid flat body, from which rises a slightly flared neck. The flask (given it is made of soft metal) can be pinched closed at the top (Spencer 1971: 59; Read 2021: 95), creating a liquid-tight container, albeit this could leak or evaporate through even the smallest gap, suggesting that the liquid (if it was to be drunk or otherwise) needed to be used relatively quickly. *Ampullae* usually have rounded or triangular ‘handles’ (located on either side of the vessel, where the body joins the neck) for suspension on a cord or chain. However, these handles (and the chain etc.) are often broken or missing.

It is common for one side of later medieval *ampullae* to be in the form of (or decorated in the style of) a shell - designated here the reverse. Spencer (1971: 60; 1990: 59) distinguished between those with bold radiating ribs, notched around the edges, well-defined shoulders, and angular handles (Type I), resembling a scallop (escallop) - the emblem of St James ‘the Great’, specifically associated with his shrine at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, but pilgrimage more generally (Spencer 1971: 61; Lewis 2014: 124-131) - and those with ribbed with fine grooves, smooth edges, no pronounced shoulders and less angular handles (Type II), being more like the common ‘edible’ cockle (see Campbell 2015 for an alternative suggestion for this type).

The obverse is also usually decorated, and these designs can vary considerably, hence their interest (see Anderson 2010: 186-193). Also, if the reverse is not in the form (or design) of a shell, it might have another motif. This is usually different from that on the obverse but can also be the same; some *ampullae* even have shell designs on both sides. It might also be the case that certain conventions were followed in terms of the placing of specific motifs together (ibid.). It is also the case that one side (even both sides) might be undecorated, though (usually) this is due to wear. If so, it will typically be the shell motive that survives best, as this is often profoundly moulded and generally quite easy to identify when worn.

There are over 1.8 million finds on the PAS database, of which some 262,000 date to the Middle Ages. Over 2,350 are listed as *ampullae*, placing them in the top twenty of the most numerous medieval ‘object types’ recorded - behind coins (over 92,000), buckles (over 36,000), spindle whorls (almost 5,000) etc - highlighting both the diversity of the PAS data and medieval material culture more generally. This is just a fraction of the pilgrimage paraphernalia which existed in the Middle Ages, even of that found through metal-detecting. Still, it nonetheless provides a good sample for research. To put this dataset within a European context, the Kunera database of pilgrim signs currently (1/5/24) gives a total of 1,679 *ampullae* from Europe of which 436 (almost a third) come from the United Kingdom,<sup>4</sup> itself highlighting the significance of the PAS dataset.

The following discussion will rely on the whole dataset of Kunera, the PAS database and those of other European finds recording schemes (like DIME and PAN), but (to keep things manageable) this paper will focus on the last five years of PAS recording (where each PAS *ampullae* record and image has been studied individually), but also consider it with the cleaned (though as yet less studied) dataset of PAS *ampullae* downloaded as part of the AHRC-funded Medieval Ritual Landscape (MeRit) project.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Kunera database: <https://kunera.nl/en> <accessed 19/4/24> albeit the dataset does contain some duplicate records.

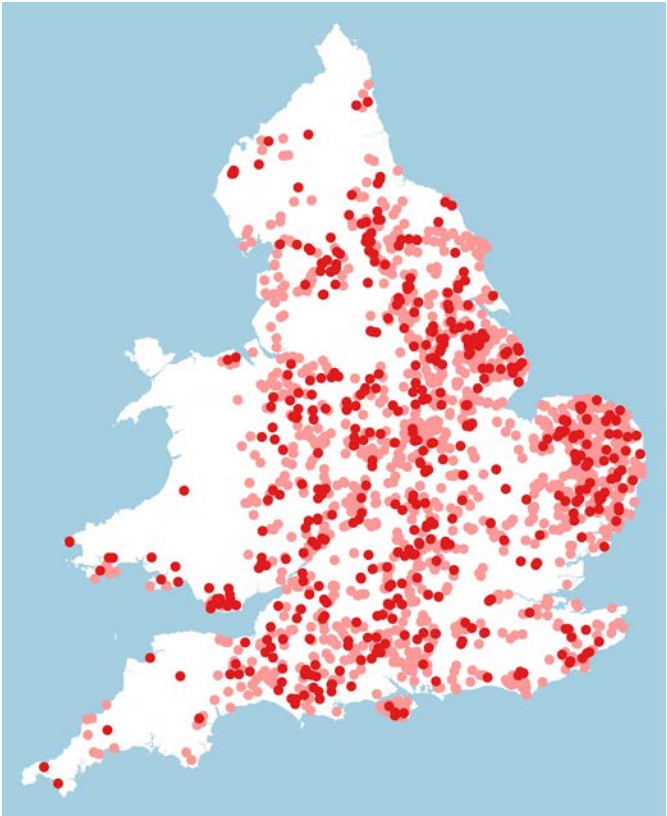
5 See <https://research.reading.ac.uk/medieval-ritual-landscape/>. For this latter data-cleaning, I am grateful to the MeRit PDRA Robert Webley.



Table 1: Number of late medieval *ampullae* recorded by the PAS in 2019-2023, highlighting some aspects of their design - notably whether they have scallop-shell moulding and are decorated with letters (note: some letter forms were uncertain, so are not reflected in Table 2).

Year	Number	Shell (rev)	Letters (obv)	Mostly Illegible
2019	106	49 (46%)	19 (18%)	35 (33%)
2020	79	35 (44%)	12 (15%)	27 (34%)
2021	89	38 (43%)	16 (18%)	27 (30%)
2022	120	51 (42%)	20 (17%)	53 (44%)
2023	135	55 (40%)	25 (18%)	48 (36%)
Total	529	228 (43%)	92 (17%)	190 (36%)

Table 1 (and see Map 1) shows that the PAS recorded 529 *ampullae* in the last 5 years, of which 43% (228) had at least one side decorated (or moulded) with a scallop-shell design. 36% (190) of *ampullae* had designs (other than shell motifs) that were generally indiscernible, and of these 91 (17% of the total) had letterings: the MeRit data suggests 382 (of 2063) PAS *ampullae* have letters (19%).<sup>6</sup>



Map 1: PAS recorded *ampullae* (2019-2023 finds = red, earlier finds = pink).  
(Map: Michael Lewis)

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the PAS data for MeRit was downloaded on 29/6/23, so does not include PAS finds after that data. Also, given that data cleaning is still underway, it is not yet a definitive dataset of PAS recorded *ampullae*.

## Letters

In 2019–2023, 529 *ampullae* were recorded by the PAS, representing 23% of the total (2,350). This gives ten letter forms (A, B, H, I, M, P, R, S, T & W) within thirteen combinations (Table 2): the only double combinations (RP, SB & SW) each being observed once; otherwise, letters are shown alone.<sup>7</sup>

Table 2: Letters on late medieval *ampullae* recorded by the PAS in 2019–23 (only listing examples where letters can be deciphered).

Year	B	H	I	M	P	R	RP	S	SB	SW	T	W
2019	-	2	-	-	1	5	-	1	-	-	2	7
2020	-	1	-	-	-	3	-	2	1	-	3	1
2021	-	-	6	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	4
2022	1	-	1	-	-	3	-	3	-	-	3	7
2023	-	1	3	2	-	4	1	2	-	1	-	10
Total	1	4	10	2	1	16	1	9	1	1	9	29

The following considers the most common letter forms, including ‘W’ (29 examples), ‘R’ (16), ‘T’ (9), ‘H’ and ‘I’ (4 and 10 respectively) and ‘S’ (9) - but also ‘SB’ and ‘SW’. As such, this is small number of letter forms given those available and used elsewhere on medieval objects (Lewis 2024: 39).

## Letter W

The letter W is the most common letter form on late medieval *ampullae* (see Anderson 2010: 192), with (at least) 29 examples in the PAS 2019–2023 dataset (168 in MeRit). This letter is generally shown as two overlapping Vs (e.g. BUC-14CBD6, SUSS-A208D7 & DOR-1622B7), which are also usually crowned (e.g. BERK-4133A8, SF-D6F5D2 & BUC-380A5A). The crown typically features three fleurs-de-lis (e.g. DOR-1622B7; Fig. 2a), perhaps based on near-contemporary coinage (North 2023: 35; see also Anderson 2010: 190). Occasionally, the crowned W motif appears upon a hatched background within a circular border (e.g. DOR-B2AEEC, SF-7E7079 & HAMP-4699E4), but other times the background appears plain (e.g. LANCUM-43C597 & BERK-3DAC3D); upon the latter, the two moulded lines forming the circular border are closer at the top than at the bottom, appearing to show a crescent.

Less often, the crowned W motif is notably larger, somewhat cruder in execution and more stylised, suggesting a purposeful deviation in design. On an *ampulla* from Watton, East Yorkshire (YORYM-973896), the crown appears to be composed of a ribbon-like line. The only other example in the PAS 2019–2023 data is from Ripon, North Yorkshire (LANCUM-9249F6; Fig. 2b), which, through having a large W, is shown uncrowned. However, it has other interesting features. Within the W motif (at the top where a triangle has been formed), there is a small letter S (see discussion below). Beneath it is a cross of five pellets, with the whole design seemingly flanked by a crescent on either side. Alternatively, the cross might be seen as the central component of a more prominent crescent motif.

