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Holy Medals with Secondary Holes as Examples of the Recycling of Historical Devotional Objects

Abstract

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Holy medals belong to a group of historical artefacts known as devotional objects and they appear in this category beside crosses, scapulars or prayer beads. They are regarded as miniature forms of large medals and are seldom made of noble metals, but rather corrosion resistant alloys. Medals occur the most often in an oval form, with a separated loop for hanging, but there are also circular, rectangular or octagonal forms. The work below is an attempt to study a special form of medals – perforated secondarily – as a historical form of recycling. Such a treatment led them to be regarded as retrieved objects, retaining their original function. Studying the manufacturing features of these objects allows us to distinguish between original and secondary perforations. The latter were made when the original eye was broken or lost. The intentions of persons who decided to recycle devotional objects for material, spiritual or mystic reasons are an important part of this paper. The article is based on studies of artefacts obtained during archaeological excavations at sites in Gniew in Pomerania (Poland) and Dubno in Volhynia (Ukraine).

Keywords: holy medals, devotional objects, recycling, Gniew, Dubno

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Introduction

Holy medals belong to an artefact group called devotional objects. They appear together with small crosses, scapulars and prayer beads and traditionally are associated mainly with the Christian faith. As material objects, they are not only of interest to students of phaleristics and sacramentals, numismatists, and specialists of theology and history, but also to archaeologists, because they occur in archaeological sites.

The fact of their occasional appearance in the inventories of archaeological works confirms their popularity and good characteristics of preservation in post-depositional processes. Analysing local (Polish) excavations of recent years, we can observe the presence of devotional objects, including medals, at sites such as: Maniowy (Chudzińska 1998), Lubin (Białobłocki

1992), Trzemeszno (Wiewióra 1995), Toruń (Grupa 2005a; 2005b, 20–21), Strzelno (Sulkowska-Tuszyńska 2006), Pułtusk (Kołyško 2007), Lublin (Niedźwiadek *et al.* 2015, 71–82), Płonkowo (Grupa *et al.* 2015b, 40, 46), Sandomierz (Rostkowska 1996), Gliwice (Furmanek and Michnik 2004), Warszawa (Dąbrowska 2012), Wrocław (Pankiewicz and Witkowski 2012; Wojcieszak 2012), Stargard (Majewski 2013), Końskowola (Nowosad *et al.* 2021; Dobek and Michalik 2022) or Gniew (Grupa *et al.* 2015a, 130–134; Niedźwiadek *et al.* 2015, 98; Grupa and Warecka 2018; Michalik 2018; 2020) and others.

This article examines one special form of the appearance of medals, namely secondary perforations, as a kind of historical recycling process. We refer here to more general meaning of recycling, as literally the process means converting waste materials into new

materials, and in the more general sense, reusing an old object for the same or new function. Therefore, the description below treats perforated medals as retrieved objects given a new life.

In addition, we know of traditions of the deposition of consecrated objects, including damaged medals, by burning them, digging into sacred ground or depositing them in coffins or burial pits (Chudzińska 2008, 287). Because we only have medallions with secondary holes available in the archaeological materials, the authors limited their presentation to medals, despite the fact that other devotional articles with remade holes are also present.

What is a holy medal?

Holy medals are miniature forms of larger medals, made rarely of noble metals, but rather of alloys resistant to corrosion. The tradition of wearing and using talismans has been known since the pagan and Gnostic eras. The development of holy medals was a Christian response to the needs of the newly baptized to have a material sign testifying their attachment to God (Pałubska 2008). In the researchers' opinion, one of the hypotheses of the creation of modern medals evolved from wax discs called *Agnus Dei*, with a pressed image of the Lamb of God, distributed to commemorate the Paschal Triduum. Sometimes discs were embedded in capsules or medallions. Originally, medals were only rarely decorated with inscriptions and worn around the neck or on clothes (Szkopek 2008, 22–23; Kołyszko 2013, 78–79).

An oval object with an eye for hanging has been the most popular form since the 19th century, but there were also round, rectangular or octagonal forms. The size of the medal represented a compromise between the clarity of an image (the bigger the surface, the better the image) and the daily practice of wearing it. Wearing a large object was uncomfortable, hence a standard size, measuring between 1 and 4 cm in diameter, developed.

