

‘TO THE CHAPEL OF ST ANDREW . . .
A BROKEN BASIN OF SILVER OUT OF WHICH
A CHALICE IS TO BE MADE’:¹ THE IMPORTANCE OF
‘MATERIAL’ IN LATE MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS BEQUESTS

by JOANNE SEAR

THE FAMOUS PERPENDICULAR churches of Suffolk are not just a legacy of the time when the cloth trade brought significant prosperity to the county, but are also a reminder of the powerful hold that religion had over the lay population of England during the late Middle Ages. In the words of Eamon Duffy, ‘late medieval Catholicism exerted an enormously strong, diverse, and vigorous hold over the imagination and the loyalty of the people’.² Extant church buildings are not the only reminder of this religiosity: late medieval churchwardens’ accounts reveal community expenditure on the parish church and often document the collection of funds for particular projects such as alterations or rebuilding; and late medieval wills also contain evidence of pious bequests by which the testator intended to fulfil his or her Christian duties.³

Whilst the majority of such bequests are monetary gifts to various religious and charitable beneficiaries, many wills also include references to material items of a religious nature. Testamentary bequests of physical goods covered a range of household items, including cooking utensils, bedding and furniture, together with articles of clothing and personal items such as daggers, purses or even armour. Religious goods were also frequently bequeathed, and these are of particular interest because it is apparent that not only did the items themselves have a definite significance and purpose, but the actual materials from which they were made also had a meaning. To understand what these objects meant to the people who bequeathed them, it is important to consider this wider context and to understand that these goods existed not simply as a physical item, but also as the embodiment of the material from which they were made. This paper will therefore focus on four types of religious bequests – namely silver, linen, stones and gems and alabaster – and discuss the significance of their materials. Two of these are personal items commonly bequeathed to churches, and two are personal religious items, which were generally bequeathed to family members, friends or even servants. The bequests considered for this paper are contained within the wills of people who lived in west Suffolk during the late Middle Ages.

To understand these bequests one must know a little about the political, economic and social background of the time. In the Middle Ages, the western part of Suffolk lay within the Liberty of St Edmund, the holdings of St Edmund’s abbey at Bury St Edmunds which had been granted to the abbey by Edward the Confessor in the early eleventh century. Although west Suffolk included the large town of Bury St Edmunds and some smaller towns, such as Mildenhall and Newmarket, 70–85 per cent of the population was still living in rural areas and predominantly engaged in agriculture. The exception to this was in the south of the area, where Mark Bailey has estimated that the level of urbanisation in Babergh hundred was close to 50 per cent due to the importance of textile manufacture and the location of a number of cloth-producing towns within the area.⁴ The cloth industry was particularly focused on south Suffolk, and many of the leading cloth-producing centres in the south-west of the county, such as Lavenham and Clare, lay within the Liberty of St Edmund. Further north, Bury St Edmunds played an important role in the distribution and marketing of the finished cloth, and even in

the north-west of the county cloth was being produced in and around the towns of Newmarket, Mildenhall and Brandon. Some of the wills used for this paper are those of people from these settlements who were associated with cloth production. Although cloth manufacture was bringing employment and wealth to many people within the area, the period brought significant challenges to those associated with agriculture and grain production in particular. Grain prices were falling from the end of the fourteenth century and culminated in an agrarian depression in the middle decades of the fifteenth century, which led to the abandonment or conversion to pasture of large areas of arable land particularly in the Breckland area of north-west Suffolk.⁵ Taken as a whole, however, west Suffolk can be considered to have been relatively prosperous during the late medieval period, particularly when compared to other regions of England, although areas to the south of the region were doing much better than areas to the north.

The wills researched for this study were made by people from a wide range of social backgrounds, from members of the gentry through to smallholders and even some labourers, but almost everyone who bequeathed items of a religious nature held high status within their communities: merchants, yeomen and men from the lowest tier of gentry society (or the widows of men who held these roles or positions). Such goods were precious and their possession was largely limited to the higher echelons of late medieval society. However, it is worth making the point that whilst the owners of these goods would have been well regarded within their small communities, they were still typical of late medieval English society. People with similar backgrounds and income levels could be found in urban and rural environments throughout England. In addition, the fact that the marketing facilities they could access were predominantly found within provincial towns suggests that these goods are likely to have been commonly available throughout the country to anyone who had the means with which to purchase them. They were not exceptional.

Wills contain evidence of a range of articles which were bequeathed to churches in the hope that, in return, the testator would receive aid and protection from God and the saints. The majority of these already had a religious purpose and included liturgical texts and small religious objects such as portable altars and chalices like those bequeathed to Mildenhall parish church by the priests George Gatynbe and John Mason.⁶ However, some of the goods given to churches had a rather different status in that they were the personal, household possessions of the testator, but were given with the expectation that they would become religious artefacts. For the most part, these bequests fell into two categories: items made of silver, and linen goods.