<sup>7</sup> The MeRit dataset shows the additional letters of F with W, IC, U, WB & WS.

An *ampulla* from Priors Hardwick, Warwickshire (NARC-B37404), has an S before the crowned W and perhaps a letter O after. It is probably significant that the W is crowned and the S is not (see below).

The letter W also appears on the necks of late medieval *ampullae*. Those from Banham, Norfolk (SF-7A5BD5), and Burmarsh, Kent (KENT-7CDD9C), for example, appear on the neck of the flask on the scallop-shell side, whereas that from Slapton, Buckinghamshire (BUC-386E55; Fig. 2c), is on the likely obverse: this is above a shield emblazoned with the arms of (what is thought to be) St George (albeit with no tincture). Importantly, these letters (like the letter S, see below) are not crowned, perhaps suggesting they had an alternative meaning to those on the main body of *ampullae*.

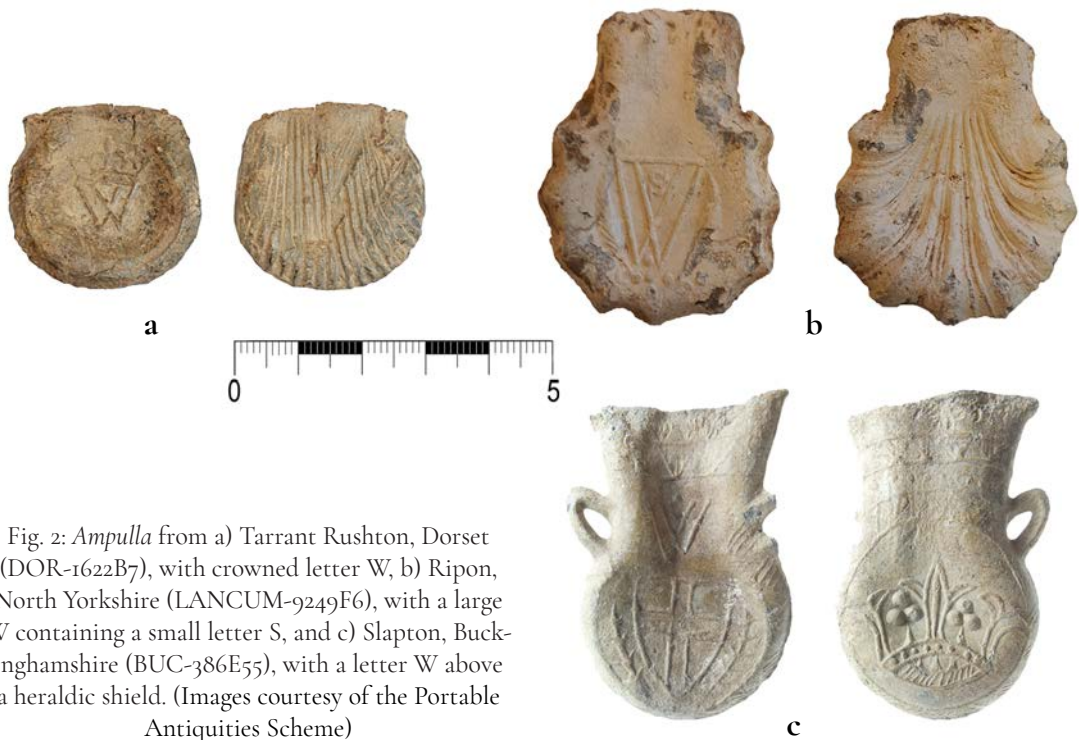


Fig. 2: *Ampulla* from a) Tarrant Rushton, Dorset (DOR-1622B7), with crowned letter W, b) Ripon, North Yorkshire (LANCUM-9249F6), with a large W containing a small letter S, and c) Slapton, Buckinghamshire (BUC-386E55), with a letter W above a heraldic shield. (Images courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)

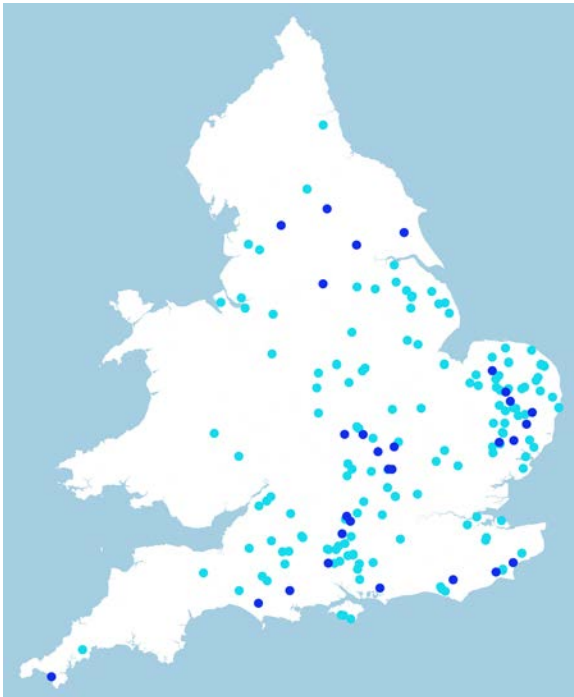
Most commonly (14 examples), the reverse side of *ampullae* with a letter W has a moulded shell (Anderson 2010: Type II.2). Others have the opposite side embellished with a crown (6 examples; Type II.21), a flower (4 examples; Type II.12), or the design is uncertain (6 examples; no other combinations were recorded by Anderson 2010: 187). *Ampullae* with a W on the vessel's neck (i.e. BUC-386E55, KENT-7CDD9C & SF-7A5BD5) all have the same design on the opposite side (a crown; Type II.21).

Brian Spencer (1971: 62) thought that since the letter W is usually crowned, such *ampullae* could relate to a 'saint of royal blood', entertaining St Werburga (Chester), St William (York) and St Withburga (East Dereham, Norfolk), as possibilities. However, given the fact that four in five of the *ampullae* with this motif (note: there was just a handful of known examples in 1971) 'were found in, or within easy reach of, East Anglia', he suggested it was more likely that these *ampullae* came from Walsingham (Norfolk) - colloquially known as 'England's Nazareth' (ibid.: 62-63). Here, in about 1130 (Spencer 1980: 11), though traditionally 1061 (Lewis 2014: 26), Lady Richeldis (Richelde) of Fervaques (Normandy) built a replica of the House of the Annunciation, within which was a statue of the Virgin, crowned, sceptred and seated

on a throne, with the Christ Child beside her. As with 'its prototype' in Nazareth, the 'Holy House of Walsingham' was associated with a well (two in fact), known (from at least the beginning of the 15th century) as 'the well of the Blessed Mary', the waters of which had healing properties (Spencer 1971: 63; 1990: 16). Undoubtedly, pilgrims would have used *ampullae* to take away this holy water.

Spencer (1971: 63) noted that the use of an initial letter to indicate a place name was inconsistent with general medieval practice but highlights the fact that some pilgrim badges from Walsingham only give the place name - *Walsyngham*. As such, if the letter represented Walsingham then he thought that the crown might be taken as the emblem of the Virgin as the *Queen of Heaven* (Spencer 1971: 63; 1990: 16; 1998: 146-147; see also Anderson 2010: 183-184 & 192), or even the gold crown commissioned by Henry III in 1246 for the statue of Our Lady at Walsingham (Spencer 1971: 63; 1980: 16-17; 1998: 147). Similarly, the form of the letter W has been interpreted as a double V for *Virgo Virginum* (Virgin of Virgins) or even, once inverted, M for *Maria* (Spencer 1990: 61; Anderson 2010: 192). Furthering his view that such *ampullae* related to Walsingham, Spencer (1971: 63 & 65) notes that one from Byfield and Hinton, Northamptonshire (Warwick Museum), has a crowned letter W flanked by the letters 's' and 'd', which he took to be for *sancta domus* (holy house). Also, the scallop-shell motif (*ibid.*: 64) might have been chosen because - according to the Dutch humanist and theologian Desiderius Erasmus (d.1536) - Our Lady of Walsingham was known as 'the sea-side Virgin'.

Following Spencer (1971: 62), Michael Mitchiner (1986: 138) observed that '*ampullae* alluding to Walsingham have nearly all been found in East Anglia', based on three he had acquired with crowned letter Ws. By 1990, Spencer (1990: 60-61) seems to be reconsidering this view based on new finds, saying 'the relatively large number [of these *ampullae*] and [their] wide distribution... points to a shrine of major importance', and (based on this) Walsingham was his favoured choice. The distribution of 29 *ampullae* with a crowned letter W recorded by the PAS in 2019-2023, together with the 168 in the MeRit data [Map 2], confirms this view, though with a notable second cluster in central to southern England (from Northamptonshire through to Somerset) besides that in East Anglia.



Map 2: *Ampullae* with the letter W (2019-23 finds = dark blue, earlier finds light blue). (Map: Michael Lewis)

Undoubtedly, Brian Spencer (1998: 135) was right that the ‘ardent popular devotion’ to Walsingham’s miracle-working statue ‘transformed an insignificant Norfolk hamlet into a pilgrim centre of international repute’. However, the letter W upon *ampullae* could be associated with other cult centres or even have operated across several. It has already been noted that Spencer (1971: 62) hypothesised that the crowned letter might be linked to St Werburga (Chester), St William (York) or St Withburga (East Dereham, Norfolk), and Anderson (2010: 192) adds to the list St Walston (Bawburgh, Norfolk). If, however, the W is instead considered a double V, then the list increases to almost every church in England (see Spencer 1998: 136). On this basis, the possibility remains that *ampullae* with the crowned letter W motif could be marketed more widely at Marian sites, beyond just at Walsingham, and maybe clusters in the PAS distribution demonstrate this.

