

The world upside down. Secular badges and the iconography of the Late Medieval Period: ordinary pins with multiple meanings

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Abstract

Thanks to the use of metal detectors vast numbers of Late Medieval pilgrim and secular badges have been found in the Netherlands. The secular badges give us a glimpse into the worldview of Late Medieval ordinary people. The decorative motifs on the badges and on simple knife handles, ceramic plates and other examples of Late Medieval material culture reveal a picture which can also be found in miniatures in (sometimes famous) Books of Hours. They show that both the elite and the common man availed themselves of a comparable iconography. Besides the amulet function of the badges another meaning is found in the co-existence of comparable religious examples. An obvious explanation can be found in the popular Late Medieval theme of the inversion of the world and its natural order: the world upside down. This was commonly expressed in the representation depicted with or as an anti-image. By contrasting the most holy with the most profane, Late Medieval people emphasized the negative aspects of sins. Both positive and negative symbols set an example for a lifestyle of chastity. Contemporary standards and values were principally based on the omnipresent Catholic belief system. The secular badges often represent sinners, who in pursuing brief earthly pleasures were seen as serving the devil instead of focussing on an eternal life by the side of Christ and his saints. In this respect we may even doubt our interpretation of these badges as items of secular meaning. That the images are almost blasphemous indicates the absolute sway of religion in the medieval world, where even striking secular images served a religious function. The provenance of these finds are urban and rural domestic contexts as well as monasteries and castles. This reveals the importance of chastity to all ranks in Late Medieval society. It is clear that this phenomenon is not typically urban, as sometimes suggested by written sources.

Keywords: religion, popular culture, Late Medieval, material culture, iconography, medieval archaeology, pilgrim badges, secular badges, archaeology

1 Introduction

Thanks to the use of metal detectors vast numbers of Late Medieval pilgrim and secular badges have been found in the Netherlands in the last few decades.¹ The secular badges confront us



Fig. 1 Badge displaying a boar playing a bagpipe, 1375-1450, found in Amsterdam (Van Beuningen Family collection, inventory number 1460). © Van Beuningen Family Collection

with an aspect of the reality of everyday life in this period that so far has remained largely unknown. This is hardly surprising. The ordinary pins, manufactured from a cheap alloy of tin and lead, were used by those people in Late Medieval society who are almost absent from the written sources. Representing the largest part of the population, they are often typecast as the silent majority. The badges give us a glimpse into their worldview. The interpretation of the scenes depicted on the badges may be carried out through analysis of written and iconographic sources. The problem in decoding the meaning of these cheap pins is that we have to use sources left us by the Late Medieval elite in order to understand the worldview of the 'common person'. Beautiful examples of such sources are illuminated manuscripts. For example a boar playing a bagpipe, seen on several badges found on Dutch soil (fig. 1) (Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993 268; Van Beuningen, Koldeweij & Kicken 2001, 415), is also represented in the margin of the famous *Très riches heures du Duc de Berry*, although in a bowdlerized version since the boar's phallus is missing (fig. 2). Another example is the depiction of a monkey stamping in a mortar (fig. 3). A parallel may be found in the margin decorations of one of the manuscripts from the famous library of Lodewijk van Gruuthuse (1422-1492), treasurer of the illustrious Order of the Golden Fleece (fig. 4) (Martens 1992, 135). Here a monkey and an ass are stamping on a mortar and again the scene has been bowdlerized. The monkeys on the badges are urinating into the mortar, something that remains absent on the margin decoration of the manuscript. In addition, the fish that the monkeys are standing on are missing from the manuscript illustration. An extensive study of the margin decorations in Late Medieval illuminated manuscripts would undoubtedly yield more parallels (Compare: Unterkircher 1974, 53, 70, 121 and 139; Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993, 252 and 264-265; Koldeweij & Willemse 1995, 23, fig. 9 left). Others may be found in medieval literature (for examples see Winkelmann 1999; Winkelmann 2002b). We should be aware that these examples do not prove that the depictions stem from a identical worldview. However, they show that in Late Medieval society both the elite and the common person availed themselves of a comparable iconography. In studying these simple and common pieces of jewellery, we must also be aware that they must have had more than one



Fig. 2 Miniature displaying the Visitation surrounded by margin decorations. The one at the bottom on the left also displays a boar playing a bagpipe, from the *Très riches heures du Duc de Berry* (1340-1416), Musée Condé Chantilly (MS. 65, FOL. 38v).