SILVER

Late medieval English parish churches included a main altar together with a number of secondary altars which were set against the nave east wall (nave altars), or against the side walls (side altars) and which were generally dedicated to specific saints and often used by guilds and perpetual chantries. All of the altars were richly decorated with a variety of paintings, plate, coverings, hangings and lights. In addition, the parish clergy (who could include a rector, vicar, curate and additional chantry priests) all wore elaborate vestments to perform their sacerdotal duties. It was considered appropriate for these liturgical items to be made from the finest materials available and this is reflected in testamentary bequests to churches. Silver was evidently considered to be a material suitable for religious bequests so that silver objects were often bequeathed to churches, whereas items made from lower status metals such as pewter or brass were less well regarded and very few wills include bequests to churches of items made from these metals. The greater number of silver bequests also reflects the fact that

only gold and silver were considered appropriate materials for vessels used to hold the Eucharist, such as chalices, patens, cruets, pyxes and monstrances, and so items bequeathed for liturgical purposes had to be made of these precious metals. Both materials were associated with the purity of the word of God and, as such, became a symbol of the divine. In the words of Psalm 12:6:

The words of the Lord are unalloyed:
silver refined in a crucible,
gold purified seven times over.⁷

Although gold was occasionally used for these liturgical items, particularly for chalices, its high cost was such that these vessels were usually made from silver or silver-gilt.⁸ These metals were also preferred for altar crucifixes, candlesticks and processional crosses, although others could be used for church goods which did not hold the Eucharist.⁹

For anyone who could afford it, silver was especially desirable in the late Middle Ages.¹⁰ It was a commodity that could last for generations, often with remodelling, its possession conveyed wealth and status, and it was also a means of storing equity until such time as it might be needed. It was expensive, at a cost of between 2s 8d and 6s for an ounce, and testamentary evidence suggests that it was rarely owned by anyone below the status of gentry or yeoman.¹¹ Even for such groups, the silver items most commonly possessed were small ones such as silver spoons or silver embellishments to girdles. These were often given to statues within the church: Robert Sheppard of Brandon Ferry gave his silver spoon to the image of Our Lady of Walsingham, and Ellen Chenery left her silvered silk belt to the tabernacle of St Peter in her parish church of Cockfield.¹²

The silver objects given to churches rather than to the statuary within them were not usually such small items, but instead larger ones of silver plate, which were generally only owned by the very wealthy. For the social elite, silver was associated with the toilet and the table: they washed in silver basins with water poured from silver basins or ewers; drank from silver cups, goblets or mazers; and ate food from silver bowls or trenchers, served from silver platters and seasoned with salt from silver nefs, or sauce from silver cruets.¹³ Such items were often given to churches by those who could afford to do so, and the bequests often included instructions on how they should be used in the religious context. Thus William Bakhote, of a family of Mildenhall mercers, gave 'a silver basin and two silver cruets of price £3 6s 8d' and stipulated that they be 'to serve the high altar for washing the priests' hands and other holy offices carried out there'.¹⁴ Testators could also ask that the silver be used at specified times of the liturgical year, so that when he bequeathed a silver girdle to Mildenhall church John Bakhot directed that it be worn on the vigils of the feasts of St Edward and St Nicholas annually.¹⁵

Such bequests show that goods that had been used in the household context or as personal items could acquire a religious purpose and significance once they were transferred to the use of the church. Whilst the goods referred to above found a new purpose, they retained their original shape. For other goods, this change in the status required a physical remodelling of the object rather than simply a reassignment of its role. For example, Alice Turnour of Sudbury gave six silver spoons and a girdle with silver ornamentation towards the making of a pair of silver censers for St Gregory's church in Sudbury, which emphasises the fact that the significance of the bequest was not so much in the actual item, but in the material from which it was made.¹⁶

Silver was associated not only with the divine, but also with remembrance. In 1515 Margery Howton bequeathed to her local church a pax of silver of 18oz and requested that her name be written in it, almost certainly as a means of reminding people to remember her in their

