Saint George Slaying the Dragon: Medieval Pilgrim Badges in England

Abstract:
This research will examine the origins of the cult of Saint George in late medieval England and will focus on pilgrimage badges depicting the legend of Saint George and the Dragon. How did this saint become so important in England even though he was not an English saint; the origin of slaying the dragon and of George’s beheading? Saint George’s story is mythical, and the stories about his life seem unreal, as if he never really existed, but was instead a symbol of ideas in which the faithful trusted. I will examine the representation of George in late-medieval English pilgrim badges, asking where they were produced and for whom. Although some historical work has been done on the cult of Saint George in England, very little is known about the inexpensive but popular badges that brings pilgrims to his shrine or shrines collected. It is my goal to connect the historical picture to these small but significant traces of material culture. When it comes to a pilgrim badge, this would be a small souvenir worn by a Roman Catholic pilgrim. A pilgrim would purchase one of these at sites of Christian pilgrimage and the imagery would relate the Saint that was venerated at the site. Badges would be typically made of cheap metals such as lead alloy and if commissioned silver guilt. These badges would be made by craftspeople and artisans in homes, shops and workshops in shrines.

Slaying the Dragon:
The legend of Saint George varies when it comes this story, according to the article “Saint George and the Dragon in Iconography” and “The Catholic Encyclopedia” The well-known Saint George was brought up by his widowed mother and raised as a Christian in the town of Lydda in Palestine. He grew up to be a Roman soldier in his early age in the late third century A.D. With Emperor Diocletian the persecution of Christian’s arose, George refused to partake in this persecution and confessed his faith leading to prison and torture and beheading. George became a saint because of his many miracles, one being the story of slaying the dragon. A town called Silene in Libya was being terrorized by a serpent beast that lived in the lake and prevented the townspeople from using the water. The town believed in Pagan ideals and would sacrifice young virgins to the beast to keep the town safe. As the Kings daughter was the next offering Saint George intervened on his white horse, spear and shield. He instructed the princess to use her belt to tie the dragons head as they brought it into the town and George pierced it with his spear. (badge 1) The town was converted to Christian faith from this legendary event. This story was mostly transmitted orally given that the earliest written accounts were in the 11th and 12th century. This story comes of rather mythical and of fairy-tale orientation, however the symbolic meaning of the story is what is more concentrated on.
- Serpent-dragon, imagery of the devil
- White horse
- Cross
- Blessing of Christ
- Spear and shield.

Early paintings and badges would include the details of not only Saint George, his horse, the spear and shield but of the princess and her part. (badge 1) Eventually badges then depicted only the main parts but including the hand gesture resembling the blessing of Christ. (badge 2)

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