Fig. 3 Badge displaying a monkey stamping and urinating on a mortar, 1375-1450, found in Reimerswaal (Van Beuningen Family collection, inventory number 143). © Van Beuningen Family Collection



Fig. 4 Miniature displaying soldiers stamping on mortars (an early type of cannon) surrounded by margin decorations, one of which shows a monkey and an ass stamping on a mortar, from a manuscript from the library of Lodewijk van Gruuthuse (1422-1492), Bibliothèque Nationale Paris (MA.FR. 2645, FOL. 1).

layer of meaning at the time they were used. The sociologist Bedaux has already pointed out the amulet function of the badges (Bedaux 1995). In addition there is an interpretation that connects these badges to each other deriving from their shape. Secular badges coexisted with religious ones and they are encountered in the same archaeological contexts. Thus we can conclude that both types of objects were used by the same groups of users at the same time. There is little difference between the types in terms of shape, constituent materials and manufacture. Therefore it is not unlikely that the meaning of the secular badges is partly found in the extension of these religious examples.

An obvious explanation can be found in the popular Late Medieval theme of the inversion of the world and its natural order. In the inverted world animals perform human actions. The normal hierarchy is also reversed in this anti-world; the servants are kings and women subjugate their husbands. Herman Pleij, Emeritus Professor of Historical Dutch Literature at the University of Amsterdam, has focussed on the role of the inverted world in Late Medieval culture in the Netherlands (Pleij 1979, 1988, 1992). In his earlier work Pleij emphasizes the temporary character of 'turning the world upside down', especially during the festivities around Shrove Tuesday, in which inverting normal roles functioned as an escape from reality. Once a year the act in which the servant becomes king makes clear the true relationship throughout the rest of the year. Although such festivities concur with Late Medieval culture in which humour and laughter are very important elements, the inverted world undoubtedly played a more structural role.² Besides the comical element, it actually had a very serious meaning because the inverted world confirmed what was ridiculed and thus reinforced it. The most proven method of this confirmation was to represent the subject as an anti-image. This is illustrated in the famous Book of Hours of Catharina van Kleef (ca. 1410-1473). One of the miniatures displays an image that is a variation on the theme of the Fall of Man (fig. 5). To the left of the Tree of Knowledge a naked Eve receives the apple from the devil. To the right of the



Fig. 5 Miniature displaying a variation on the Fall of Man, from the Book of Hours of Catharina van Kleef (ca. 1410-1473) (The Morgan Library & Museum, New York).

tree, the customary Adam is replaced by a fully dressed Virgin Mary with the Christ Child. An angel above the tree holds a banderole which reads: 'Eve cause of all sin; Mary cause of merit'. That this textual comment was unnecessary to reveal the inherent meaning of the image is proven by the handle of a knife excavated in Amsterdam (fig. 6). On one side we again see Eve as the mother of all sin. The other side depicts the Holy Virgin Saint Barbara with her tower. Although for the Catholic medieval people the miniature clearly alludes to the two most important episodes in history – the Fall of Man and the Redemption from Sin by the suffering of Christ – the actual contrast between the icons of sin and purity plays an important role. The Holy Virgin Saint Barbara on the handle of the knife is setting an example by her lifestyle of chastity, just like the Holy Mary.

A ceramic plate, manufactured in Den Bosch and found in a monastery in Hooydonk in the Duchy of Brabant (fig. 7), is yet another example of these oppositions. A forcep, a banderole and an amputated breast (symbols for the Holy Virgin Saint Agatha) are depicted in the sgraffito technique, while the name of Mary is incised twice on the rim of the plate. Saint Agatha's attributes are flanked by a jester and a fish, both symbols of lust and gluttony (Nijhof & Janssen 2000, 260 and 265). In this capacity, a fish is depicted several times in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, painted by Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1460-1516 – fig. 8) (Bax 1956, 205). Another plate shows the incised name of Mary under a crown, while beneath it again is the counter-image of a fish (fig. 9). Similar plates are found in both urban and rural domestic contexts as well as monasteries and castles (Nijhof & Janssen 2000). This reveals the importance of chastity to all ranks of Late Medieval society. It is clear that this phenomenon is not typically urban, as sometimes suggested by written sources.