prayers.¹⁷ Outside of the church context, testators frequently gave a single spoon to be remembered. Thomas Stoteville of Dalham gave to the wife of his former servant ‘j gilte spone for a remembrence the more to thenk on me’.¹⁸ Whilst this was just one bequest, some wills contain numerous gifts of silver spoons such as that of John Bolter of Brandon Ferry who left fourteen to be divided equally between his children.¹⁹ As with the silver bequest of Margery Howton, it seems likely that this practice was associated with the doctrine of purgatory and the wish to be remembered after death in the prayers of the living. Whilst the doctrine of purgatory did not survive the English Reformation, the practice of giving silver as a means of remembrance appears to have done so. Silver spoons continued to be given, so that in 1554 Agnes Hals of Bury St Edmunds bequeathed to her neighbour ‘good Mistris Andrewes’, ‘my spone with a forke in the end, of silver, for a poore toke[n] of remembrau[n]ce’. Silver rings, or bequests of money with which rings of remembrance were to be made, were also given: Agnes Hals gave her son ‘my ringe with the dead manes head’; and in 1621 Lady Anne Drury of Hardwick House gave ‘tenne pounds a peece to all my brothers to buye them ringes, and twentie pounds to be bestowed in ringes of ten shillinges amongst my freind[es]’.²⁰

Small items of silver could be acquired from a handful of local goldsmiths known to have been operating in the region in the late medieval period, particularly at Bury St Edmunds, where a few craftsmen were probably sustained by the work generated by the abbey.²¹ Stourbridge Fair, near Cambridge, was also well known as a place at which modest silver luxuries, or ‘fairings’, could be acquired and many people from the region would have visited this important annual event.²² More substantial silver goods were generally bought on visits to London rather than acquired within the region. Richard Bakhot identified in his will that a new silver mazer bequeathed to his brother Nicholas was one ‘*quam nuper emebam apud London* [which was recently acquired in London]’.²³

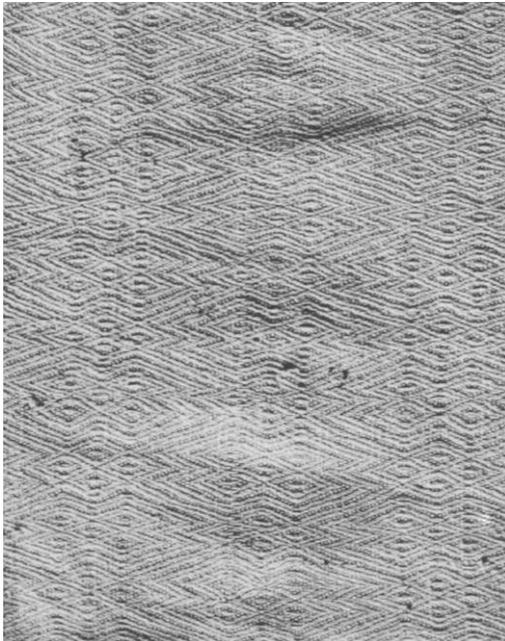


FIG. 11 – Linen diaper cloth, 1200–1399
(© Victoria and Albert Museum).

LINEN

The other household material that was often bequeathed to churches was linen. Linen was widely produced in the late Middle Ages and in a variety of forms ranging from very rough domestically produced cloth, through to fine diaper cloth and linen damask. Most good quality plain linen, diaper and linen damask was imported from France and the Low Countries although ‘diaper linen’ was also produced in and around the town of Aylsham in north Norfolk.²⁴ The most popular fine linen was diaper (see Fig. 11), which was a fabric woven with a small and simple pattern formed by the different directions of the thread and generally producing a diamond effect.

As with silver, fine linen was always associated with status, not simply because its manufacture required a level of care and attention which was inevitably reflected in its cost (imported fine linen could cost as much as 13d per yard, whereas domestically

produced linen started at only 1½d), but also because its ongoing maintenance necessitated the input of servants who were skilled in the specialised task of washing and finishing so as to ensure that the linen retained its whiteness and, as far as possible, resisted dirt. The pattern on linen diaper cloth in particular could not be seen without the play of light on the warp- and weft-faced surfaces and this required the linen to be treated during the manufacturing process to ensure a smooth finish, as well as initial and subsequent bleaching and careful ongoing laundering.

Within the domestic environment, fine linen was associated with dining in the form of napkins, tablecloths and towels for wiping hands. However, from the early centuries of the church, linen was widely used for various purposes including as altar cloths, vestments and towels. This use was highly symbolic: the bleached whiteness represented cleanliness of heart and purity of life; whilst the preparation of the linen, which involved beating and weaving the flax and washing and bleaching the naturally brown cloth, was considered to represent the purifying of flesh and the cleansing of the soul through the Blood of Christ. Its use also invoked biblical references such as the linens in which the body of Christ was wrapped when he was laid in the tomb and the appearance of angels dressed in fine linen.