## Letter R

William Anderson (2010: 192) observed that late medieval *ampullae* with the letter R are ‘less common’ in the PAS dataset than those with a W, ‘but still prominent’. The PAS 2019–2023 dataset confirms this view, with Rs being the second most common letter form on *ampullae* (with 16 examples) and the third most common (after the letter T) in the MeRit PAS dataset (51 examples). Importantly, perhaps, compared to the letter W, Rs are less likely to be crowned.

*Ampullae* with a crowned letter R show variation in the motif and elements thereof. An example from Titchmarsh, Northamptonshire (OXON-79DD9B), depicts a large gothic letter R with a bifoliate crown above; the band of the crown is formed of a curved line, with a line of pellets above, surmounted by three fleur-de-lis formed of fine lines. The same motif appears on an *ampulla* from Hodsock, Nottinghamshire (SWYOR-A511B5; Fig. 3a), but here the design is crisper, showing the circlet of the crown as hatched-oval, formed between the band of the crown and the top of the letter R. Both items have a double crown motif on the other side, linking them as a single type (not observed by Anderson 2010: 187). In contrast, an example from Halstock, Devon (DOR-1A7C37; Fig. 3b), has a reversed crowned letter R within an otherwise plain shield (again, not observed by Anderson 2010: 187). The crown on this example is notably more angular than those described above. It also has a central quatrefoil, rather than fleur-de-lis. Its reverse appears undecorated but has an indented circle at its centre.

Otherwise, the letter R is shown uncrowned within a circular border, of which there are two main types. The first shows just these two elements – a crowned R within a circular border. Amongst the better-preserved examples of this type is an *ampulla* from Sibton, Suffolk (SF-793379; Fig. 3c), although damaged at the mouth and neck, and is bent. The second type shows these same elements, but also (above the circular border) what has been described as a ‘ragged staff’, usually interpreted as a lily (see PAS records).<sup>8</sup> Another moulded border surrounds the whole design (suggested by Anderson 2010: 190 to show the lily’s pot). This motif is most evident on *ampullae* from Hockham, Norfolk (SUR-5C6264; Fig. 3d), Owersby, Lincolnshire (NLM-E35714), and Wainfleet St Mary, Lincolnshire (LIN-1ADDAA). All have the reverse form of a shell (Anderson 2020: Type II.3), highlighting a clear distinction between this type and those with a crowned letter R. Perhaps the different motifs reflect different cult centres or the works of different craftworkers (see further below).

Of further note is an *ampulla* from Grassington, North Yorkshire (SWYOR-AD2738; Fig. 3e), with the letters RP in a circular border. This example is worn, so perhaps the P is another letter, though it

8 Note the ‘ragged staff’ motif is also identified with the Earls of Warwick (Spencer 1990: 29; 1998: 292–293).



is clearly of a type linked to *ampullae* with an uncrowned letter R in a circular border. In this case, its reverse depicts a crown formed of fleur-de-lis (not observed by Anderson 2010: 187).

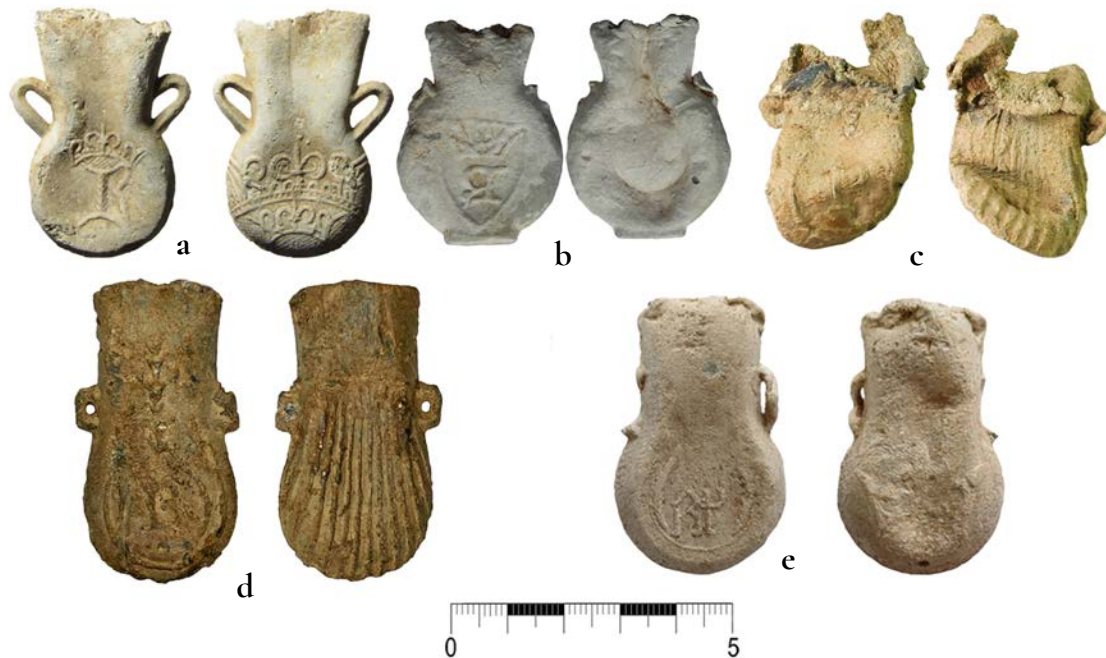
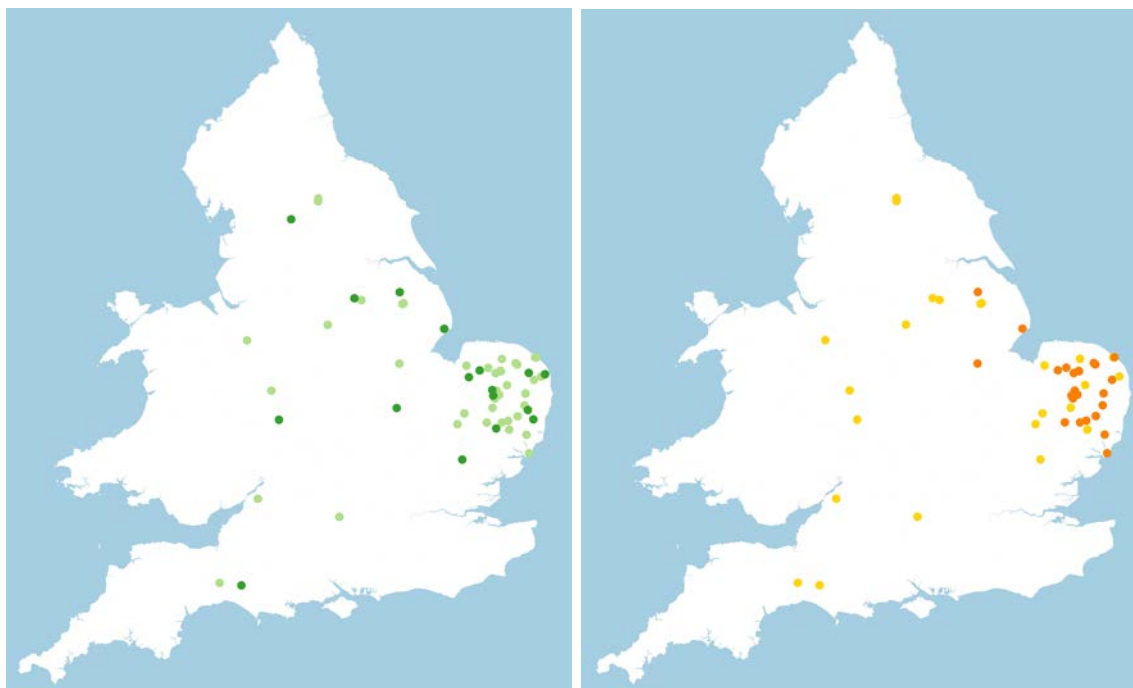


Fig. 3: *Ampulla* from a) Hodsock, Nottinghamshire (SWYOR-A511B5), with a crowned letter R, b) Halstock, Devon (DOR-1A7C37), with the letter R reversed, c) Sibton, Suffolk (SF-793379), with the letter R in a circular border, d) Hockham, Norfolk (SUR-5C6264), with the lily motif, and e) Grassington, North Yorkshire (SWYOR-AD2738), with the letters RP in a circular border. (Images courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)

Several interpretations have been offered for the meaning of the letter R on such *ampullae*. Brian Spencer (1971: 62) said it could be attributed to ‘many saints’, including St Rumbald (Buckingham and Brackley, Northamptonshire). However, its combination with the lily-pot motif suggested that the letter might stand for a Marian shine connected to the Annunciation, such as Reepham (Norfolk). A decade later, Spencer (1980: 16) refined this view, connecting the lily pot with the Holy House at Walsingham, proposing that the letter R might stand for its founder, Lady Richeldis of Fervaques. In this context, it is interesting that in the 2019–2023 PAS dataset *ampullae* with the letter R cluster in East Anglia [Map 3a], and this is notably the case for those with the ‘ragged staff/lily’ (Anderson Type II.3) [Map 3b].