The iconography presented on medals had to appeal generally to ordinary people who were frequently illiterate, helping to shape their morality according to the model lives of saints. Such was the teaching of the Council of Trent, which approved the development of the iconography of images of the Saints. Simultaneously, the Council decried both iconoclasm and idolatry (Pasierb 1987, 19).

Local medal variants issued because of important events should also be mentioned (e.g. a medal with an image of Our Lady of Gietrzwałd, to commemorate

Her appearance in the village, situated in Warmińsko-Mazurskie province). Despite the fact that the area belonged to Prussia, it was largely inhabited by Poles who were adherents of the Catholic faith. The parish church was built at the end of 15th century, and the local painting of Our Lady of Częstochowa had been regarded as miraculous by villagers ever since Our Lady appeared in a nearby maple tree to two Polish girls on 27 June 1877, with the site becoming a pilgrimage sanctuary. Pilgrimages to the site continue to this day (Rewoliński 1887, 42; Michalik 2017b, 11).

The other forms of historical objects are two medals of the Sacred Heart (of Jesus) pierced with a sword and an arrow. The obverse presents a symbol of the burning Sacred Heart with a wound on the right and a radial rim. The various shapes of the flames and the radial rim can indicate different workshops or various methods of coining medals. In both cases, the image of a burning heart is surrounded with an inscription in German gothic script: HERZ JESU URQUELL ALLER GNADEN [Lord Jesus, Source of All Grace] (Michalik 2017c, 15). This fact shows that the symbolism on the medals was similar, but differences came down to details that were not significant for the pronunciation of the performance. However, inscriptions in Polish and German occur more rarely than in Latin, which was more popular until the 19th century.

Next, from the 15th century onwards, devotional objects were made using the die cutting technique from a readymade form (Pałubska 2008; Michalik 2017b, 10). In the light of historical material analyses, we can venture the claim that this technique was more popular, although it is difficult today to define particular manufacturing workshops, due to the insufficient knowledge of the problem and the fact that production centres were often anonymous (Chudzińska 1998, 15). Mass, “factory” medals production can be dated from the beginning of the 19th century with a noticeable uniformity in the form of the products (Pisarszak 1979). This “industrialization” did not always mean an improvement in quality, as we can observe how poorer material was used or there was a lack of precision in the stamp making. Examples of this are medals-scapulars produced at the beginning of 20th century of aluminium alloys, whose quality was susceptible to corrosion processes (Michalik 2019).

Pendant forms

Depending on common habits, devotional objects were worn on textile bands and strings around the neck, sometimes exposed on outer garments as

decoration elements. These practices are represented by iconography sources from the late Middle Ages and modern times (Pisarszak 1979; Kołyszko 2013, 236). However, medals were more frequently hidden under garments, and this may indicate a demonstration of personal intimate faith or due to practical reasons. In every case discussed above, the medal had to have a hole, an opening for stringing an object, using a band, string, cord, chain or thread. In die cutting medals, the holes were usually in a separated oval eye (Fig. 1: C), but round eyes are also found (Fig. 1: B). The last hanging form are examples with a “neck” (Fig. 1: D) – characteristic generally for cast forms. The eyes were from 3 to 5 mm long, but of course there were also much bigger medal forms with larger eyes.

Cast medals usually had holes with triangular (Fig. 2: A), semicircular (Fig. 2: B) or tear-shaped (Fig. 2: C) eyes. Perforation could also occur at the top of

a medal. The majority of eyes were from 6 to 8 mm long, which in the case of the small holes (having usually diameter of about 2 mm) was at least half of the eye surface (Chudzińska 1998, 21). It sometimes transpired that holes were pierced or drilled too close to an eye edge and this caused them to break quickly (Chudzińska 1998, 21), and the protruding eye construction faced the danger of mechanical damage.