There is ample evidence of bequests to churches of fine household linen such as the tablecloth of ‘diaperwerk’, 6½ yards long and 1¾ yards wide that Agnes Hukton gave to the high altar of the parish church of Clare; and the best tablecloth of ‘le dyaper werke’ which Margaret Davy gave to the high altar of the church of St Augustine at Stoke-by-Clare.²⁵ As with silver bequests, testators often stipulated the use to which the linen should be put, so that Robert Fyzkeys of Brandon bequeathed ‘a linen cloth to serve at the altar’ and Humfrey Duffeld of Mildenhall gave ‘my best diaper cloth for an altar cloth’.²⁶ Again, an item that had been associated with the household could transmute into a religious artefact, although this process required a formal reassignment: Agnes Gosse asked that the cloth of diaper work which she gave to the high altar of Fordham church (just outside of the region in Cambridgeshire) be ‘sanctified to serve at the altar’.²⁷ Linen bequests to churches can usually be identified as being quality cloth, such as the diaper cloth referred to in some of these examples, or is referred to as being the finest or best. Alice Webbe of Mildenhall and Joan Swanton of Depden both stipulated that the tablecloths they gave to the use of their respective parish churches be the ‘best’.²⁸

Both silver and linen were given by testators to churches and could be transposed from the domestic environment to a religious setting. The two other items considered in this paper are somewhat different since they were, from the outset, intended to be religious artefacts and retained that status once they were bequeathed. However, once again, the material from which they were made gave them a wider value in the medieval context and in these instances it was the stone from which they were crafted that was significant.

STONES AND GEMS

The concept that certain stones and gems possessed apotropaic or magical properties can be dated to prehistoric times. By the classical period there was widespread belief in the virtues of stones, such that references to their properties were frequently included in early scientific and medicinal writings, particularly by the Babylonians and Greeks. Many of these classical lapidaries have survived, including those by Pliny and Dioscorides. During the Middle Ages belief in the inherent power of stones reached its zenith, and there was an increased interest in these ancient texts, which formed the basis of new works and, in particular, the verse *Liber Lapidum* (Book of Stones) written in Latin by Marbode, bishop of Rennes, between 1067 and 1081. This drew on Marbode’s knowledge of the classical sources and his other research and

described sixty stones, their powers and how they should be used. For example, it was claimed that chrysolite (peridot) would drive away night terrors if strung on hairs plucked from an ass's tail, whilst emerald could make its wearer eloquent and persuasive and act as a cure for epilepsy (falling sickness) and fever.²⁹ The significance and popularity of *Liber Lapidum* is reflected in the fact that over a hundred manuscript copies are still in existence, including translations in French, Provençal, Italian, Irish, Danish, Hebrew and Spanish, whilst Marbode's work also heavily influenced many subsequent lapidaries which are often largely a reworking of his text.³⁰ A number of these subsequent works were both available in England and written in the vernacular. Evidence suggests that their contents were widely disseminated so that medieval people generally had a developed understanding of the different functions of stones.³¹

This notion that a religious item might also have scientific or even magical virtues seems somewhat incongruous to our modern thinking, however to the medieval mind these were all related to the divine. Medieval people considered that the mystical and practical powers of stones were God-given marvels and that God wanted knowledge of these virtues to be proclaimed and their properties utilised. In this connection it is worth noting that Marbode was an eminent theologian who wrote widely on a range of religious topics, and many of the other known writers of medieval lapidaries were, similarly, associated with the church. In addition, whilst today we would readily dismiss the idea that stones could have such properties as mere superstition or cultural folklore, the line between magic, religion and science was significantly blurred in the Middle Ages. As Roberta Gilchrist has noted, it is false to assume that marginal superstition and formalised religion were mutually exclusive categories.³² The existence of quasi-religious items such as manuscript prayer rolls worn as girdles to secure safe childbirth shows how these two concepts could easily coincide in the medieval world.³³

The religious stones most commonly bequeathed in the late Middle Ages were 'paternosters' or sets of rosary beads. These usually took the form of beads strung in three sets of fifty, with a larger bead, the 'gaud', as every tenth bead.³⁴ The three sets represented the psalms, and each bead was counted by the user as they repeated the *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria* prayers. Although strings of prayer beads had been used from at least the eleventh century, they were particularly popular from the early fifteenth century with the development of the belief that they contained indulgences which were released to the wearer once an appropriate number of devotions had been recited.³⁵ They served both religious and personal display purposes and were often owned by women, particularly widows, as their wearing was viewed as modest and therefore morally acceptable. Paternosters could be made from a range of materials from gold or silver through to basic wood or bone, however, in almost all of the instances where prayer beads are bequeathed in wills and their material is identified, they are of three minor precious stones: jet, amber or coral. Prayer beads of jet are most commonly bequeathed, followed by those of amber and then coral. Other sources also confirm that these were popular stones for paternosters: in 1381 the stock of a London jeweller, Adam Ledyard, included 'paternoster beads of white and yellow ambers, coral, jet and silver gilt, and aves of jet and blue glass as well as cheap sets of maple-wood and white bone for children'; whilst a fifteenth century inventory from the Paston family listed beads of coral, jet, box and amber.³⁶ The Suffolk wills contain numerous examples of paternosters made from these stones and such references are particularly prevalent in the wills of widows. For example, the wills of three widows from Mildenhall contain a range of such bequests: Alice Webbe, widow of the draper Robert Webbe, bequeathed two sets of beads including one set of jet; Elizabeth White gave a set of jet beads and a set of coral beads; and Matilda Curteys, widow of the yeoman William Curteys, left three sets of jet beads and a set of amber beads.³⁷ Whilst all of these were each made from just one of these stones, the set given by William Honybourn, a dyer from

