

# Ship of Semen Badge

14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Century, Netherlands

## Materials and Tools Used

Soapstone

Lead-free Pewter

Woodworking and Jewelers carving tools

## Summary

The subject matter of this type of badge has, unsurprisingly, caught my eye for quite a while. I have been looking for a reason to do an off-color badge. The Casting Guild in Arn Hold was given the opportunity to do a fundraiser at the Masked Ball event (as well as the site token). I assigned out the site token and a different (very cool and perfectly respectable) badge to others and kept this project for myself.

This badge is a reproduction of the badge in Figure 1. It was cast a three-piece soapstone mold that I created and hand carved. The piece has an integral pin like the original (the pin can be seen across the open space in Figure 1).

## Human Sexuality Badges

Pilgrim badges, usually small, thin metal pins used as both souvenirs and holy items from shrines covering Europe and the Holy Land, became popular and widespread during the 12<sup>th</sup> century (likely because of a combination of the crusades and a good source of the tin needed for pewter production) through the 16<sup>th</sup> century when they were largely (though not entirely) discontinued and replaced with medals. These badges usually show some aspect of Christ, Mary, the saints, apostles or aspects of the shrine itself. In addition to pilgrimage and other religious badges, there are many instances of livery badges showing the heraldry of the person that the badge is for, badges denoting trades and used as love tokens.

In addition, there are hundreds of extant examples of badges depicting various aspects (and acts!) of sexuality; the vast number of them found in the Netherlands. While we have many examples of the use of pilgrim and livery badges (see Figure 2), we have no examples of the use of these badges so we can only speculate on what they may have been used for. Some of the theories that scholars are suggesting include tokens to ward away bad luck or bring good luck (in the biblical sense), fertility, Carnivál badges, badges to mock the more common pilgrimage tokens or even brothel tokens. It may be that these were worn inside the clothing rather than on a hat or other external item.

For any who are having their delicate sensibilities a bit embarrassed at this moment, I can assure you that I picked one of the most discrete examples of this type of badge. If you like, you may find other examples in Appendix 1.



*Figure 1 - Ship with captain and four phalli, one of which winged - Cast badge, Lead-tin alloy  
1375 – 1424, Netherlands*



*Figure 2 - Detail of Pilgrim Hat  
1507 - Italy*

## Pewter Casting in the Middle Ages

The earliest pewter that has been found was in an Egyptian tomb dated to 1450 B.C.E. Pewter was used by the Romans and was introduced to Britain in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. Significant pewter production did not begin until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Many industries sprang up around the casting of pewter badges, plaques and other items that had to do with pilgrimages. Pewter was also used in many household items. It was known as the “poor man’s silver”.

Materials used for pilgrim badges in period ranged from lead to tin to pewter. Pewter in the middle ages is difficult to define. It was often a mixture of lead, tin, and traces of other metals. There have been mainland pewter mixtures found with over 50% lead and some found with no lead at all. For example, Canterbury bells were made with 97% tin, 2% copper and traces of bismuth and antimony. Most pewter mixes did contain lead. Melting points varied with the metal composition ranging from around 350°F to 600°F. I do not care to use lead in my pewter for all the obvious brain liquefying reasons. The pewter that I am using closely matches the Canterbury bell metal; mainly tin with some copper and antimony and it has a melting point of about 425 °F.

## Soapstone Molds

Materials used for the casting mold ranged from wood to baked clay to cuttlefish bone to soapstone. Soapstone, or steatite, is almost entirely composed of talc. Good soapstone is very easy to carve, holds intricate detail and will last through hundreds of castings. Good soapstone has an even consistency with few inclusions and should not be crystalline. Soapstone was quarried in many places, including Norway and Iceland and was used by various cultures throughout the middle ages.

Soapstone has been used for casting various types of metal since before the Vikings. It was used to cast pewter, lead, bronze and other metals. Soapstone was itself also used to make many items, as it was so easy to carve but held up well to heat. Pots, bowls and lamps are only a few examples.

