

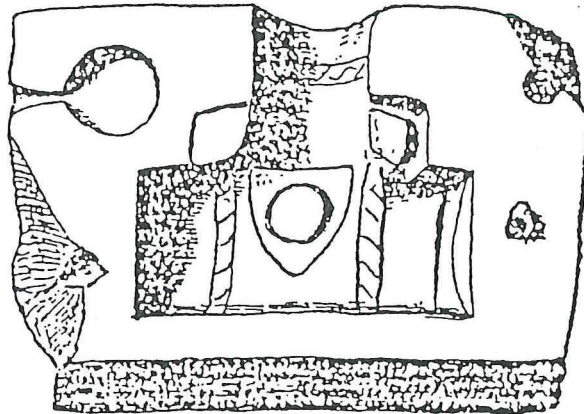
EVN

An ampulla mould from Exeter

Ronald F. Homer

In 1933, while excavating foundations for Woolworth's store, a stone half-mould for a barrel-shaped pewter ampulla was discovered in Fore Street, Exeter.¹ This measures 3.5 by 2.3 by 0.9 inches thick and would have been located in its mating half by two pewter pins (one of which remains) set in holes in the stone. As will be seen from the illustration a subsidiary circular mould is cut at the upper left of the stone block. This was evidently used for casting a plug with which to close the neck of the ampulla; perhaps by sealing it in with wax.

Barrel-shaped ampulla were made at Becket's shrine at Canterbury in the third quarter of the 13th century. Though the style appears to have been unpopular, and was soon superseded at Canterbury, there is some evidence that this type of ampulla was made elsewhere, albeit rarely, for perhaps another hundred years. Close dating of the Exeter



mould is therefore not possible and it was attributed to the 15th century when found.

Exeter Cathedral held an impressive collection of relics from late Saxon times and through the medieval period. These included a piece of the true cross, some of the Virgin Mary's hair and clothing, a piece of St. Paul's neck and four of St. Agatha's teeth, bones or belongings of both St. Johns, St. Andrew, St. James and St. Stephen, and numerous other relics of nearly one hundred other holy men and women. None of these, however, would seem to warrant the production of a holy water container as a pilgrim souvenir and the most likely association is perhaps with the local Romano-British saint, Saint Sidwell whose church lies just outside the city walls in the present-day suburb of that name. She was said to have been decapitated with a sickle at her step-mother's command. A spring of water gushed forth where she died and a holy well was fed from it in medieval times. She was much venerated in Devon and is early commemorated in Bishop Leofric's missal and psalter of the mid 11th century.

There are no surviving pilgrim badges or ampulla from Exeter as the soil is not conducive to their preservation. This mould, possibly together with a much defaced stone mould for casting a circular badge of uncertain design, is, with the signal exception of the wax images found concealed in the tracery of Bishop Lacy's tomb in 1943, the only remaining evidence for medieval pilgrimages to an Exeter shrine.²

References.

1. L.A.D. Montague, 'Had Exeter a Pilgrim's Shrine?', *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, XVII, 370-2 (1932-3).
2. U.M. Radford, 'The Wax Images found at Exeter Cathedral', *Antiquaries Journal*, 1949, 164-8.

The author is grateful to John Allan of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, to Professor Nicholas Orme and to Brian Spencer for their help.