Bury St Edmunds, is described as ‘a peyre bedys of jeete, gaudied w[ith] corall’ and so combined two of these minor precious stones.³⁸

Jet and amber were formed from fossilised vegetable matter, wood in the case of jet, and the resin of ancient pine forests in the case of amber, and both were available in England. Jet was found at Whitby in northern England, although Spanish jet was also found near Compostela and used for making the religious artefacts sold at the shrine of St James the Great. Amber was often washed up along the shores of eastern England, but was also imported from the Baltic.³⁹ Both stones had been used by the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons, particularly as amulets designed to ward off evil spirits, and by the end of the tenth century they were being used to create cross-shaped devices which were worn as pendants. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a number of English clerics praised the properties of these materials and they regularly appear in lapidaries of the time, though whilst jet was universally lauded, continental commentators often regarded the use of amber as pagan, so that jet was the material of choice for clerics. This may explain why it was preferred by the laity. Amber was prized for its sweet smell as well as the beauty of the stone, which came in white, yellow and red. Jet rosaries were particularly popular amongst widows, which may indicate that it was associated with bereavement well before the Victorian period when its black colour made it a popular stone for mourning jewellery.⁴⁰ Jet and amber were the materials most used for the prayer beads of the ‘middling sort’.

Coral was not available domestically, unlike jet and amber, but was imported from the Mediterranean where it was obtained from a number of locations including off the coast of southern France as well as around Sardinia and Sicily. It was worked into beads by workers at the ports where it was landed, such as Naples, Genoa and Marseilles, before being exported to destinations which included London. Coral paternoster beads were expensive not only because they were an import, but also because their polishing was highly labour intensive.⁴¹ As a result, coral was the bead of choice for the more affluent, and coral paternosters often appear in portrait paintings of members of the elite from this period. Perhaps the most famous example is the portrait diptych of his parents painted by Albrecht Dürer *c.* 1490, in which both his father, a goldsmith, and his mother are shown holding coral rosaries.⁴² Chaucer’s prioress, Madame Eglentyne, also wears a coral rosary, and her possession of this item reflected her portrayal as a nun with an aristocratic and genteel background:

Of smal coral about hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gaudied all with grene⁴³

In medieval lapidaries, a range of apotropaic powers are commonly ascribed to jet, amber and coral. All three were considered to be able to drive away evil spirits, particularly the devil and demons who tempted mankind to the sins of the flesh, and these powers made them an excellent choice as rosary beads. In addition, jet and amber had the power to drive away serpents, whilst amber could make the wearer merry. Coral gave the wearer the power to still tempests and traverse broad rivers, which may explain why it appears to have been a popular choice for the rosaries of pilgrims and travellers. The stones not only possessed ‘magical’ attributes, but also a range of medical powers. Amber could prevent the wearer from suffering from colds; coral stopped excessive menstruation; whilst jet stimulated menstruation.⁴⁴ They could also heal a range of hurts and wounds and cure various diseases, and were thus invaluable for the prolonging of life.⁴⁵ Jet was regarded as an anaesthetic; amber had laxative properties; and coral could staunch the flow of blood from a wound as well as curing madness, gout, sore eyes and other diseases.⁴⁶ The medicinal powers of the stones could vary according to the method of application, so stones were not only worn, as in the case of

paternosters, but could be used in a number of other ways. This might involve burning the stones, adding them to ointments or imbibing them as remedial infusions, either as a powdered form of the stone suspended in water or as the water in which a stone had been soaked, as it was believed that water could absorb the properties of the stone.⁴⁷ According to Marbode, for example, powdered jet mixed with water could ‘the female womb its piercing fumes relieve’, and water in which jet had been steeped for three days ‘bestows ease to the pregnant womb in travail’s throes’.⁴⁸