Fig. 6 Handle of a knife excavated in Amsterdam displaying Eve and Saint Barbara, 1450-1525 (Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie, Amsterdam).



Fig. 7 Ceramic plate with the incised attributes of the Holy Virgin Agatha (a forcep, a banderole and an amputated breast) flanked by a jester and a fish, 1450-1525, manufactured in Den Bosch and found at the site of the monastery in Hooydonk (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, inventory number F.1766).



Fig. 8 Detail from the *Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1460-1516) – the fish as a symbol of lust and gluttony (Museum Prado, Madrid).



Fig. 9 Ceramic plate with the incised name of Mary under a crown and beneath it the counter-image of a fish, 1450-1525, found in Dordrecht (Provinciaal Bodemdepot, Alphen a/d Rijn).

Ceramic plates with sgraffito decoration comparable with the above-mentioned examples were produced in various parts of the Netherlands. The most common motifs on this type of plates have either a religious or a heraldic subject, such as the numerous known plates decorated with symbols of saints. A beautiful example is a plate excavated in Dordrecht, which is decorated

with a tower (attribute of Saint Barbara) and flanked by the Gothic letters B and A associated with this holy virgin (fig. 10). Another plate shows the coat of arms of the Egmond family (fig. 11). This piece was excavated at the site of their castle, near the village of Zoetermeer. Be it religious or heraldic, the scenes serve as a model. However, examples are also known where symbols of a lesser nature are glorified, such as jesters, owls or dice – sometimes even incorporated in a heraldic coat of arms (fig. 12).



Fig. 10 Ceramic plate with the incised attribute of Saint Barbara (a tower) which is flanked by the Gothic letters B and A, 1450-1525, found in Dordrecht (Provinciaal Bodemdepot, Alphen a/d Rijn).



Fig. 11 Ceramic plate with the incised coat of arms of the Egmond family, 1450-1525, found at the site of their castle, near the village of Zoetermeer (Provinciaal Bodemdepot, Alphen a/d Rijn).



Fig. 12 Ceramic plate incised with dice incorporated in a heraldic coat of arms, 1450-1525, found in Dordrecht (Bureau Monumentenzorg en Archeologie, Dordrecht).

Numerous stoneware funnel beakers produced in the German town of Siegburg are decorated with appliquéés showing the Holy Virgin Mary with the Christ Child (fig. 13) or a saint. However, a small number of beakers has appliquéés of less common iconography. Occasionally we find one with a loving couple or even a phallus replacing the more normal depiction of the saints and applied in exactly the same manner (fig. 14).

The numerous religious badges that have been excavated, and their secular counterparts, which contrast sharply to the applied themes, should also be seen as an expression of the aspect of Late Medieval culture which is mentioned above (Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993). In the 1980s secular badges were often typecast as carnival badges, an extension of their interpretation. Whether the role played by the badges depicting the world upside down was restricted to festivities, or whether they had a more structural position in daily life remains unknown. From the above-mentioned examples, the latter option seems the most likely.



Fig. 13 Stoneware funnel beaker produced in the German town of Siegburg and decorated with appliquéés showing the Holy Virgin Mary with the Christ Child, 1375-1450, found in Venlo (Provinciaal Depot voor Bodemvondsten, Maastricht).



Fig. 14 Stoneware funnel beaker produced in the German town of Siegburg and decorated with appliques showing a phallus, 1350-1400 (Stadtmuseum Siegburg).

2 The meaning of the badges

If at least some secular badges actually carried the meaning explained above, we may assume they had negative connotations for the Late Medieval population. To emphasize this negative aspect, symbols of foolishness were often depicted in the same pose or capacity as those of the most holy depictions. That this method was not limited to the visual arts is illustrated in the *Carmina Burana*, a Latin satire from the High Middle Ages that sketches a world that is heading towards its destruction (Pleij 1997, 395). Various biblical figures and saints are conducting actions contrary to their own virtuous lives, e.g. Church Fathers playing dice. An example of this genre is found in the Book of Hours originating from the Frisian monastery in Thabor. It contains a page showing a miniature of Christ as the *Salvator Mundi* (fig. 15) (Wierda 1995, 25). A bear standing in the margin of this folium is holding a clot of honey in its paw (Wierda 1995, 21). The bear and honey are depicted in the same way as Christ holding his orb, thereby sharply contrasting the highest imaginable with the lowest.