For this mold I used a three-piece mold made from Brazilian soapstone. I like the quality of the soapstone (and have no source for European soapstone). It has an extremely even consistency and the coloration (or lack thereof) helps to see the carved mold. Multi-part casting, such as this, uses multiple pieces of stone, sanded flat and put together, as seen in Figure 3. This type of mold is used for more three-dimensional objects like buttons, pins or belt plaques. The sprue, or funnel, is used to get the metal into the mold. The metal is poured from a seam between the two or more upper pieces of stone. Sometimes multiple sprues, or funnels, are needed to fill the entire mold.

Mold registration is used to get the mold pieces to line up the same way each time. I used a drill press to drill straight down through one piece of mold and slightly into the next piece. Once I drilled the holes, I lined them up and poured pewter into each hole. This leaves a pin through the stone with a nub on the end that fits perfectly into the hole in the other piece. Because this was a three-piece mold, similar holes had to be drilled from one top piece into the other. Figure 4 shows the registration drill holes and nubs for this type of mold.

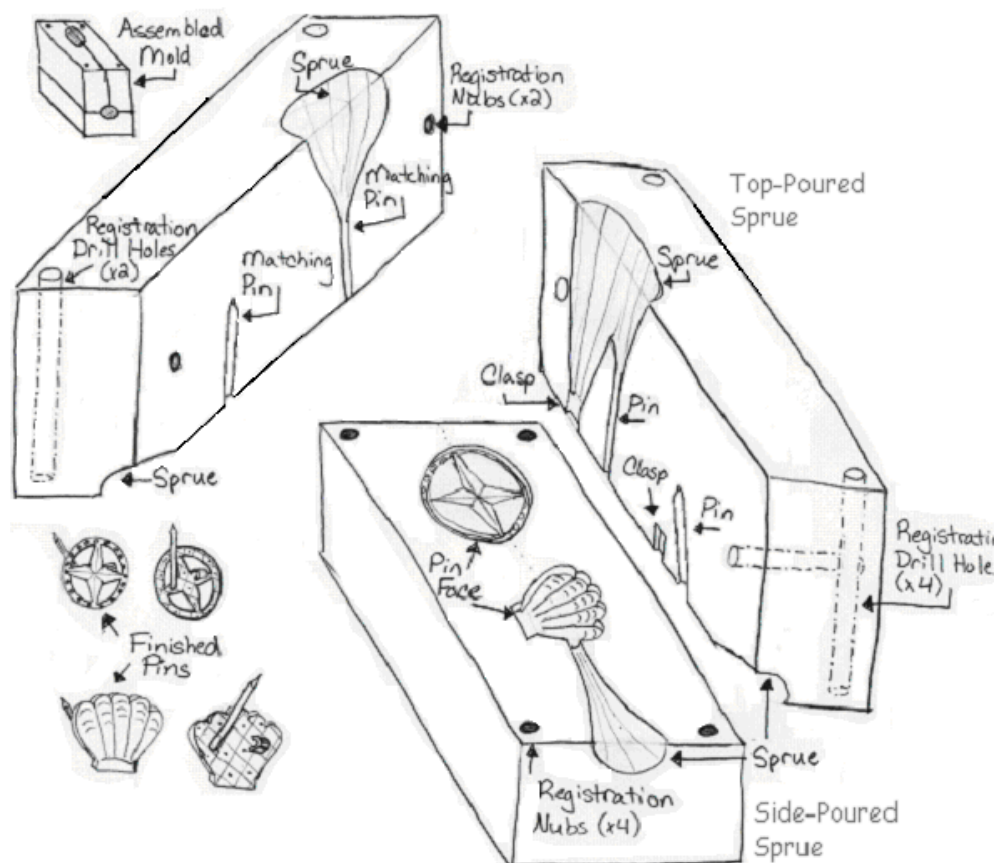


Figure 3 -Cast Badge Mold Layout – Michele Wolf

## Carving and Pouring the Badge

I hand carved the mold using woodworking and stone carving tools. The picture must be carved in reverse, both left to right as well as depth-wise. I used modeling clay to help see what was being carved. The details are very small. It helps to take off my glasses and use my near-sightedness for all it is worth.