Whilst the beads of paternosters were generally of these stones, or other minor or non-precious stones, the dividing beads, known as gauds, were often of silver. In addition, if the paternoster had a cross or crucifix, these also tended to be of silver, whilst other small silver items could also be added such as hearts, rings, small saints’ figures or scallop shells.⁴⁹ Chaucer’s Prioress had a brooch shaped as a letter ‘A’ attached to her rosary which stood for *Amor vincit omnia* (Love conquers all).⁵⁰ Margery Howton of Mildenhall bequeathed two sets of prayer beads, ‘a pair of jet beads gaudied with silver’ and ‘a pair of jet beads gaudied with castelstin’ and John Baret of Bury St Edmunds gave ‘my bedys of white ambyr with the ring of syluir and ovir gilt’.⁵¹ The use of silver for these gauds and decoration was not only a way in which the wearer could display wealth and status, silver was also considered to have apotropaic properties and features in medieval lapidaries.⁵²

ALABASTER

Late medieval wills also include a number of bequests of alabaster items and, in particular, the small alabaster tablets which portrayed the head of St. John the Baptist such as in the examples shown (see Figs 12, 13 and 14). These were bequeathed far less commonly than prayer beads, but are relevant to the theme of this paper because, once again, not only did the figures serve a purpose, but the material from which they were made was also significant. Devotional images of saints were hugely popular in the late medieval period and were often owned by individuals as well as by religious establishments. These images could be made from a range of materials including wood and plaster, however, the use of gypsum alabaster became increasingly popular in the late medieval period. The fine grain of the stone and its soft and smooth appearance are such that it closely resembles marble. As it is much easier to carve than marble, alabaster objects could be produced comparatively easily and cheaply. All of these factors ensured that alabaster images had a wide appeal to the late medieval consumer.

Alabaster was to be found in various sites across the Midlands and this local availability led to the development of an English sculpture industry which flourished from the fourteenth century until the early sixteenth century, particularly in York, Burton-on-Trent and Nottingham which were near to the main medieval quarries in the ridge south west of Tutbury in Staffordshire, and at Chellaston Hill in Derbyshire.⁵³ Initially, alabaster craftsmen produced tomb monuments for high status individuals particularly full length effigies such as that carved for Edward II’s tomb in c. 1330.⁵⁴ In time, they moved into the production of other items which would be displayed in churches and other religious settings including panels for altarpieces and full-sized statues of saints. However, by the end of the medieval period, the main focus of production was on small items which could be used for personal or household devotion, rather than the larger ones used for corporate devotion. Whilst a range of products were produced, images of the head of St John the Baptist, which portrayed the severed head of the saint placed on the dish which Salome presented to Herodias, were especially fashionable.⁵⁵ These carved heads were not only popular in England but also on the continent whither they were exported in large numbers. Ironically, many of these exports have survived, while those that remained in England were generally destroyed during the Reformation though some survive in museum collections.



FIG. 12 – Alabaster head of St John the Baptist, 1470–90, 20cm x 15.7cm (© Victoria and Albert Museum).



FIG. 13 – Alabaster head of St John the Baptist, date unknown (with kind permission of Salisbury Museum © The Salisbury Museum).



FIG. 14 – Alabaster head of St John the Baptist, fifteenth century, 27cm x 20.6cm (© Victoria and Albert Museum).

These heads were made in a variety of forms. That shown in Fig. 12, which is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, has been dated to the end of the fifteenth century and is of a good quality of carving and painted and gilded. Other examples are much simpler and unadorned such as the example in Fig. 13 which is held by the Salisbury Museum. In addition, these images could be simply the head of the saint, as in Fig. 12, or the head could be incorporated into a small tablet and surrounded by a fairly standard iconography as in the example from the Salisbury Museum (Fig. 13). In this image, the head of St John the Baptist is on a plate, with St Peter to the right of the head and an archbishop saint, generally thought to be St Thomas Becket to the left. Above the image, the figure in the oval shape is a soul, usually identified as being the soul of the owner,

and the figure below the head of St John is Christ issuing from a long tomb. The rather more complex painted and gilded alabaster tablet from the Victoria and Albert Museum (Fig. 14) shares much of this iconography but with a few more embellishments. Again, the panel includes a representation of the head on a plate, St Peter stands to the right of the head and the archbishop saint to the left. A representation of the soul is above the head but this time the *Agnus Dei*, the symbol of St John the Baptist, is below the image. In this example the plate with the head is supported by angels and to either side of the angels are the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child and St Catherine holding her wheel. Other saints are sometimes shown on these tablets but less frequently. This image also displays a cut on the forehead of St John which is often included, particularly on the painted images, a reference to the wound that, according to legend, Herodias inflicted when she stabbed the severed head.⁵⁶

