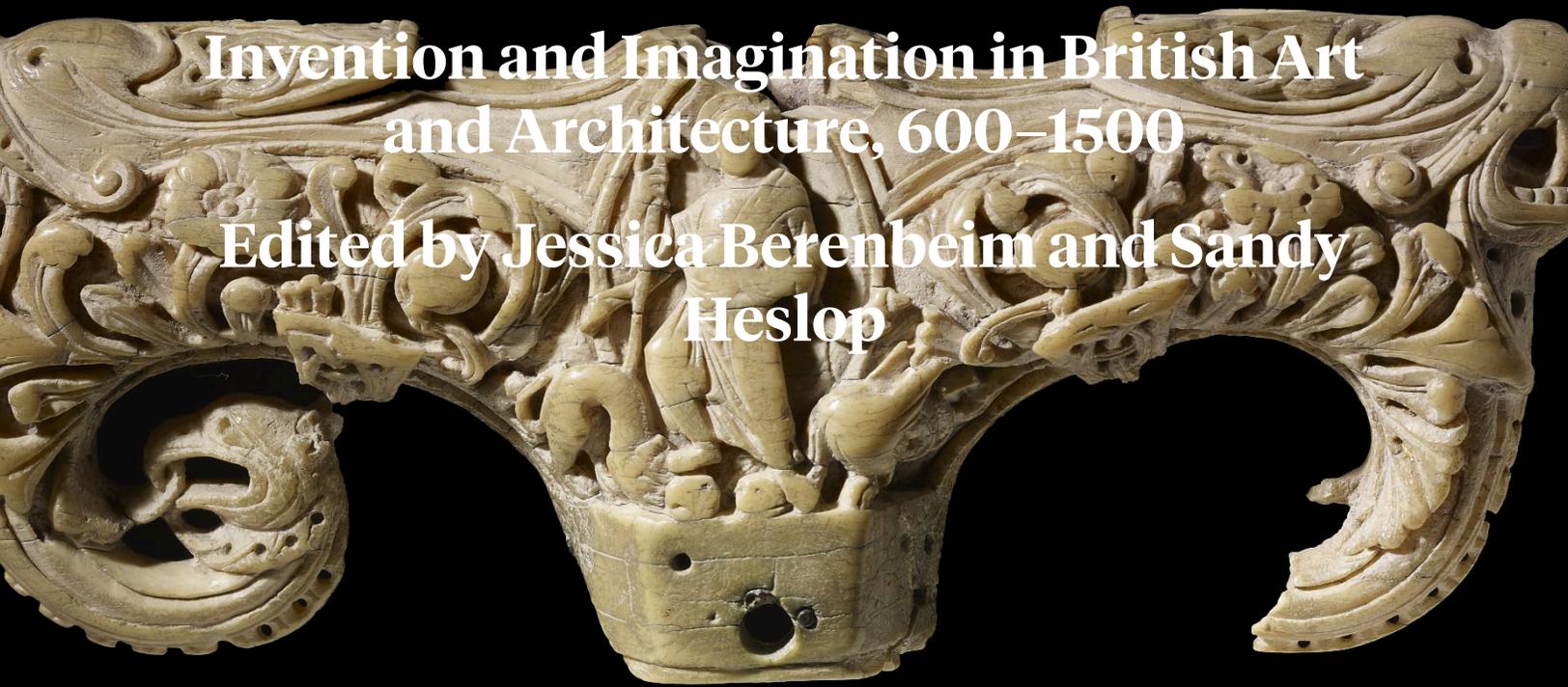


British Art Studies

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**Invention and Imagination in British Art
and Architecture, 600–1500**

**Edited by Jessica Berenbeim and Sandy
Heslop**



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Cover image: Unknown maker, Ivory Staff Terminal from Alcester, 11th Century, ivory, 14 × 5 cm. Collection of the British Museum (1903,0323.1).. Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum

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Pilgrim Souvenir: Ampulla of Thomas Becket, Amy Jeffs



Pilgrim Souvenir: Ampulla of Thomas Becket

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Cite as

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This tin ampulla was probably purchased by a pilgrim near the shrine of St Thomas Becket in Canterbury. It is designed to contain holy water and be hung around the neck on a cord. Measuring 100 by 87 millimetres, it is in the form of a narrow, pointed vessel surrounded by an openwork penannular frame and would have been rapidly slush-cast, in one go, in a three-part mould.¹ A date in the first half of the thirteenth century is probable based on the style of the military figures' armour and the archaeological contexts of stylistically similar ampullae.²

The ampulla was acquired by the British Museum in 1921, likely one of the many pilgrim souvenirs discovered in the Thames foreshore from the first half of the nineteenth century onward. Despite the object's modest material, the makers went to some technical lengths to produce a functional, aesthetically pleasing and iconographically complex souvenir that served the various needs of the cult centre and its devotees.



