

Laidlaw Essay

My project for the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme centred around Late Mediaeval Magical Objects in Europe. The aim of this project was to collect information and rediscover the narratives of material culture involved with magical practices and rituals that would later be included in an academic book. My objectives were divided into quantitative and qualitative research.

The quantitative portion consisted of searching through books and online museum catalogues for additional objects that may be relevant to the project. I compiled a list of late mediaeval crystal balls and ritually concealed garments. An unexpected positive experience from pursuing mediaeval concealed garments was the opportunity to travel and correspond with curators from various museums and heritage locations around England. I visited Northampton to see the Northampton museums' shoe collection, as shoes are a common item of clothing found in concealed deposits. After viewing Northampton's Concealed Shoe Index, I went to Canterbury Cathedral to find another pair of shoes. During this process, I was able to contact many of the leading historians that had written about concealed ritual deposits such as Dinah Eastop and Ceri Houlbrok. These communications reinforced the collaborative nature of historical research and the supportive community of historians that generously offered their time and advice. In the future, I learned that it's more efficient to try and contact the curators prior to visiting the museum to gain access to the collections not available to the standard viewer.

For qualitative research, I focused on a Wolf's Tooth Ring. I researched the materials that were used to create the ring and the design and motifs chosen to enhance the magical aspects and represent the owner of the ring. Furthermore, I looked into how wolves were interpreted during the mediaeval period and how animal bones were incorporated into rituals and charms. I also looked at the Latin inscribed charms on the ring and attempted to explore the possibilities of their meaning, while crafting a narrative for the ring's owner(s). After these readings were complete, I was able to write an object entry:

This golden ring originates from Britain or France around 1200-1300 CE. The front-half is symmetrically carved with stiff-leafed foliage, a gothic style of three-lobed segments. The leaf design lays raised upon a cross-hatched pattern which provides a textured and shaded background. At the ring's centre is a wolf tooth carved to fit into the heart-shaped bezel. The inner band is later inscribed in black between the years 1375-1425 CE with two written charms, 'Buro + Berto + Berneto' and 'Consummatum Est'.

Finger rings often represent emotional connection and support. They frequently acted as expressions of love. A heart, a comprehensive symbol of emotions and passion, is displayed on the forefront of the ring translating the intimate feelings of the ring's giver to the wearer. Hearts were a common design for betrothal, wedding, and love rings. One example includes an English silver-gilt ring with clasped hands and a second bezel with a

heart, from the 15th century found in Kent. Hands and hearts were embodiments of betrothal and one's innermost love. The motif of nature evident by the stiff-leaf foliage, is also a common decoration for jewellery relating to love. The Wolf's Tooth Ring likely served a dual purpose in conveying attachment and magical purpose. Courtship rings were customarily given to women, however, the size of the Wolf's Tooth Ring suggests that its original owner was a man. This ring would have then been worn around the neck as a pendant. Wearing the ring around the neck allowed for close proximity to the skin and heart, which may have amplified the prophylactic and romantic properties of the item. The gold material of the ring further suggests that the purchaser of this ring was wealthy and assumed a high position in society as perhaps an affluent merchant or noble. The inscription on the ring was added years after its initial creation which suggests that the ring's functionality shifted and evolved depending on its ownership. Love rings were conventionally inscribed with amatory words or rhymes, however, the Wolf's Tooth Ring is not simply a token of affection, but harbours materials and charms to invoke magical protection. The giver of the ring wished to secure their loved one's well-being.

An animal has both their physical-self, used by people for food and raw materials, and their metaphorical-self which mirrors attributes from the society that assigned them anthropomorphized characteristics. Although the correlation between the animal's physical and metaphorical-self is not produced from scientific fact nor entirely accurate, the wolf's perception as an apex predator contributes to its figurative-self as a powerful animal with desirable raw materials. The *Secrets of Albertus Magnus* written in the 13th century, describes the wolf's environmental superiority, 'as the sheep doth fear the wolf, and it knoweth not only alive, but also dead'. Individual bones, specifically from the head and feet of an animal, were thought to embody the overall essence of a creature. Teeth were significant because they were associated with an animal's ability to survive, through hunting and self-defence. The wolf's tooth in this ring, thus represents the wolf's larger metaphorical-self and is symbolically qualified to perform its magical duties.