Late medieval consumers were not only attracted to alabaster because of its appearance and reasonable cost. As with the previous examples, it was a material which possessed other attributes. Of particular significance in this instance was the link between the name of the stone and the ancient and consequently biblical use of *alabastra*, the small vessels used in the Ancient World to contain precious oils.⁵⁷ The practice of storing oils in these vessels had originated in eleventh century BC Egypt where containers were made from a stone first quarried in the settlement known as Alabastron, hence the name given to both the material and to the containers made from it. The Egyptians subsequently used alabaster for a range of other sacred and sepulchral objects, but the tradition of using and storing oils in containers known as *alabastra* spread to other parts of the classical world. The Bible makes numerous references to the anointing of precious oils, but only in the story of Jesus's feet being anointed by Mary as he dined at the house of Simon the leper is it specified that the oil was held in an alabaster container. However, the story is particularly significant since it is one of only a very few which appear in all four of the gospels. So, for example, it is reported in Matthew 26:7 that a woman came to Jesus with 'an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head as he sat at meat'.⁵⁸ As such, the story was well known during the Middle Ages and people would have appreciated the connection between the *alabastra* of the biblical story and the alabaster material used for these images. Ironically, this association disregarded the fact that the ancient alabaster of Egypt and the Near and Middle East is calcite alabaster and a different material altogether to the gypsum alabaster found in England.

In addition to its biblical association, alabaster, as a stone, was considered to have medicinal properties such that it is also often included in medieval lapidaries. For example, the Peterborough Lapidary, dated to the end of the fifteenth century, recommends that it be drunk with ale to alleviate soreness in the foot or in the knee, whilst other sources suggest that it was used to treat sore eyes.⁵⁹ The alabaster from which the images of St John the Baptist were made was considered to be especially effective since it combined the medicinal properties of the stone with the power of a religious item. As a consequence, many of the extant alabaster heads or tablets show evidence of having been chipped away at the sides or back. The resulting alabaster fragments were almost certainly ground into powder and used to treat ailments. It is evident that the tablet held by Salisbury Museum (Fig. 13) has had the bottom right-hand of the piece scraped away in this manner.

Wills contain a number of monetary bequests to enable churches to buy alabaster panels, which indicates the popularity of images made from the material during this period. Indeed, Nigel Ramsey suggested that every English church and chapel and many private individuals would have held an alabaster or set of alabasters.⁶⁰ Two Icklingham wills from 1472 indicate that the parish was in the process of purchasing a panel for its church since both Margaret Cratern and John Chyrcheman give money to the buying of a panel 'de Alebaster' to be put on the altar.⁶¹ References to personal ownership of such items is rarer, however, in her will of

1522, Agatha Hert of Bury St Edmunds, widow, bequeathed two figures of St John the Baptist: she gave her son Richard Jaxson ‘a Seynt Joh[ann]is hede of alabast[er] w[ith] Seynt Pet[er] and Seynt Thom[as] and the fygur of Cryst’; and Fraunces Wrethe ‘a lytyll Seynt John’s hed of alabaster w[ith] a scriptur, *Caput S’c’i Joh’is Baptiste* [head of St John the Baptist]’.⁶² The descriptions suggest these two figures are likely to have been very similar to those shown in the illustrations. Although there is no extant evidence that these items were readily available within Bury St Edmunds, it is known that religious institutions were often involved with the sale and distribution of religious artefacts so it is reasonable to suggest that they may have been acquired through Bury Abbey. There is also testamentary evidence of alabasters in nearby Thetford, another important religious centre, so that in 1499 the burgess and fishmonger John Flecher bequeathed ‘a Saynte John’s heed’ to Kat[er]yne Crowe.⁶³

In conclusion, it is apparent that all of these items had a significance which went beyond their use as religious objects. In each case the actual substances from which the artefacts were made had a meaning which would have been understood in the late medieval context, but which has become somewhat lost to us today. Silver and fine linen conveyed the idea of wealth and status combined with remembrance, in the case of silver, and purity, in the case of linen. All three of the materials commonly used for prayer beads, jet, amber and coral, were credited with apotropaic powers so that these religious artefacts combined Christian belief with folk traditions and offered putative medicinal powers to their owners. Alabaster possessed similar curative properties, but also linked the medieval world with biblical times. It remains important to understand the religious context of such items, often in conjunction with a consideration of their craftsmanship or even their role as items associated with wealth and status. Only by understanding the contemporary perceptions of the powers and properties of these objects can we appreciate their full medieval significance.