I added details of the piece with fine picks and a tiny knife. The amount of detail that the soapstone can capture is really very amazing. On the upright pieces of the mold, I carved one side of the pin, as well as a wider piece to be used as the pin catch. The other side of the pin can't be carved until after the first pouring as there is no way to tell where to carve it so that it matches up. I did what I *always* do and made the catch too far away from the pin so that it would not reach.. so I carved a second catch in the middle area to use instead. There are three sprues, sending the metal to different parts of the mold at the same time and two of these form the pin and catch for the badge.

This mold was a bit finicky to pour because the phalluses in the interior of the open work did not want to fill once the framework was



Figure 4 – Gertrude of Nivelles Badge Mold showing Air Vent holes. 1400-1499 – Brussels  
Bruxelles, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, F 1194

poured as there was no way for the air to escape. To solve this issue, I drilled two very small holes from the interior of the badge (like those seen in Figure 4) through the bottom of the mold through to the outside and then stuffed it with straw to keep any stray pewter inside the mold. This allowed air to vent and the whole mold to fill. (And there was much rejoicing!)

The setup that I used to pour the mold is a cast iron ladle and a propane torch to heat up the metal. The ladle is both the melting pot and used to pour the metal. Pewter has a relatively low melting point though so this can be done on a stove or campfire. For demonstrations I use a hidden propane powered stove inside a dutch oven so that it looks like a brazier. Once the metal is poured and solidifies (which takes only a few seconds) I can take it out, clip off (and re-melt) the sprues as well as any metal flashing. I use files to clean up the piece and then bend over the catch and pin to finish the badge.

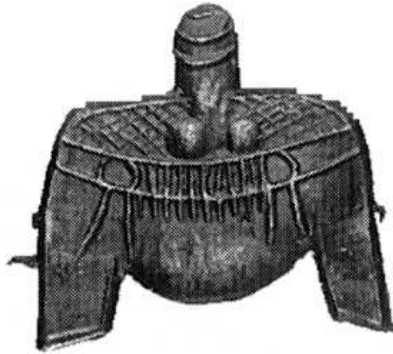
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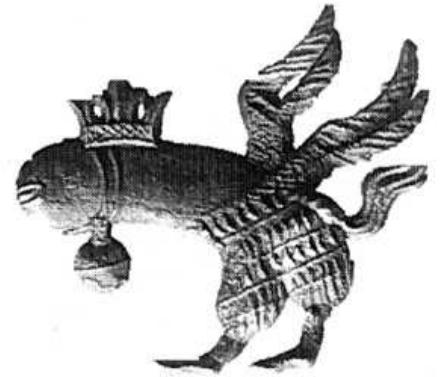
## Appendix 1 – It's *Not* As Bad As It Could Have Been!



*Phallic animal with bell around its neck approaches a vulva figure, 1325 to 1374*



*Pair of trousers with phallus, 1375 to 1424 - Netherlands*



*Winged phallic animal wearing crown and bell around its neck, 1375 to 1424 - Netherlands*



*Scene at an inn or brothel: Two floors, below a goblet, a carafe and a copulating couple, above the landlord with richly filled purse hanging from his belt, a jug turned upside down on the roof, 1375 to 1424 - Netherlands*



*Procession of three phallic figures carrying crowned vulva on a litter, 1375 to 1424 - Belgium*



*Kneeling man showing his genitals to a half-naked jester sitting under a tree with large leaves, 1325 to 1374 - Belgium*

My dearest husband suggested threatening you with an "Appendix 2" showing real life examples of the above. I don't think that I have quite the "balls" to do that to you though.