Original and secondary perforations

A significant medal form discussed in this paper relates to medals made without separate eyes, which only have an opening in the upper part of their contour (Fig. 1: A). This type of a hole should be regarded as the original perforation, despite the fact that it was not always pierced, since it could also have been

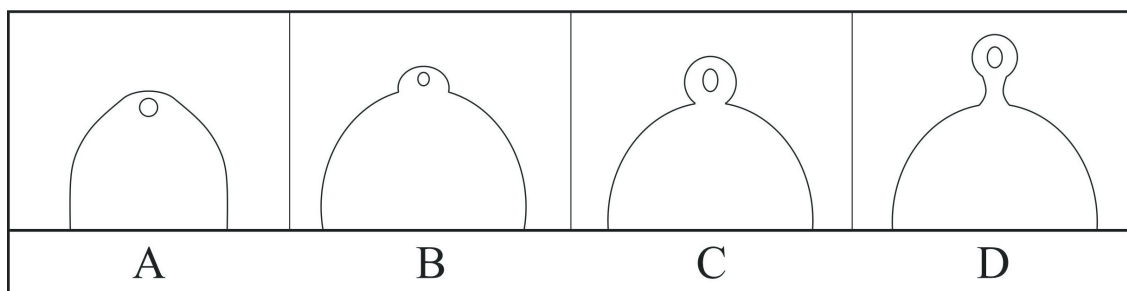


Fig. 1. Hole examples in die cutting medals.

A – on a medal plate; B – on a round eye; C – on an oval eye; D – on a separated eye
(drawn by J. Michalik).

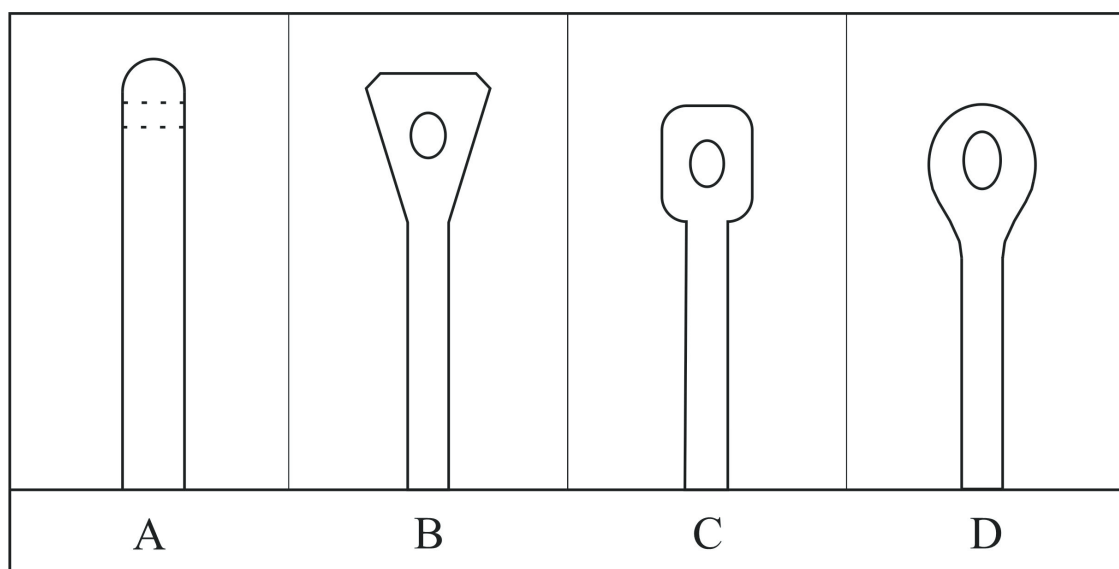


Fig. 2. Examples of holes in cast medals.

A – on a medal plate; B – on a semicircular eye; C – on a triangular eye; D – on a tear-shaped eye
(drawn by J. Michalik, after Chudzińska 1998, 21).

drilled. The whole pendant is in accordance with the artist's intention – hence, it is an integrated artistic composition. The hole is symmetrical and often profiled at the edge.

The following characteristics, namely composition cohesion, decoration, and symmetry, permit us to distinguish original perforation from secondary piercing, which could have been done resulting in the loss of, or damage to the original one. When preparing his medal collection catalogue, entitled *Medale religijne...* (1887), Rewoliński made precise drawings of objects with damaged eyes and secondary holes for a band (Fig. 3: A–C; Rewoliński 1887, no 7, 8, 20, 24, 541, 587, 726, 1007, 1056, 1112). There are numerous examples of such medals which have been found during archaeological explorations, e.g. finds in Dubno (Fig. 3: D; Niedźwiadek *et al.* 2015, fig. 81: A–B), Volhynia (present-day Ukraine).