However, it is also apparent that the letter R might have another meaning in other contexts. Anderson (2010: 192) notes the discovery of a lead token at Ramsey Abbey, Cambridgeshire, which has upon it the letter R on one side and a bird and a fish on the other, perhaps offering another cult centre. Even more remote from the East Anglian distribution of *ampullae* with the letter R, Kate Rennicks (2019: 167) has suggested the crowned letter R found on silver-gilt lead tokens from Holme Cultram Abbey, Cumbria, might stand for *Regina Coeli*, for [Mary] Queen of Heaven (Gilbanks 1900: 88).





Map 3: a) *Ampullae* with the letter R (2019-2023 finds in dark green, earlier finds in light green); b) MeRit data showing those with the 'ragged staff/lily' (orange) and without (yellow). (Map: Michael Lewis)

Important also is whether the letter R stands for a person or place, or both, and whether the fact the letter is crowned (or not) alters that interpretation. In the collection of Michael Mitchiner (1986: 150, no. 422) is an *ampulla* from the Thames foreshore at Queenhithe, City of London, that has upon its reverse HENI/B, presumably for *Henricus*. On this basis, it is clear some *ampullae* give personal names. The evidence is lacking to be certain, but it is quite possible that the letter R in an East Anglian context represents a personal name, and the chances are it also reflects a localised East Anglian cult.

## Letter T

The letter Ts on late medieval *ampullae* are unusually ornate; there are nine examples in the 2019-2023 PAS dataset and 52 in the MeRit PAS dataset. Typical is that from Skendleby, Lincolnshire (LIN-8BE55C; Fig. 4a), which shows a crowned Lombardic capital letter T; its curling tail makes it look almost like a letter G. The crown is double-banded, with a central fleur-de-lis between two half-lis, with the whole motif flanked by scrolling branches with pellets for fruit. The same design is observed on other *ampullae* (e.g. DENO-1A2789, GLO-B9CA21, NARC-309806), with its conformity being of note, especially compared with other letter forms on *ampullae*.

Two reverse designs occur in the 2019-2023 PAS dataset of such *ampullae*. First, most commonly (seven examples), the motif of a fleur-de-lis (Anderson 2010: Type II.30). That from Caldecott, Rutland (NARC-309806; Fig. 4b), has the fleur-de-lis is flanked by three pellets in a triangular formation, with the whole design within a moulded circle, surrounded by a pelleted band. The perimeter of the *ampulla*

body is also decorated with a band of zigzags. This same design appears on the other examples with the fleur-de-lis, though there can be subtle differences, suggesting they are not all from one mould. The other two *ampullae* in the 2019-2023 data with the crowned letter T (SUR-9466D4 & WILT-E6o6EE Fig. 4c) have the reverse design in the form of a shell (Anderson Type II.5).

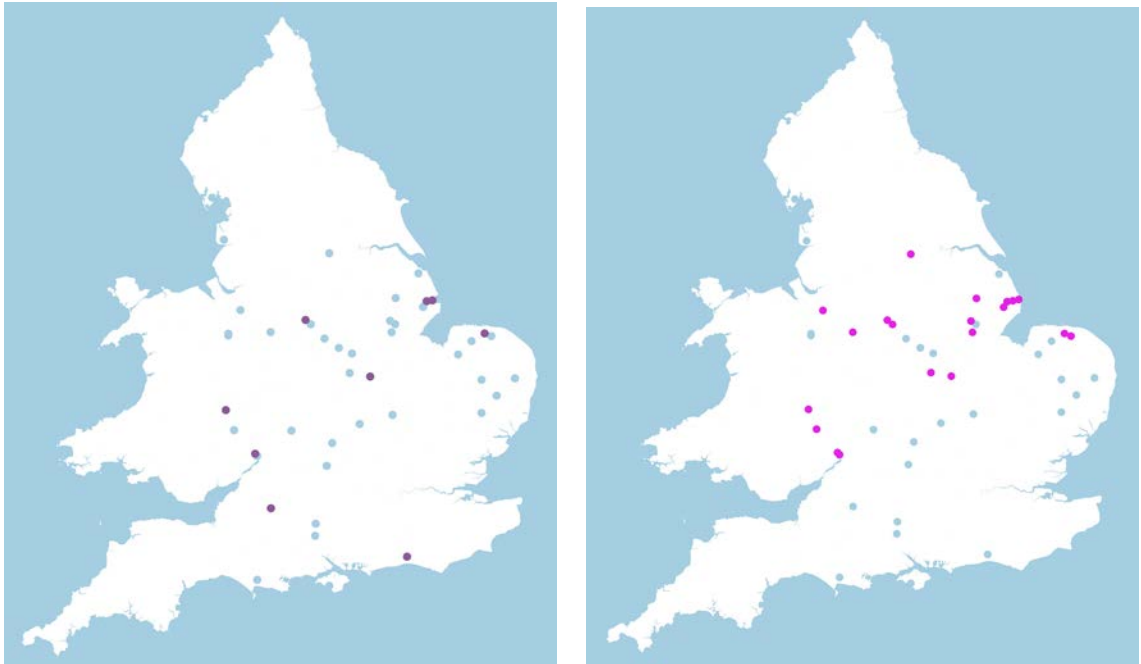


Fig 4: *Ampulla* from a) Skendleby, Lincolnshire (LIN-8BE55C), with a crowned letter T flanked by branches and fruit, b) Caldecott, Rutland (NARC-3o98o6), with the reverse design of a fleur-de-lis motif, and c) Staverton, Wiltshire (WILT-E6o6EE), with the reverse design of a scallop-shell. (Images courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)

It is generally thought that the crowned Lombardic letter T stands for the cult of Thomas Becket (see PAS records; also Spencer 1998: 121-123), though William Anderson (2010: 192) noted that none had been found in Kent; Canterbury being the martyrdom site of Thomas Becket. The situation is no different 15 years on, with the distribution of such *ampullae* in the PAS 2019-2023 dataset concentrated in a band across the Midlands from the Bristol Channel to the Wash [Map 4a]. This is most notable in the MeRit dataset of PAS finds for *ampullae* with the reverse motif of the fleur-de-lis (Anderson Type II.3o) than those with a shell (Anderson Type II.5), the latter being more dispersed [Map 4b].

There is a tradition of Becket *ampullae* being made with many forms and designs (see Spencer 1998: 38-72), though these mostly date to the 13th century. Significantly, on these, Thomas is not identified with just the letter T, but within longer legends: e.g. OPTIMVS EGRORVM MEDICVS FIT TOMA

BONORVM (Thomas is the best doctor of the worthy sick), ORA PRO NOBIS BEATE THO/THOM (Pray for us blessed Thomas), REGENALDVS FILIVS HVRS THOMAS MARTIRIVM FECET FIERI (Reginald Fitzurse caused Thomas' martyrdom). Likewise, on later badges, Thomas' name is usually given in full or minimally abbreviated: e.g. THOME, THOMAS (Spencer 1998: 107-111 & 115-118). However, there is a badge type in the form of a Lombardic letter T. Brian Spencer (1998: 121) notes that 'the decorative potential of this shapely letter was used to good effect and, more often than not, the horizontal top stroke was worked into a substantial, flamboyant crown', as found on *ampullae* with a crowned Lombardic letter T. Spencer (ibid.) goes on to say, this is a good example of 'reinforcement', with the addition of one amulet device to another, to increase its efficacy.



Map 4: a) *Ampullae* with the letter T (2019-2023 finds in purple, earlier finds in light blue); b) MeRit data showing those with the reverse motif of a fleur-de-lis (pink) and all others (light blue). (Map: Michael Lewis)