Other craftsmen manufactured objects that intermingled symbols of despicable behaviour and of worship. There are various examples of such mockery among the waste of a late fifteenth century craftsman that produced pipe clay statues (a so-called *beeldendrukker*) in Cologne (Neu-Kock 1988; Neu-Kock 1993). This craftsman produced statues with both religious and secular themes. Among the artefacts were small cribs holding the Christ Child carrying the orb, sometimes in the company of the child John the Baptist (Neu-Kock 1988, 19; Neu-Kock 1993, 38-40). In the same waste were also cribs in which an ass is sleeping (Neu-Kock 1988, 33; Neu-Kock 1993, 65). The choice of the ass, of all animals, is not surprising, as the ass was a symbol of laziness (Bax 1949, 68). The representation of the ass enhances the negative connotation of the image. By worshipping laziness as a virtue it becomes very clear how despicable it really is. That the variations are not only made upon religious themes is shown by the above-mentioned margin decorations from Bruges depicting the monkey and the ass stamping on a mortar (fig. 4). When we compare the margin decorations with the adjacent miniature, it becomes clear that the mortar is a variation on the weaponry that is depicted there. Just like the glorified soldiers are stamping around on their mortars, the despicable monkey and ass are stamping on theirs. And once more, the image that is meant to be virtuous shines brighter by contrasting it with something ridiculous.



Fig. 15 A miniature from the Book of Hours from the Frisian monastery in Thabor displaying Christ as the Salvator Mundi and in the margin a bear holding a clot of honey in its paw, 1488 (Tresoar collection, Provinciale Bibliotheek, Leeuwarden).



Fig. 16 Badge displaying a devil's head held up as a relic bust, 1375-1450, found in Sluis (Van Beuningen family collection, inventory number 3248). © Van Beuningen Family Collection

A badge excavated in Sluis, in the province of Zeeland, shows a horned head with a protruding tongue (fig. 16). The bust is a devilish parody of a relic bust. The figures on either side show this 'relic' to an imaginary public, a theme also seen on religious badges. On various pilgrims' badges relic busts are shown in the same way as the horned head from Sluis (fig. 17). Pilgrims' badges from Aachen also display a relic: a holy piece of clothing is held up as an object of

devotion (fig. 18). A secular badge depicting a piece of clothing is a variation on this theme. This time a pair of trousers is held up by two figures. However, in this case it is not the trousers but the protruding phallus that is the object of worship. On a badge excavated near Utrecht the elevated status of the phallus is further emphasized by surmounting it with the crown (fig. 19). That the phallus is not only represented as an object of religious worship is illustrated by a badge that was found in Den Bosch. A helmet, connected by a small chain to a badge, as symbol of nobility, is crowned by a winged phallus (Winkelman 2002b, 344).



Fig. 17 Pilgrim's badge from Maastricht displaying the relic bust of Servatius held up as an object of devotion, 1375-1450, found in Middelburg (Van Beuningen family collection, inventory number 3577). © Van Beuningen Family Collection

A variation on ridiculing the display of relics is the mock procession. In this genre we can include the various margin decorations in fourteenth century manuscripts, where animals in procession perform the role of human beings (Randall 1966, fig. 569-573, 575 and 599). Hieronymus Bosch also painted such a mock procession in his *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Here two naked men carry an upside-down bear on a litter (Marijnissen & Ruyffelaere 1987, 121). When we compare this detail with contemporary images, it is obvious that it represents a mock procession (Ramakers 1996, 108-109). Badges that show three phalli bearing a crowned vulva also may be seen as a variation on this theme (fig. 20) (Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993, 262). Malcolm Jones has pointed out that the crowned vulva on this badge should be interpreted as a persiflage on Mary (Jones 2000, 100-101), whilst Johan Winkelman, Emeritus Professor of Historical German Literature at the University of Amsterdam, identified the vulva as an extreme depiction of *Vrouw Minne* (i.e. the Middle Dutch equivalent of Venus, a symbol of lust) (Winkelman 2002a, 231). According to the attributes with which she is associated, *Vrouw Minne*, portrayed as a vulva, is the counterpart symbol of Mary, just like Eve in the above-mentioned miniature from the Book of Hours of Catharina van Kleef. A litter bearing a copulating couple excavated in Amsterdam makes clear that the three phalli's worship of the vulva symbolises coitus (Van Beuningen, Koldeweij & Kicken 2001, 407, fig. 1732). The absence of an attachment pin suggests that the litter was possibly part of a three dimensional group.