In the examples presented here, all of the holes are situated in the upper parts of the medals, just below a damaged eye. In some cases, there is another hole at the bottom part or at the top, beside the first one, which could have served for fastening the metal to clothes or joining prayer beads together. What is interesting, secondary perforations were often made close to the edge, on reliefs and inscriptions around, and this has caused problems with deciphering them.

Presentation of selected objects

The situation is not sufficiently always clear for us to be absolutely sure whether the perforations are original or secondary – in this situation we try, using the discussed characteristics, to establish the category into which the object fits. Sometimes eye relics are helpful or as comparisons to similar artefacts.

For example, a medal of St. Benedict represents an interesting type with a hole which is not on a separate eye. This object belongs to a permanent museum exhibition entitled “Sztum i Ziemia Sztumska” [“Sztum and the Sztum Land”], situated in the one-time Evangelical church in Sztum (Michalik 2017a). It is an octagonal medal pressed in tin, not precisely cut with a round hole perforated on the upper part of its surface (Fig. 4). The object's size – 24 x 18 mm and was made by punching in a copper alloy plate. The medal's condition is poor and we are not able to describe its detailed features precisely, except the letters on the cross: CSPB CSSML NDMD and on its rim: IHS VRSNSMVSMQLIVB. The letters do not form a specific word and can seem mysterious. However, these are the first letters of the words that make up the St Benedict prayer: C[rux] S[anc ti] P[atris] B[enedicti]. C[rux] S[acra] S[it] M[ihi] L[ux]! N[on] D[raco] S[it] M[ihi] D[ux]! [The Cross of [our] Holy Father Benedict. May the Holy Cross be my light! May the Serpent never be my lord!], and I[esu] H[ominum]

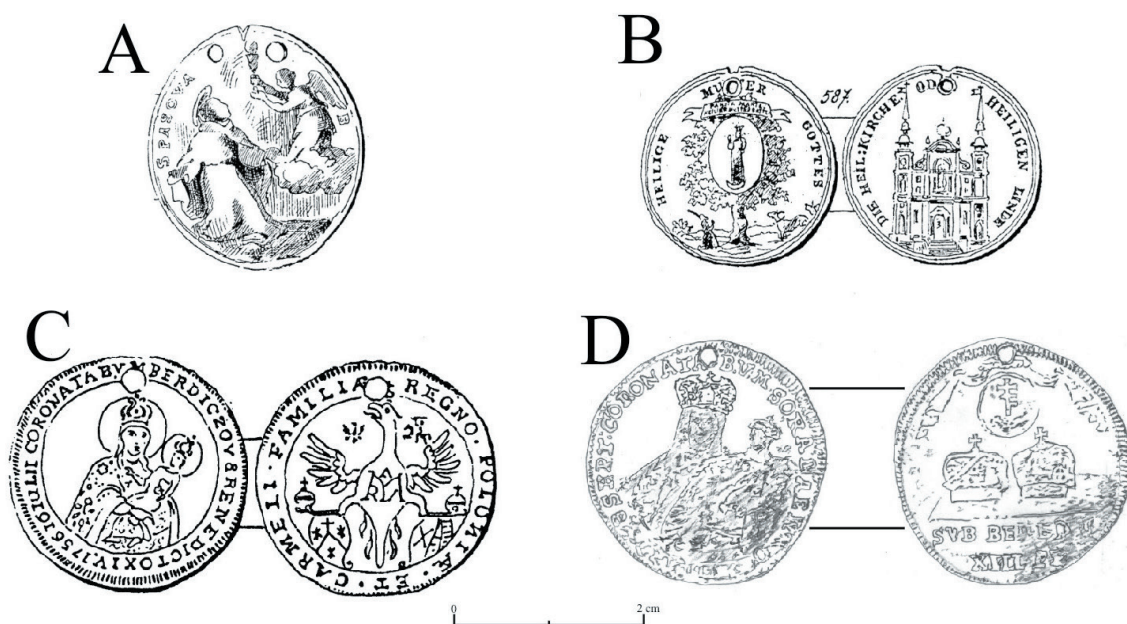


Fig. 3. Examples of medals with secondary holes.

