

50 Medieval Magical Objects

By: Nola Mak

This project is focused on creating the first book on medieval magical objects for scholarly and educational purposes as well as an online exhibition. The project is trying to achieve the exploration of magic through material culture for both the elite and everyday medieval people, as well as supporting archeological studies of ritual residues and odd deposits. It combines interconnecting disciplines and religions to fully flesh out what magical rituals material appeared as, and outline the medieval guidelines for what constitutes a magical item. '50 Medieval Magical Objects' is important because it is an informative collection, pertinent to understanding the power these items held in medieval life. The project explores the relationship between the physicality of these items, the people who used them, and the magic behind them.



Introduction

My focus was on a Wolf's Tooth Ring, currently located in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

This golden ring originates from Britain or France around 1200-1300 CE. The front-half is symmetrically carved with stiff-leaved 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'.



Wolf's Tooth Ring

Methodology

Finding quantitative evidence including rings with hearts, rings with animal bones, and rings with similar written inscriptions, Reading primary and secondary sources to understand the use of teeth in magic intended to heal, and the possible interpretations for the inscriptions and their intended use. Historical speculation to craft a narrative for the owner(s) of the ring.

Design

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. 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.



Teeth

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.

Inscriptions

'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,

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 use of animals fragments

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.



Key References

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