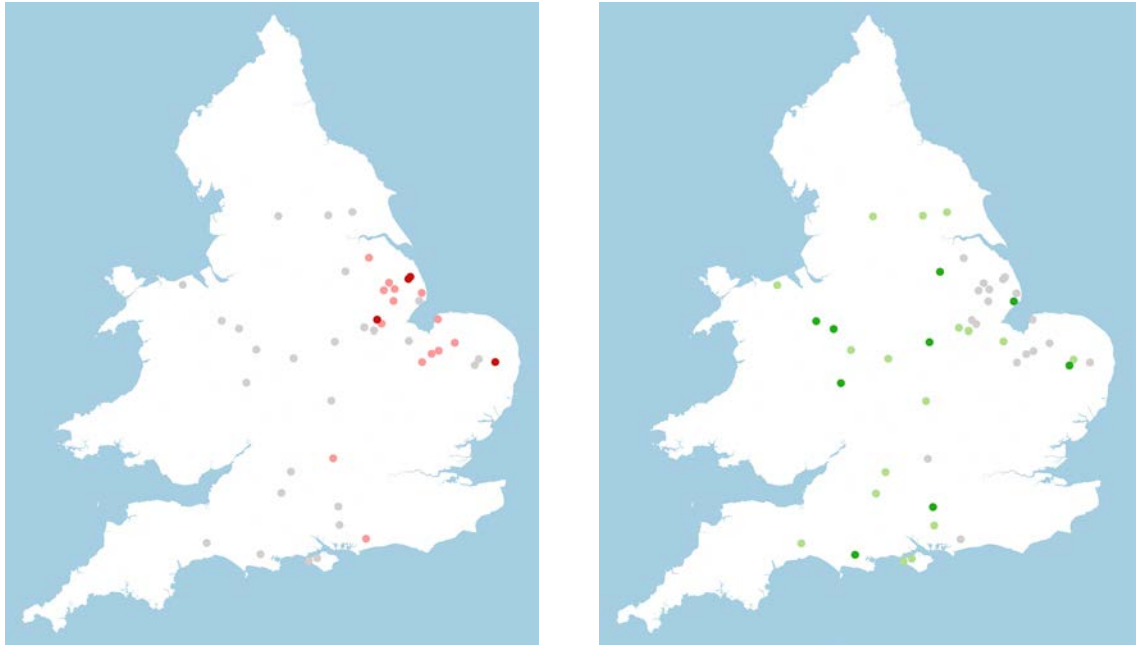
Given the above, the distribution of PAS finds, particularly of *ampullae* with the reverse symbol of the fleur-de-lis (Anderson Type II.30), is notably distant from Canterbury. This suggests that these *ampullae* might relate to another cult centre, such as the chapel of St Thomas of Canterbury on High Bridge, Lincoln, or St Thomas', Burton le Coggles, Lincolnshire, or even signifies another St Thomas, such as St Thomas Cantilupe of Hereford (Prosser 2019: 64-69). Perhaps even it was the case that such *ampullae* were traded by itinerant pilgrim souvenir makers, travelling from one site to another.

## Letter H and I

Next, the letters H and I are considered together. Given the nature of the letter form, one might be (accidentally or purposefully) read for the other (Anderson 2010: 187). However, as will be shown, their distribution suggests they are distinct from each other.

Four *ampullae* with the letter H appear in the PAS 2019-2023 data, with 18 PAS finds recorded in the MeRit database. Here, the H is shown as two linear uprights crossed in the middle, though the up-rights of the letter bend outwards and the horizontal part upward.<sup>9</sup> That from Muckton, Lincolnshire (NLM-962631; Fig. 5a), has the H within a hatched circle. This seems to be similar to one from Woodton, Norfolk (NMS-07FC85; no image on record), which the recorder says shows this same motif ‘within a double line border of concentric circles’: this ‘double line border’ is also evident on another, from Aunsby and Dembleby, Lincolnshire (LIN-A627F8). As such, a third Lincolnshire *ampulla*, this time from Reston (PUBLIC-A6629A; Fig. 5b), is of particular interest as it has the same design (although the hatching is hard to make out), with what appears to be pellets between the concentric circles. The reverse design on all four *ampullae* is of a shell (Anderson 2010: Type II.6).

All the *ampullae* with a letter H recorded in the last five years (a small sample, though confirmed by the MeRit data) come from Norfolk and Lincolnshire [Map 5a], suggesting a localised cult.



Map 5: a) *Ampullae* with letters H (2019-23 finds in red, earlier finds in pink) and I (grey); b) *Ampullae* with letters I (2019-2023 finds in dark green, earlier finds in light green) and H (in grey). (Map: Michael Lewis)

*Ampullae* with the letter I are a more complex group, not least because there is sometimes a degree of uncertainty about whether the letter is an I or something else. William Anderson (2010: 192) noted at least three ‘sub-variant’ types with the letter I, though there might be more than that.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that another H form appears in earlier PAS data, see for example SUSS-564EE2 from near Chichester, West Sussex, which shows a lowercase ‘h’.

Most common are *ampullae*, which show a crowned letter I within the raised outline of a shield. The shield is bulbous and almost heart-like (see Mitchiner 1986: 143, for a letter I within a crowned heart), and the crown is formed of a central fleur-de-lis between side fleurs. Typically, the crown is situated upon the letter within the boundary of the shield, as on *ampullae* from Wainfleet St Mary, Lincolnshire (LIN-Fo6406; Fig. 5c), although an *ampulla* from Clayworth, Nottinghamshire (NLM-D81711), is curious in having the crown upon the shield itself (see Spencer 1990: 62). It is of note that all these *ampullae* (five examples) have a ‘compass-drawn’ flower on the other side (not recorded by Anderson 2010: 187).

Similar, but notably distinct, is an *ampulla* from Affpuddle and Turnerspuddle, Dorset (DEV-3C8E2A; Fig. 5d), which shows a square-topped shield formed by a double border; this is divided in two by a horizontal line (*per fess*), of which the letter I is in the lower part. Contrary to what seems usual in the 2019-2023 PAS data, the reverse of the vessel is in the form of a shell (like Anderson 2010: 187, Type I.1). The recorders of the Dorset *ampulla* (Courtney McElhinney and Laura Burnett) have noticed others with the same or very similar motif clustering in Hampshire (HAMP1986) and the Isle of Wight (IOW-1B89Ao & IOW-7AF845), suggesting they come from the same ‘southern shrine’, albeit these others have pellets in the upper part of the shield, which is not apparent (though perhaps worn off) on the Dorset example.

Hard to decipher is the design on an *ampulla* from Bayton, Worcestershire (HESH-C433AB; Fig. 5e). This appears to show a letter I (and behind it some geometric pattern or motif) within a double border of concentric circles. This *ampulla* also stands out due to its extra embellishment, including banded moulding and hatching at the vessel’s neck and around the edges of its body. The design on the reverse is of a compass-drawn flower (type not observed by Anderson 2010: 187). Likewise, it is not clear whether the I is crowned or not on an *ampulla* from Sileby, Leicestershire (LEIC-763E4A); the letter is of note since it is formed of two lines. This has the reverse shell design (Anderson Type II.6).

Two *ampullae* with I-like letters are related because their reverse shows a shell design formed of chevrons. That from near Shrewsbury, Shropshire (WREX-815D11), has (what seems to be) a plain moulded I (interpreted by the recorder as a letter T). More interesting is an *ampulla* from Welshpool and Lyneal, Shropshire (WREX-3538CA; Fig. 5f), which has a shield containing a possible letter I, J (albeit an unlikely letter form at this date) or T, or maybe (even) a cross. Above the shield, seemingly rising from a pole, is a moulded flag-like motif (related to Anderson Type II.6).

Brian Spencer (1990: 62; 1998: 205), following the same thought processes that led him to suggest the letter W might stand for Our Lady of Walsingham (see above), suggested that *ampullae* with a letter I or the crowned I might allude to Our Lady of Ipswich, Suffolk. The etymology of Ipswich perhaps lends to a G (rather than I) being more expected: Ipswich is recorded as Gepeswiz, Gipeswiz, Gipeuuid, Gipewiz and Gypeswiz in the Domesday Book (Williams & Martin 2002: 1363) and *GIPESWIC*, *GYPES*, *GIBEL*, *GIPEU* and *YIP* on English hammered coinage (North 2020: 237).

Spencer (1990: 62) also thought that if the letter I stood for a place rather than a person, ‘this might bring St Ives [now Cambridgeshire] into the reckoning’ where nearby Ramsey Abbey promoted the cult of St Thomas on the repute of its thaumaturgic water. If, instead, the letter is a J, Spencer (1990: 62) also added St James (Reading Abbey), St John of Beverley (see also Anderson 2010: 192) to the mix, though was dismissive of Michael Mitchiner’s (1986: 143) suggestion that the letter I (in a crowned heart) is an allusion to Jesus Christ. Based on the Norfolk findspot of an *ampulla* in his collection (no. 406), Mitchiner noted the presence of part of the True Cross at Bromholm, Norfolk, a shrine which was also a centre of veneration to Christ’s Sacred Heart (see also Spencer 1998: 159-165). He also highlighted a shield bearing the letters IC on an *ampulla* from London (ibid.; no. 407), which he presumed to be for Jesus Christ. It seems then, as Spencer (1990: 62) thought, there are many possible options...