A, B, C – medals from the collection of T. Rewoliński (after Rewoliński 1887, no 7, 587, 1007); D – a medal from Dubno church excavation (drawn by J. Michalik, after Niedźwiadek *et al.* 2015, fig. 81: A–B).



Fig. 4. The medal of St. Benedict from the exhibition “Sztum i Ziemia Sztumska” in Sztum (photo by J. Michalik).

S[alvator]. V[ade] R[etro] S[atana]! N[on] S[aude] M[ihi]! V[ana] S[unt] M[ala] Q[uac] L[ibas]. I[pse] V[enena] B[ibas]! [Jesus is the savior of humanity. Get you behind me, Satan! Never tempt me with your vanities! What you pour me is evil. Drink the poison yourself!] (Białobłocki 1992, 181). The medal edge is decorated with an ornament of small pearls. The figure of St Benedict figure on the reverse has been considerably worn and eroded, although his long folded habit and his crozier are visible. The reverse rim is also decorated with pearls.

The first images of St. Benedict date back to the early Middle Ages (the fresco from the eighth-century Basilica of St. Ermete in Rome) (Wiewióra 1995, 436). From the 16th century, Italians took to presenting the Saint as a middle aged man with a beard and grey hair, although in regions north of the Alps this image appeared as late as the Baroque period (Seibert 2007, 47). His cult was characterized by devotional objects presenting St. Benedict's prayer on the obverse and the Saint's image on the reverse, and they appeared in the 17th century in various forms – oval, octagonal or knight's crosses (Chudzińska 1998, 30–31). Special powers were attributed to St. Benedict medals, as they were believed to protect the wearer from diseases, the devil and temptations (Sczaniecki 1976, 229). An analogous medal was excavated in material from the site in the village of Maniowy in Podhale (Chudzińska 1998, tab. I), among finds from Lubiń near Kościan (Białobłocki 1992, fig. 3), and Chojnice (Kołyško 2008). Medals of St. Benedict were also found in St. Jo-

seph's Church in Pułtusk during clearing work in the Wessl Chapel (Kołyško 2007, 68), and in Trzemeszno, while exploring the monastery complex (Wiewióra 1995, 433).

Another medal worthy of our attention here due to its secondary perforation is a medal of St. Calasanz (Fig. 5). Joseph Calasanz was born in 1557 in Peralta de Calasanz in Aragon (Spain), and he is regarded as a founder of the Piarist Order. He is also the creator of the first free elementary school and a patron of Christian primary schooling. He died on 25 August 1648 in Rome. Joseph Calasanz was beatified in 1748 by Pope Benedict XIV, and canonized in 1767 by Pope Clement XIII (Duchmewski 2000). After his beatification his portrait frequently adorned medals and his name was popular with the Piarist fathers. When he joined the Order, Antoni Karwowski called himself Joachim of St Joseph Calasanz (Dudziński *et al.* 2017, 45). The medal was found during the course of excavations in Gniew in 2012, in the burial located in the southern part of the nave. Its diameter is 22 mm, and the preserved eye fragment is smaller than two millimetres. The obverse presents St. Joseph Calasanz, surrounded by the inscription [S.] [IOSEPH]VS A MATRE D[E]I, which means 'Joseph of the Mother of God', which is one of his names.

Images of St. Joseph Calasanz appear usually in monastic houses and Piarist monasteries. The Saint is presented there as an elderly bearded man in a black cassock and a biretta, sometimes with a lily. Some images add a clerical galero hat and a mitre lying at his



Fig. 5. The medal with St. Joseph Calasanz (photo by J. Michalik).

feet, as a symbol of his rejection ecclesiastical honours (Jacniacka 2000). The reverse has the letters M A, and underneath the letters M P Θ Y (Mary's name in Latin and the Greek abbreviation for *Meter Theou*), which together and a circular disk surrounded by rays create the arms *Ordo Clericorum Regularium Pauperum Matris Dei Scholarum Piarum* [The Order of Poor Clerics Regular of Our Lady of the Pious Schools]. The medal was cast from a copper alloy and the eye remains suggest that the hole was placed perpendicular to the medal surface. After mechanical damage probably caused by its long use, a secondary hole was made on its surface and the remains of the eye were filed. The Saint's face was not damaged by moving the hole slightly to the left and into an empty space there. On the reverse side, however, the decoration was disturbed, as it covered all of the surface.