The magical purpose of a wolf's tooth was to promote teething in children and soothe adult toothaches. The dog is repeatedly conjoined with the wolf, as dogs' teeth perform similar functions. According to *Natural History* written in the 1st century by Pliny the Elder, a dog's tooth would be boiled and consumed by children who were slow to teeth. *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* translated by J. Delcourt is an Early Mediaeval text and similarly advises a dog's tooth to be burnt and then applied to relieve pain from teething. Another method of applying canine teeth was by placing them around the neck of an infant. Promoting teething was socially and economically beneficial because it saved wetnursing expenses and facilitated a transitional period into the community, as children began to actively take place in sharing food. Animal teeth were utilised to combat the potential health risks of this period. The Hippocratic Aphorisms from the 5th BC list fevers, diarrhoea, and gum ulcers as possible symptoms of children teething. Pliny additionally guides the reader through medicinal and magical remedies derived

from teeth and includes other animals such as the mole, snake, and dolphin. The mole is an animal deeply integrated into mediaeval magic and fragments of its body are used in numerous medicinal remedies. The dolphin and snake teeth are rarer examples of teeth from predators in ritual practice against toothaches. Rather than the teeth being applied or boiled for consumption, the cure for toothache required teeth from these animals to be attached and worn as an amulet. The use of body parts derived from apex predators contributes to the perceived power of the object. The Wolf's Tooth Ring was created for an adult and the tooth was combined with a magical charm to prevent and relieve toothaches.

'Buro + Berto + Berneto' is a Latin charm for calming toothaches. It has a similar charm which also applies to toothaches, 'Boro + Berto + Briore', found in a fifteenth medical manuscript located in Stockholm. 'Boro + Berto + Briore' may have also been combined with other charms pertaining to childbirth, to induce a safe delivery. This can be seen in a 14th century British charm intended to encourage labour,

'Boro berto briore † Vulnera quinque dei sint medicina mei! [cf. 27]. Tahebal † † ghetter † † guthman † † † † † Purl cramper † C[h]ristus † factus † est † pro † nobis † obediens † vsque † ad † mortem † autem † crucis [Christ was born for us, submissive even unto death on the cross].'

Childbirth and toothaches were two health-concerns commonly addressed in charm texts. The ring served as a protective amulet, its multifunctional purposes were unrestricted by gender and could thus be worn by either men or women.

The charm 'Consummatum Est' translates to 'it is finished' and are the last words Christ spoke on the cross. Religion and magic are both reliant on faith and religious references to Christ are recurrent in mediaeval magical charms. Furthermore, charms are broad and can have multiple meanings compiled into a singular phrase. 'Consummatum Est' is a phrase used to calm storms and staunch bleeding. In a literal sense the words 'it is finished' commands both storms and bleeding to end. Christ died and could come to no more harm, similarly to how the storm can do the wearer no more harm. Additionally, calming the storm is one of the miracles Jesus performed in the Gospels. Likewise, charms to control bleeding were numerous and helpful in an array of situations. 'Consummatum Est' could be employed to cease the flow of blood from wounds, and relates to women menstruating or who are pregnant and fear miscarriage and haemorrhage after childbirth.

The Wolf's Tooth Ring, currently located in the Victoria and Albert Museum, was a courtship ring that may have been passed down as a family heirloom or re-purchased when the later inscriptions were added. 'Buro + Berto + Berneto' and 'Consummatum Est' augmented the purpose and power of the ring, extending its initial protection against toothaches to childbirth, bleeding, and storms. The wolf's tooth is the heart of the ring and the animal's role as an apex predator extends its physical strength to its metaphorical representation and thus its protective magic.

A recurring concept during my project was that research is in a constant flux of evolution and reevaluation. Although I had written a completed object entry, further sources revealed that the blood component of the ring may have been more significant than I had originally thought, connecting the heart motif and the written charm for bleeding, 'Buro + Berto + Berneto'. This project also helped me experience authentic academic research which advanced my abilities to evaluate primary sources and helped me understand the balance a historian must achieve when writing about demographics that were previously ignored in the historical narrative and did not leave substantial written records. Speculation based on evidence is not prohibited and occasionally necessary in certain cases where there are not sufficient records. This enhanced understanding of historical speculation also helped me evaluate modern scholarship and the validity of secondary sources.

This is very specific to history rather than Laidlaw, but during the school year I came across a quote from Fernand Braudel, the leader of the Annales school. In an interview he said that a historian's most valuable asset is imagination. When I read this, I partially understood what he meant. A historian is a craftsperson because they can create narratives and interpretations from limited evidence, the speculation component of history. During the Laidlaw research project, however, I got to experience what he meant rather than simply understanding it.

A final thing I learned is related to feedback. I've always been a person who enjoyed feedback, likely because I strived to do well which was usually rewarded with positive responses. At the start of this project, I had very little experience in mediaeval history and this contributed to a feeling of imposter syndrome. Additionally, I had to learn how to detach the feedback I was given with my abilities as a student and researcher. Suggestions on how to do better or critiques, had to be detached from my own self-perception of myself. Not meeting your own expectations at first can be difficult, but this doesn't correlate with how smart or competent you are. Rather it is just part of the learning process on how to be a better researcher.

Overall, my Laidlaw experience has been immensely positive and constructive. A preview into the academic world post-university has helped me develop my skills as a more critical historian and given me an introduction into European mediaeval magic. I am now also interested in looking into the general expanse of mediaeval history, and more specifically pertaining to this project, mediaeval magic in East Asia. I am also more confident when it comes to contacting other historians and curators for advice and questions. The research conducted during my project has undoubtedly impacted my academic career and understanding of historical analysis.