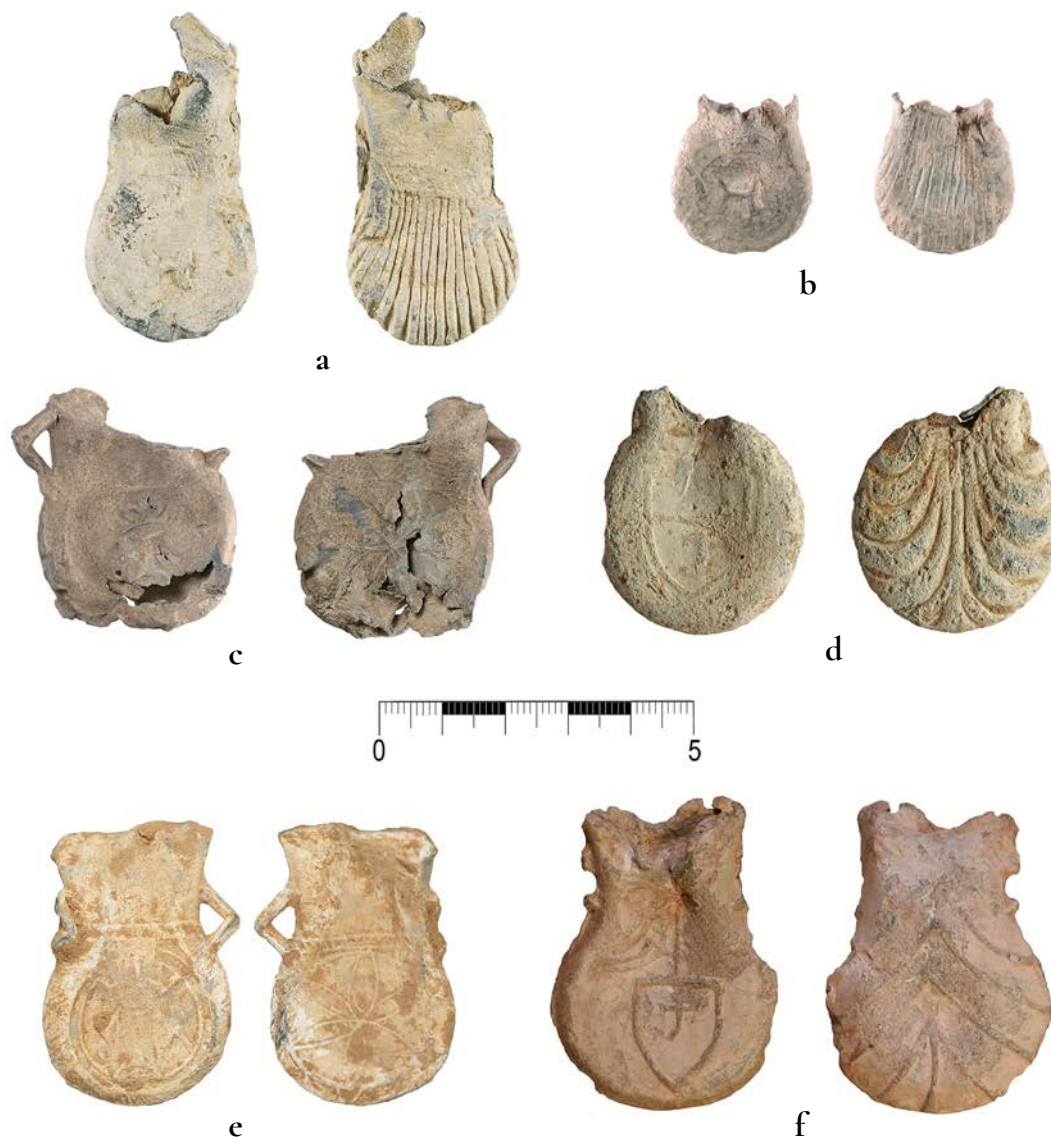


Fig 5: *Ampullae* from a) Muckton, Lincolnshire (NLM-962631), with a letter H upon a hatched circle, b) Reston, Lincolnshire, (PUBLIC-A6629A), of similar form to the previous example but showing a double line border of concentric circles with pellets in between, c) Wainfleet St Mary, Lincolnshire (LIN-Fo6406), with a crowned letter I within a shield, d) Affpuddle and Turnerspudde, Dorset (DEV-3C8E2A), with the letter I in the lower part of a shield, e) Bayton, Worcestershire (HESH-C433AB), showing a letter I within a double border of concentric circles, f) Welshpool and Lyneal, Shropshire (WREX-3538CA), with a shield containing a possible letter I or similar. (Images courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)



*Ampullae* with the letter I are more widespread than those with the letter H, confirmed by the MeRit dataset of PAS finds [Map 5b]. Following Spencer's hypothesis that the more famous the shrine the more widespread the distribution of its pilgrim signs, then *ampullae* with the letter I might suggest a cult of some significance. Even so, their distribution implies a nucleus in the northern/midlands and southwest parts of the country, with a notable absence in the southeast.

The more localised distribution of *ampullae* with the letter H is surely relevant. There has been less discussion of the meaning of this letter than might be expected (e.g. see Spencer 1971: 60), probably because it is not apparent what it might represent. Within one PAS record (NLM-962631), it has been put forward (by Martin Foreman) that the H stands for Henry VI, but the PAS finds do not indicate a focus around his cult centre at Windsor. Alternatively, the H might represent a non-royal personal name. In some earlier PAS records within the MeRit dataset (see NMS-2794A2 & NMS-92674C), it has been suggested (by Andrew Rogerson) that the H might be for St Hugh of Lincoln (d. 1200) who was canonised in 1220 (Farmer 1978: 199-200). Another possibility is 'Little Saint Hugh' (d. 1255), an English boy whose violent death was falsely blamed on Lincoln's Jewish community, with the story developing that he had been ritually tortured and murdered (ibid.: 200). Hugh's story is referenced in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the Prioress' Tale (Ackroyd 2010: 333-337), and his cult seems to have been proactively established to attract pilgrims to Lincoln (Hillaby & Hillaby 2013: 657-658). Even if the PAS distribution is not connected to either Hughs, it would be consistent with a Lincoln cult centre.

## Letter S (and SB and SW)

The letter S is one of the most interesting letter forms found on late medieval *ampullae* as it is typically shown reversed (retrograde), though for reasons that remain enigmatic. The 2019-2023 PAS data includes nine examples, with 48 in the MeRit PAS data; 38 having the S reversed.

Representative of the type is an *ampulla* from Aunsby and Dembleby, Lincolnshire (LIN-B58CCA; Fig. 6a), which depicts a crowned reverse S within a cross-hatched circle. Unlike the crowns on other letters on *ampullae*, it is quite subtle and delicate, formed of a band with a central fleur-de-lis flanked by two half-lis. Where the body joins the neck of the *ampulla*, there is a moulded band formed of diagonal lines within a border (similar are DENO-620B3C & GLO-2C87A3). The same design is found on other *ampullae* (e.g. BH-5979D4; Fig. 6b & DENO-92A1C1), although the neck banding is absent; on the latter, this might be because the object is broken at this point and missing its neck. Similar is one from Keynsham, Bath and North East Somerset (GLO-E04C97), though the letter S does not appear crowned (see also LVPL-4FFBB2), perhaps due to wear. In all cases, the reverse of the *ampullae* shows a shell design.

Some *ampullae* show the letter S on the vessel's neck. Examples in the PAS 2019-2023 data include an example from Tortworth, Gloucestershire (GLO-9ED181), which has (what seems to be) a large letter S (the right way around) on its side. The main design on the body is a compass-drawn flower. The opposite side has a large fleur-de-lis on the body and a cross pattée on the neck. Geoff Egan (see PAS record) noted that a mould found during the excavation of a medieval workshop in Acre, Israel, has a similar design, suggesting that the *ampulla* from Tortworth travelled from the Holy Land. Another example with a letter form more like the *ampullae* discussed is that from Ashleyhey, Derbyshire (DENO-DBBD18; Fig. 6c), which has a reversed letter S on the neck. Here, the main design is a rounded shield topped with a crown of stylised fleur-de-lis: the shield is emblazoned with a saltire cross, the cross itself being filled with hatching, suggesting tincture. The opposite side of the vessel has a compass-drawn flower.

Otherwise, the letter S might be found with another letter. That from Priors Hardwick, Warwickshire

(NARC-B37404), with an S before a crowned W (and perhaps an O after), has already been noted. Also recorded is an *ampulla* without a findspot (DOR-E67078; Fig. 6d), which appears to have the letters SB. It parallels a complete example from Westbury, Somerset (SOM-B4C778), found in 1988 and later recorded with the PAS: others finds include those from Cerne Abbas, Dorset (SOMDOR-EA22C5) and Long Man, East Sussex (SUSS-D9AE78). On these, the lettering is much clearer, showing S.B. Brian Spencer (pers. comm. to finder in record) suggested that these initials might refer to St Bridget of Sweden, where her cult was popular at Syon Abbey, Isleworth, 'Middlesex', during the second half of the 15th century. Two other *ampullae* inscribed with the same letters have been recorded with the PAS (NMGW-A7E456 & NMGW-FAEA63), both found at Wenvoe, Vale of Glamorgan, Wales, leading to a different cult centre being suggested. Naomi Payne (PAS record), who recorded the Westbury *ampulla*, notes that the record for NMGW-FAEA63 refers to a third *ampulla* with S.B. also from Wenvoe, hypothesising that the concentration in this location might 'represent repeat visits to the same shrine'. She notes that Wenvoe is only a few miles north of Barry Island, where the 6th-century Welsh saint St Baruc is said to have been buried and was a focus of pilgrimage (see also Read 2021: 95-96, No. 533). The theory that SB might refer to St Baruc is somewhat speculative, given pilgrim signs are not known to have been made for Celtic saints (Geoff Egan, pers. comm.; also see Locker & Lewis 2016). The southwest examples might suggest a cult centre in the West Country or at least further southwest than Isleworth.