Medals of St. Joseph Calasanz occur rarely in archaeological material. Even excavations in the Piarists crypt in the Church of The Name of the Most Holy Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn did not uncover a single item of that type (Dudziński *et al.* 2017, 11). As *terminus post quem* date for the making of such medals is 1767, when St. Joseph Calasanz was canonized.

A medal from the excavations at Dubno Church (present-day Ukraine) also has signs of secondary perforation (Fig 3: D). It is a crown medal, made specially to commemorate the coronation of a miraculous picture. The Dubno medal presents Mary, Mother of Consolation (Our Lady of Sokal), which is simultaneously one of rarer images of the picture, which was destroyed many times (Niedźwiadek *et al.* 2015,

107). The coronation of this image was conducted by Archbishop Jan Skarbek on 8 September 1724, with the approval of Pope Innocent XIII (Niedźwiadek *et al.* 2015, 107). Due to the importance of this event, the medal's owner, who may even have been a participant in the coronation ceremony, seems to have wished to keep using the medal, despite its being considerably damaged.

An attempt at interpretation

Since the existence of medals with secondary perforations is an established fact, we should consider the intentions of the people who restored them to their original functions. The first is common for all recycling activity: we retrieve an object as it still has material value or its component parts (raw material) are valuable. We repair cars and telephones but recycle drink cans. The situation with medals is similar since they are made of metal (silver, alloys with copper admixture, brass), which have a more or less material value.

Moreover, medals are rather expensive items, considering their material costs and artistic value (sometimes they are small masterpieces). They were valuable when bought, and still valuable even with small defects – most frequently eye damage. The further we go back into the past, the more justified this opinion becomes. Today, commodity mass production is cheap, but when technological and economic conditions were different, the value of products such

as devotional objects was different, close to that of modern jewellery.

We may also assert that accessibility to these products may have been limited as well. They were only on the market in certain places, such as pilgrimage centres – Gietrzwałd in present-day Poland or Loreto in Italy, so repairing an old medal may well have been the only way of having one.

Another type of motivation discussed here is more indefinable – namely spiritual motivation. It is obvious that we are attached to devotional objects in a particular way and they are external demonstrations of our faith and spiritual concerns. Due to such special affection, we often find rosaries in Catholic burials. In the past, depositing devotional objects with the dead was a result of “pompa funebris” which developed in the Baroque, leading to sumptuous burial ceremonies, in contrast with earlier, poor funerals (Kołyško 2013, 11–12). Despite the paucity of extant textual sources (Fischer 1921, 167–168; Chudzińska 2008, 287) describing the kinds of equipment to be deposited in the coffins of the deceased, we know of such cases from numerous excavation sites.

Taking all these facts into account, it is easy to state why today, in our opinion, we rarely come across medals with a secondary hole. Motivations for such practices weakened because medals became relatively cheap and societies wealthier. We do not pay our particular attention to spiritual values, the *sacrum* of the Church has weakened, and people have become “disenchanted” in some way, particularly in the face of present social-ideological changes. The tradition of repairing medals no longer serves a function.

Summary – old practices, modern ideas

The practice of secondary medal perforations described and briefly interpreted here belong to the past – we do not do it any longer, and archaeological sites of more recent periods do not deliver such finds. Research conducted in the area of the former St. Martin's Cemetery in Poznań, coming from the 19th century and the 1920s, has not revealed any medals with repairs (the authors own studies). As we have shown, conducting repairs meant that damaged medals were not treated as waste, and hence we see historical recycling here, albeit somewhat different from modern practice, and with an absolutely different spiritual attitude. However, the motivation remains the same – it was an attempt to save an object from being thrown away and abandoned.

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