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NOTES

- 1 Flood 1993, 13.
- 2 Duffy 2005, 4.
- 3 For example, an extant record of collections made by the Mildenhall churchwardens from 1446 to 1454 and the churchwardens’ accounts from the first half of the sixteenth century have been transcribed by Judith Middleton-Stewart and published by the Suffolk Records Society: Middleton-Stewart 2011.
- 4 Bailey 2007, 279.
- 5 Bailey 2007, 211–12.
- 6 Norfolk Record Office (NRO), Norwich Consistory Court (NCC), Ryxe 146 (Gatynbe); NRO, NCC, Surflete 147 (Mason).
- 7 Cited in Cherry 2011, 6.
- 8 Silver-gilt is the term given to silver which has been gilded with gold so that it becomes visually indistinguishable from gold.
- 9 Cherry 2011, 58.
- 10 Whilst gold was held in much higher esteem than silver, gold items were very exclusive, luxury items, which were only very rarely owned by anyone outside of the nobility. Many items which appeared to be gold were, in actual fact, silver-gilt.

- 11 Prices recorded by Thorold Rogers suggest that silver cost 2s 8d per ounce for raw silver, with silver plate varying between 2s 8d and 6s 0¼d per ounce: Thorold Rogers 1882, 474 and 488.
- 12 NRO, NCC, Ryxe 416 (Sheppard); Northeast and Falvey 2010, 67.
- 13 Lightbown 1987, 53.
- 14 Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds (SROB), IC 500/2/9/303 (Bakhote).
- 15 SROB, IC 500/2/10/379 (Bakhot).
- 16 Northeast and Falvey 2010, 420.
- 17 NRO, NCC, Briggs 28 (Howton).
- 18 The National Archives (TNA), Prerogative Court of Canterbury, (PCC) PROB 11/5, fol. 177v (Stoteville).
- 19 NRO, NCC, Popy 222 (Bolter).
- 20 Tymms 1850, 143–47 and 166–68.
- 21 In the medieval period the occupational term ‘goldsmith’ was applied to men who worked in precious metals and not just in gold. Goldsmiths lived and worked in a number of provincial towns, and the main trade of these regional craftsmen was in silver plate and jewellery rather than gold, which was largely the preserve of the London goldsmiths: Wylkynson 2004, 107.
- 22 Glanville 2004, 11.
- 23 TNA PCC, PROB 11/6, fol. 141v (Bakhott).
- 24 Walton 1991, 343.
- 25 Northeast and Falvey 2010, 164; SROB, IC 500/2/11/423 (Davy).
- 26 Northeast 2001, 352.
- 27 Northeast 2001, 389.
- 28 NRO, NCC, Typpes 146 (Webbe); Northeast and Falvey 2010, 411.
- 29 Riddle 1997, 45, 49.
- 30 Evans 1977, 34.
- 31 Evans 1977, 70–72.
- 32 Gilchrist 2008, 120.
- 33 Gilchrist 2012, 138.
- 34 Not all medieval paternosters conformed to this pattern.
- 35 Swanson 2003, 5.
- 36 Evans 1970, 50; Davis 1976, 732.
- 37 NRO, NCC, Typpes 146 (Webbe); NRO, NCC, Spyltymber 243 (White); SROB, IC 500/2/11/337 (Curteys).
- 38 Tymms 1850, 81–83.
- 39 Hinton 2005, 209.
- 40 Lightbown 1992, 347.
- 41 Lightbown 1992, 347.
- 42 The panels have been separated since the seventeenth century. The portrait of Barbara Dürer, c. 1490 is held by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, and the portrait of Albrecht Dürer the Elder, 1490, is displayed in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.
- 43 Robinson 1974, 19.
- 44 French 2013, 201.
- 45 Scholey 2009, 43.
- 46 Evans 1977, 55.
- 47 Evans 1977, 82.
- 48 Riddle 1977, 56.
- 49 Medieval rosaries did not always include a crucifix or cross, but often a figure of a saint or another item with a religious association, rings, or a tassel were added to the beads.
- 50 Robinson 1974, 19.
- 51 Tymms 1850, 15–44.
- 52 Evans 1977, 148.
- 53 Ramsey 1991, 34–36; Cheetham 1984, 12. There is some debate as to whether alabaster carvers were at work in other areas of the country, particularly London, since many sources contain references to ‘alabastermen’, however, these references may be to men who traded in alabaster rather than actual craftsmen: see Cheetham 1984, 13–17.
- 54 Ramsey 1991, 31.
- 55 Cheetham 1984, 28.
- 56 A wide range of other heads and panels on this theme can be found on the website of the Victoria and Albert Museum (www.collections.vam.ac.uk) using the search option ‘head of St. John the Baptist’.
- 57 Ramsey 1991, 29.

- 58 Whilst the story does appear in all four of the gospels, the specific details differ and only Mark and Matthew specifically refer to the oil being held in an alabaster vessel: Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–50.
- 59 Evans and Serjeantson 1933, 68.
- 60 Ramsey 1991, 37.
- 61 Northeast and Falvey 2010, 278–79.
- 62 NRO, NCC, Briggs 28 (Howton); Tymms 1850, 115–16.
- 63 NRO, NCC, Sayve 13 (Flecher).

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