Following his theory that the crowned letter W stands for a place name (Walsingham), Brian Spen-

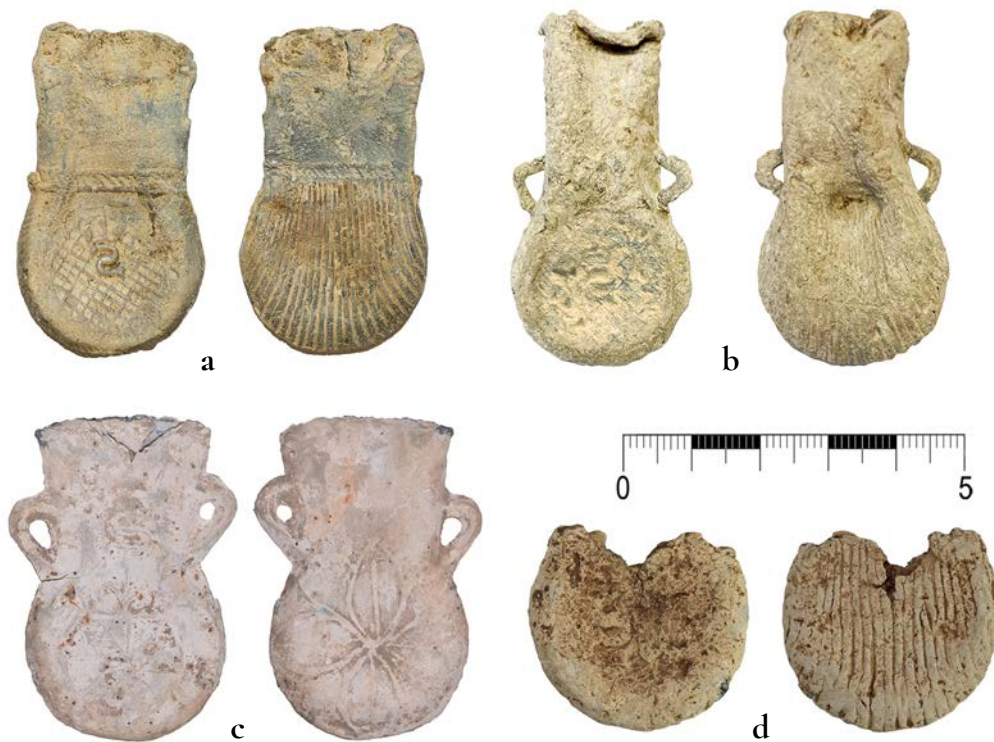
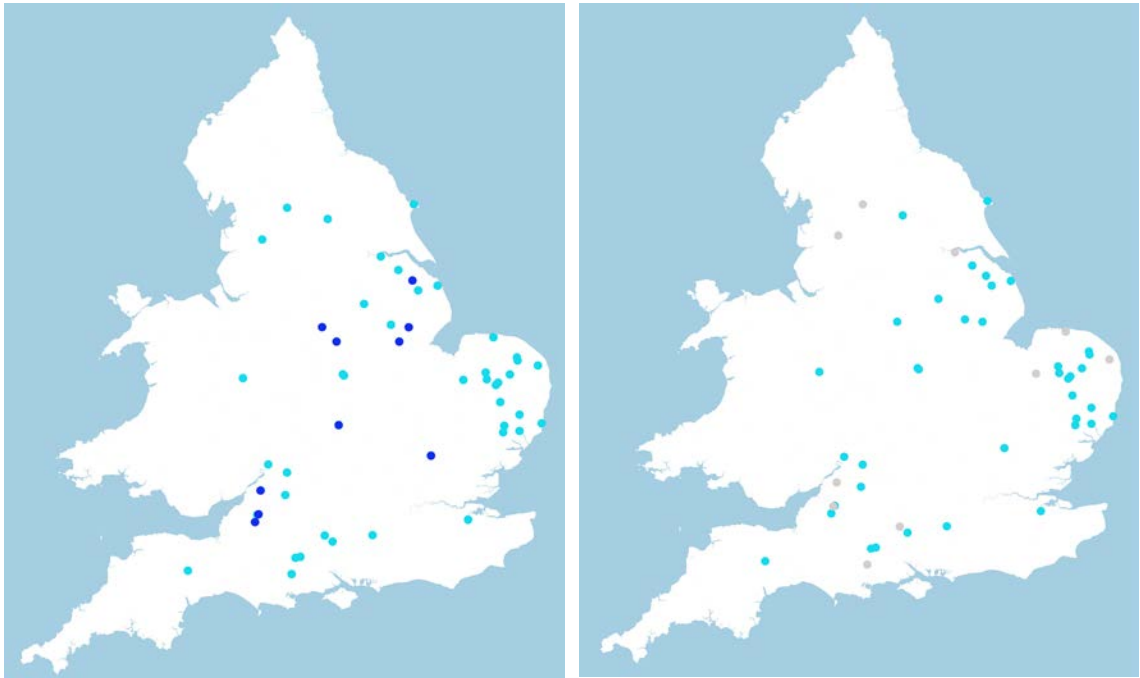


Fig 6: *Ampullae* from a) Aunsby and Dembleby, Lincolnshire (LIN-B58CCA), which shows a crowned reverse S within a cross-hatched circle, b) Westmill, Hertfordshire (BH-5979D4), with the same design but the 'banding' at the neck of the *ampulla* is absent, c) Ashleyhey, Derbyshire (DENO-DBBD18), which has a reversed letter S on the neck, d) probably Dorset (DOR-E67078), with the letters SB. (Images courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)

cer (1971: 64) proposed that the crowned letter S might relate to the ‘popular’ Marian shrine of Our Lady of Sudbury, Suffolk. He also suggested that a single workshop supplied *ampullae* to several local shrines. These claims were likely based on the (then) high quantities of *ampullae* being recovered in East Anglia compared to elsewhere. Intriguingly, *ampullae* with the letter S are notably absent from East Anglia in the 2019–2023 PAS dataset [Map 6a], suggesting instead a shrine site in the midland counties of Derbyshire or Lincolnshire or even in the southwest. However, the MeRit data [Map 6b] redresses that, showing notable clusters in East Anglia, besides around Lincolnshire towards the west and in the southwest. Of further interest, and perhaps somewhat unexpected, is that the distribution is not much different if the S is reversed or not. Important, then, is that there are clusters of the same letter form, but these are not obviously in places linked to one another.



Map 6: a) *Ampullae* with the letter S (2019–23 finds in dark blue, earlier finds in light blue); b) *Ampullae* with the S that are reversed (light blue) and not (grey). (Map: Michael Lewis)

Shortly the significance of these letter forms upon late medieval *ampullae* will be considered and the relevance of their distribution to one another. Beforehand, however, it is helpful to consider what might be learnt about these English and Welsh finds within a European context.

## PAS *Ampullae* within a European Context

Kunera provides a useful resource for medieval pilgrim signs found across Europe, including objects in museum collections besides public finds. With over 28,000 items recorded, it is a large dataset, containing 1,679 *ampullae*, of which 436 are from the United Kingdom. Otherwise, much of the data comes from north-western Europe, notably the Netherlands (535 *ampullae*), Belgium (119) and France (118).

Given that Kunera only includes a fraction of the *ampullae* recorded by the PAS, it is clearly currently incomplete. Neither is its data representative of the material culture of Europe, mainly due to varying laws for the recovery and reporting of archaeological finds (Sawicki, Lewis & Vargha 2024: 3–5), with a notable bias toward north-west Europe where metal-detecting is permitted. Nonetheless, it does offer some mechanism to assess English and Welsh finds within a European context, focusing here on those with lettering.

Lettering upon later medieval *ampullae* from Belgium and France is rare. Most common are those with the Christogram IHS – a contraction of the Greek word ΙΗΣΟΥΣ (Jesus), also interpreted as being for *Iesus Hominum Salvator* (Jesus, the saviour of mankind). From France are examples from Paris (Kunera: 01520), a barrel-shaped *ampulla* depicting IHS within a crowned shield from Saint-Omer (Kunera: 26568; Fig. 7a), and one from Zimmersheim (Kunera: 26059) with IHS on the neck. *Ampullae* with IHS from Belgium include examples from Aalst (Kunera: 16889; see also van Beuningen, Koldewij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 257, No. 2811), Damme (Kunera: 25187) and Oudenaarde (Kunera: 09806). Likely connected with these are also examples from the Netherlands. These include a barrel-shaped *ampulla* from Kampen (Kunera: 06719; see also van Beuningen, Koldewij & Kicken 2001: 337, No. 1586), and more usual flask-shaped examples from Middelburg (Kunera: 23718), Nieuwlande (Kunera: 25190) and Vlissingen (Kunera: 16899), with the latter also showing the arms of Philip the Bold of Burgundy (see Koldewij 2007).

As noted, these *ampullae* with the IHS monogram come in various forms, with their letters executed in diverse ways. Most date from the 14th or 15th centuries, introduced perhaps from 1300 (dating based on Kunera). If this dating is correct, they seem to largely post-date the more ornate ‘early *ampullae*’ but, significantly, come into use earlier than the later medieval examples with letters from Britain discussed above. As such, they might be regarded as a ‘transitional variety’. Intriguingly, they are notably absent in the PAS dataset. However, examples have been found in England and recorded by Kunera, including from London (Kunera: 02111) and Little Walsingham, Norfolk (Kunera: 08605), both dated to the 14th century.

Otherwise, letters do not seem to appear in the French finds on Kunera,<sup>10</sup> and are rare in the Belgian data. An *ampulla* with an A surmounted by a cross was found at Leper (Kunera: 06425; see also van Beuningen, Koldewij & Kicken 2001: 310, No. 1318) and has been linked to Aachen. Somewhat similar, a barrel-shaped *ampulla* from Zoutleeuw (Kunera: 20884) has a monogram combining A and V, surmounted by a cross and then a crown. A crowned M, suggested to represent Mary, was found at Diksmuide (Kunera: 23720; Fig. 7b), and a barrel-shaped *ampulla* with a rounded M was found at Mechelen (Kunera: 09295).