Fig. 18 Pilgrim's badge from Aachen displaying a holy piece of clothing held up as an object of devotion, 1375-1450, found in Amsterdam (Van Beuningen family collection, inventory number 418). © Van Beuningen Family Collection



Fig. 19 Badge displaying a pair of trousers with a phallus as an object of worship, 1375-1450, found near Utrecht (Cultuurhistorie en Monumenten, Utrecht).



Fig. 20 Badge displaying three phalli bearing a crowned vulva in a procession, 1375-1450, found in Brugge (Van Beuningen family collection, inventory number 652). © Van Beuningen Family Collection

An interesting parallel may again be found in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. One of the central details is a naked man dragging an enormous mussel (fig. 21), which clearly serves as a metaphor for the female sexual organ. We also encounter this metaphor in Late Medieval literature and on some secular badges (see also Winkelman 2002a, 229). One of two matching mussel shells excavated in Rotterdam is decorated on the inside with a vulva (fig. 22) (Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993, 264). A second example found in Amsterdam reveals a vulva protruding from an opened mussel (Van Beuningen, Koldeweij & Kicken 2001, 413, fig. 1776).



Fig. 21 Detail from the *Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1460-1516) – a naked man dragging an enormous mussel (Museum Prado, Madrid).



Fig. 22 Badge displaying two matching mussel shells (a) one of which is decorated on the inside with a vulva (b), 1375-1450, found in Rotterdam (Van Beuningen family collection, inventory number 667). © Van Beuningen Family Collection

The couple in the enormous mussel shell painted by Bosch, symbolised man's pursuit of carnal pleasures. In all examples shown thus far, lust is either worshipped or avidly sought after. The energy that people expend in pursuing earthly pleasures that are nonsensical in the light of eternal life appears to be a recurring theme in the popular culture of the later Middle Ages. An example is a scene on the triptych *The adoration of the Magi*, again by Hieronymus Bosch. The central theme of this triptych, the worship of Mary and Christ by the Three Kings, is placed in the foreground. The sinful world in the clearly separated zone behind forms the backdrop. One of the scenes in this foolish world depicts a man leading an ass mounted by a monkey (fig. 23) (Marijnissen & Ruyffelaere 1987, 245). This man is without a doubt a symbol of the fool who made the effort to transport a monkey, an animal that symbolized the lowest imaginable order in the eyes of Bosch's contemporaries. To emphasize the foolishness of the man, the ass is covered with a beautiful rug. What made this scene recognizable as a parody of a biblical event is the idol behind and to the right of the man and his ass. Such idols, placed on a pillar, are a regular depiction in scenes showing the Flight to Egypt. This tableau is shown on both woodcarvings and stained glass windows and it is set in a landscape in which the idols are falling down (fig. 24) (Husband 1995, 153; Marijnissen & Ruyffelaere 1987, 239). This representation derives from an apocryphal story in which one of the many wonders of this journey was the spontaneous falling of the idols at the moment of the infant Jesus passed by. Joseph, who leads the ass bearing Mary and the Christ Child, has been replaced by a fool who is leading an ass carrying a monkey. Of course this time the idol stands firmly on its pillar, which fits perfectly within this foolish world.

The fool painted by Bosch is comparable with a contemporary fool carved on the underside of a choir seat in the church of Hoogstraten (Belgium). This duffer transports his dog in a wheelbarrow as if it were precious merchandise (Steppe 1973, 167, fig. 31). The scene is comparable with the earlier mentioned marginal illustrations from the *Très riches heures du Duc de Berry* (fig. 2). Furthermore, in the famous Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy (1457-1482) we find a figure that is transporting a monkey in his wheelbarrow (Ostkamp 2004, 189). The animal shows him his rear end in contempt (see also: Filedt Kok 1985, 201-202). A badge found in



Fig. 23 Detail from the *The adoration of the Magi* by Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1460-1516) – a man leading an ass mounted by a monkey (Museum Prado, Madrid).