Figure 1.

The Book of the Faiz Monseigneur Saint Loys, composed at the request of the 'Cardinal de Bourbon' and the 'Duchesse de Bourbonnais', circa 1401-1500, manuscript. Collection Bibliothèque nationale de France, (French 2829). Digital image courtesy of BnF 2017

The obverse of the vessel is decorated with three figures cast in deep relief: Thomas Becket between two of the knights that killed him. The figures' extremities extend beyond the vessel and join the frame. Becket is the largest and is placed centrally. He is shown nimbed and clothed in archiepiscopal garb. His crozier extends forward and, along with his head, would have been cast between the abutting faces of the two-part portion of the mould. The rest of the design for the obverse was carved into their interior faces. This would have included the rest of Thomas's figure and the figures of the two knights. They are depicted raising a sword in symmetrical gestures, so that the blades extend beyond the frame and flank the vessel. Behind the swords are two symmetrically positioned suspension loops, designed to be threaded onto a cord (fig. 1). These have been bent back, presumably by the weight of the hanging ampulla.

The two knights function as a saintly attribute for Becket. The overall design of the obverse thus fulfils one of the primary purposes of the pilgrim souvenir image; to be recognizable.³ The figures' symmetry creates physical balance, allowing the object to hang straight.



Figure 2.

Unknown maker, Ampulla of Thomas Becket (front and back), circa 1170–1200, tin, 10 × 8.7 × 2.8 cm. Collection of the British Museum (1921,0216.62). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

The back of the vessel hangs vertically. It is also slightly longer than the obverse, which is angled away from it. When worn against the chest, the deep-relief figures on the front would therefore lean out at the viewer, while the reverse sits flat against the wearer's body. The design for the reverse of the ampulla is lightly embossed onto a flat face, making it even easier to wear.

Despite its relative concealment, the low-relief image on the reverse is charged with meaning, playfully simulating the impression of a vessica-shaped seal. Tessellated with the pointed base of the vessel, it shows the martyrdom of Becket, enclosed by the inscription: "OPTIM EGROR MEDIC FIT TOMA BONOR" ("Thomas is the best doctor for the worthy sick"). Flouting the visual constraints of an actual seal impression, the sword of the knight passes from the image, through the legend-field and into the empty space beyond, toying with the viewer's expectations.

Jennifer Lee discusses the pilgrim souvenir's status as a sign of the pilgrim's special relationship with the saint.⁴ The clear allusion to the authoritative form of the seal impression on this example is not unique, and suggests pilgrim souvenirs were intended to be perceived as material evidence of a

contract.⁵ That the seal-image sits against the chest, invisible to the external world yet known to the wearer, emphasizes the personal nature of the agreement between devotee and saint.

This object reveals the versatility of the decorated ampulla as a physical souvenir that was at once attractive, affordable to both make and sell *en masse*, a wearable advertisement of the cult for prospective pilgrims, and a meaningful memento for the homecoming devotee.

Footnotes

- 1 Slush casting requires the molten metal to be poured in, then emptied out before becoming fully solidified, leaving the interior hollow. A fragment of a mould for a similar ampulla has been found at 16 Watling Street, Canterbury, and is illustrated in B. Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (London: HMSO, 1998), 49, no. 6a.
- 2 Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs*, 45.
- 3 The requirement for pilgrim souvenirs to be recognizable to the general populace (advertised by the wearer) is emphasized in both the Canterbury Interlude; Beryn, "The Canterbury Interlude", in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. J. Bowers (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), chap. 5, ll. 171-73; and Benedict of Peterborough's "*Miracula Sanctae Thomae Cantuaruensis*", in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, Vol. 2, ed. J. C. Robertson (London: Longmans, 1876), 134-35.
- 4 Jennifer M. Lee, "Searching for Signs: Pilgrims Identity and Experience Made Visible in the *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*", in *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, Vol. 1, ed. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 473-91.
- 5 See, for example, the souvenirs associated with Our Lady of Rocamadour and St John the Baptist's head at Amiens.

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