A broad search of Kunera gives 96 *ampullae* with letters, of which 39 are from the UK and 31 have no country of origin. Letters are otherwise most common in the Netherlands, with 18 examples. Of note is the fact that certain *ampullae* forms tend to be used for some letter types. For example, AW monograms surmounted by a cross appear on ‘barrel-shaped’ *ampullae* from Dordrecht (Kunera: 06725; Fig. 7c; see also van Beuningen, Koldewij & Kicken 2001: 378, No. 1591), Nieuwlande (Kunera: 06726 & 25197; see also van Beuningen, Koldewij & Kicken 2001: 379, No. 1592) and Westenschouwen (Kunera: 23509). The letter A often appears upon *ampullae* with a more rounded body. Some, such as from Rotterdam (Kunera: 16893 (Fig. 7d) & 23375; see also van Beuningen, Koldewij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 258, No. 2816) show an A within a small circle. A large cross-hatched letter A is found on an *ampulla* from Dor-

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<sup>10</sup> Although one, seemingly unprovenanced (APL-9030) is recorded in the Musée d’Archéologie, Lons le Saunier, is on Artefacts (<https://artefacts.mom.fr>).



drecht (Kunera: 16894; see also van Beuningen, Koldeweij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 258, No. 2817). Intriguingly, as noted above, a lone letter A is not found in the 2019-2023 PAS data.

The letter M is also relatively common in the Kunera Dutch data. In all instances, the letter is crowned. On *ampullae* from Reimerswaal (Kunera: 16891) and Rotterdam (Kunera: 16890; see also van Beuningen, Koldeweij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 257, No. 2812-3), the letter form is more rounded, but notably angular on an example from Hoorn (Kunera: 23719; Fig. 7e). Again, as noted above, the letter M appears in the 2019-2023 PAS dataset but is by no means common. Likewise, the letter W appears on *ampullae* found in the Netherlands, though its form varies. Akin to the AW monogram, is a similar form showing a crowned letter W, as on an example from Terneuzen (Kunera: 24450; PAN: 00062637). Upon an *ampulla* from Dordrecht (Kunera: 23983) is a W on the neck of the vessel above a shield of St George (or similar); this is like the above example from Slapton, Buckinghamshire (BUC-386E55), recorded by the PAS. Another Dutch find, from Appingedam (Kunera: 23725), shows a crowned W, which is common in the PAS dataset (see above).



Fig. 7: *Ampullae* from a) St Omer, France (Kunera: 26568), showing IHS within a crowned shield, b) Diksmuide, Belgium (Kunera: 23720), with a crowned M, c) Dordrecht, Netherlands (Kunera: 06725), that has an AW monogram, d) Rotterdam, Netherlands (Kunera: 16893), showing an A within a small circle, e) Hoorn, Netherlands (Kunera: 23719).

One example of a Dutch *ampulla* with the letter T appears in the Kunera data, found in Leiden (Kunera: 23723). This is much like those in the PAS dataset showing a Lombardic T (also see above). In the Kunera data are also two flask-shaped *ampullae* with a crowned reverse letter S (as in the PAS data), from Appingedam (Kunera: 23724) and Sluis (Kunera: 07794; see also van Beuningen, Koldeweij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 258, No. 2818). The fact that these places are both close to the coast might suggest that they are imports from England.

The relatively high quantity of Dutch *ampullae* finds compared with much lower numbers from Belgium and France might be explained by numerous factors - including topography, past-population density, etc - but undoubtedly, the fact that metal-detecting is common in the Netherlands is also relevant. Indeed, if the British and Dutch finds on Kunera are considered as just a sample of the whole - especially likely given 92 *ampullae* have been recorded with the PAS in 2019-2023 - then it might be expected that around 60 *ampullae* were found in the Netherlands in the same period. The Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands (PAN) is a dataset of more recent detecting finds, albeit (like PAS) of all periods and find types. Forty-six *ampullae* (PAN type 02-02) have been listed since the inception of the PAN in 2016, so fewer than might be expected. Of note is that just two have letters (the already mentioned Kunera: 244050 (PAN: 00062637) & also 24448 (PAN: 00061620), the latter also possibly showing a crowned W).

Mette Søvsø (2023: 400 & 422) cites 29 *ampullae* from Denmark, most through metal-detecting (see also Søvsø this volume, also pers. comm.).<sup>11</sup> Besides showing that *ampullae* are rare in Denmark (Søvsø 2023: 401 & 422), it is also clear that lettering upon them is even rarer: only one, from Hemmed, Norddjursland (Museum Østjylland: DIME: 216139), appears to have a letter, suggested to be a letter A.

## Final Thoughts

The PAS dataset is considerable, especially when compared with other European datasets. As such, more continental data is needed to truly place the English and Welsh finds into a broader context. Even so, it is possible to make some general observations.

First, 'flask-shaped' *ampullae* appear much more common in Britain than elsewhere (see also Imperiale 2015: 937). Indeed, British finds seem to lack the diversity in form found in continental Europe. Second, the decoration on late medieval *ampullae* from England and Wales seems more varied than elsewhere, and letters on *ampullae*, for instance, are a decorative aspect even less common elsewhere in Europe. Therefore, English and Welsh finds are (usually) quite distinct in a European context, though 'British' types sometimes occur abroad, notably in the Netherlands, likely due to travelling pilgrims.

In terms of the English finds within an English context, two main observations might be made. First, letters on *ampullae* suggest both the existence of localised cults, perhaps represented by the letters H, focusing around Lincolnshire, and R, which seems local to East Anglia, and those that are more widespread, like the letters I, T and W. Brian Spencer was probably right that the latter represent cult centres of some status - in the case of the letter W, for example, Walsingham - but a more nuanced theory might be that, even so, some widespread distributions reflect some localised pockets of activity. Examples might include *ampullae* with the letters I and S, even T, which could indicate similar *ampullae* being sold at multiple cult centres.

Another aspect of note is whether crowns upon letters mean something special (or not). Single letters are not unusual on other medieval objects. For example, buckle plates and strap-ends recorded with the PAS are commonly inscribed with letters: 36% and 39%, respectively (Lewis 2024: 45). Letters recorded include A, B, G, H, I, K, M, N, P, R, S, T, V and W, so including all the letters [bold] discussed above, of which the letter 'M' - presumably for Mary - is most popular. Somewhat surprising then is the fact that the letter M is not common on English and Welsh *ampullae*, contrasting with the Netherlands, as is the letter W (so an inverted M). Letter badges are also common in the Netherlands, including A, B,

<sup>11</sup> A special thanks to Mette Søvsø for providing a list and images of all these *ampullae*. Since then, another has come to light in Denmark, making the total 30 *ampullae* (as of 10/5/24).



D, H, M, MO, R, S & V (van Beuningen, Koldeweij & Dicken 2001: 442-3; van Beuningen, Koldeweij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 365-369; see also Willemsen & Ernst 2012: 119-129, who say ‘there is a distinct overrepresentation of the letters A, B, M and S’), showing some letter forms [**bold**] not apparent in the British *ampullae* finds. Many of these letters can be crowned, but they also appear on other objects, such as gaming boards (Hall 2001; see also see van Beuningen, Koldeweij, Kicken & van Asperen 2012: 382, No. 3359). The conclusion might be, therefore, that crowned letters are not obviously significant, but they are probably more likely to be associated with saints than not.

Flexibility in associating designs with particular cult centres might have been advantageous to people selling *ampullae*. As with pilgrim badge makers, it is possible to imagine vendors selling their wares at various cult centres, and they probably travelled (as appropriate) to do so. The English and Welsh data is a testament to this activity, which seems less visible in continental Europe.

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This book builds on the first volume - *A United Europe of Things: portable material culture across Medieval Europe*, published by Springer in 2023 - offering articles on medieval small finds from across Europe. This earlier book drew together papers presented at various Annual Meetings of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) sponsored by the Medieval European Research Community (MERC). This new volume does likewise, as well as including some shorter papers following a 'call' within the growing community of the European Medieval Finds (EMF) network.

Since 2023, another successful session, entitled *United Europe of Things? Materialities Creating Medieval Ritual Landscapes*, was organised at the EAA in Rome (2024). This combined the theme of a 'united Europe of things' with a special focus on 'persistence and change in medieval ritual landscapes' to tie in with the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded 'Medieval Ritual Landscape' (MeRit) project run by the University of Reading with the British Museum; one of us (Michael) is co-investigator. Besides the three of us (Michael, Maria and Jakub), this session was organised by Robert Webley (University of Reading, the post-doctoral researcher on MeRit) and Petar Parvanov (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences). It included 18 papers from 21 scholars based in Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The next EAA session in Belgrade (2025) is again being organised by us three, this time with Saša Čaval (Slovenian Academy of Sciences & MERC Committee). This will focus on the shared and diverse experiences of medieval life, emphasising the ability of material culture - especially metal finds - to reveal the interconnected nature of European societies in the Middle Ages.

*Part of Introduction by Michael Lewis*

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