Fig. 24 A stained glass window depicting the *Flight to Egypt*, ca. 1532 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inventory number bk-nm-12969).

Vlaardingen shows another variation on this theme (fig. 25). On the back of an enormous phallus we see a woman pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with phalli. In this way, the woman becomes a counterpart to the earlier mentioned male vulva worshippers, who are depicted as phalli carrying a vulva. Apparently the woman, as a penis worshipper, expended considerable effort to satisfy her lust.

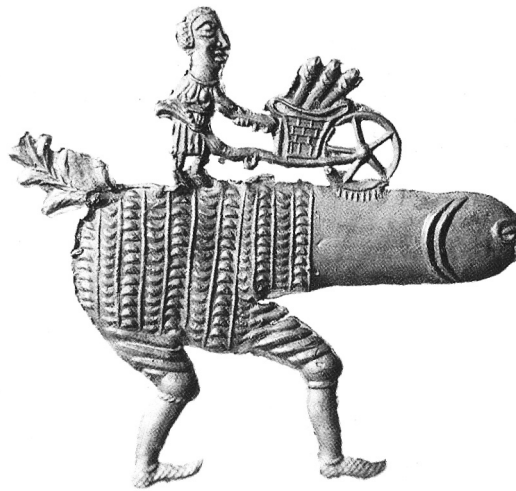


Fig. 25 Badge displaying an enormous phallus, the reverse shows a woman pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with phalli, 1375-1450, found in Vlaardingen (private collection).

It is possible that these badges fulfilled a function within the practices of the charivari. In their popular trials, people who demonstrated reprehensible behaviour were punished by their own community with ritual sanctions (Rooijakkers & Romme 1989). For example, by pinning such badges to adulterous men or women, they would be disgraced in front of the whole community. This would explain why this badge and the one with the vulva worshippers are so large. Unlike most of the much smaller, and therefore less striking badges, they must have drawn immediate attention.

3 Conclusion

Secular badges provide us with a unique insight into the perceptions of ordinary members of Late Medieval society, which may only be understood in the context of their time. Contemporary standards and values were principally based on the omnipresent Catholic belief system. In depicting the inversion of the natural order, holy examples, like Mary, Agatha and Barbara, were contrasted with those who were less pure. Motifs representing this include penis and vulva worshippers who in pursuing brief earthly pleasures are serving the devil instead of focussing on an eternal life by the side of Christ and his saints. In this respect we may even doubt our interpretation of these badges as items of secular meaning. That the images are almost blasphemous indicates the absolute sway of religion in the medieval world, where even striking secular images served a religious function. One was probably so aware of the objective truth inherent to the belief in Christ, that counter-images were also clearly understood. Even though such images were not sanctioned by theologians, ordinary people apparently did not find them reprehensible. Moreover, illuminated manuscripts show us that this type of iconography was not restricted to the common people, although the elite used more bowdlerized versions. In the margins of illuminated manuscripts from the highest circles we find representations that originate from the same traditions. However, their importance appears to be less evident in this context. The location of these images in the margins seems to express the actual importance it represents for these groups. Important or not, these images were well understood by people from all sections of Late Medieval society and they provide interesting insights into how they may have perceived their world.

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Notes

1. This article is based on the research that was carried out by the author in preparation for the exhibition 'Jheronimus Bosch', held between 1 September and 11 November 2001 in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (see Van Gangelen & Ostkamp 2001). Some of the results of this research have been presented at the congress 'Spätmittelalterliche Insignien in Ihrem kulturhistorischen Kontext' organized by the University of Amsterdam and the Royal Dutch Academy of Science (*Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, KNAW), on 26 and 27 September 2002 (see Winkelman & Wolf (eds) 2004; Ostkamp 2004). The results of this research were also discussed at the 12th congress on Theoretical Archaeology (Archeologie & Theorie Symposium) held at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam on 10 January 2003 (*Materiële cultuur en de mentaliteit van alledag*). The author would like to thank Nina Linde Jaspers, Toon Vugts and Ceri Boston for helping translate the text into English.
2. We also find this interpretation in the later work of Pleij (Pleij 1994; Pleij 1997).

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