

Seals from Glastonbury.

John Cherry

This note considers three nineteenth-century seal casts, two papal bullas, a copper alloy seals and an object whose sigillographic use, if any, is uncertain.

Three seal casts, reputedly from the excavations at Glastonbury, were examined. The original seals from which two casts were taken were identified and the third remains unknown. Since all three casts were probably made in the nineteenth century, it is unlikely that they were from the excavations.

Wax seals have however been found in excavations. The most interesting example is the wax seal of the hospital of Santo Spirito in Rome which was found during excavations at Hulton Abbey, Staffordshire. The most likely explanation of its occurrence here is that the seal had been attached to an indulgence gained on a pilgrimage. 1.

The three objects considered here are not wax seals but are casts of seals in a plaster or sulphide. Such casts were made in order to record the appearance of wax seals and were widely collected in the nineteenth century.

The three casts are :

1. GLSGA :1991/61/3. Figs 1.

Two objects were submitted.

The first is a white plaster mould, (diameter 72mm), coloured red in the centre of obverse. On the reverse has been scratched 'h 36' and in painted in black paint 'M133'. The legend reads + SIGILLUM : COMMUNITATIS : LENNIE. It is apparent that the scroll held by the eagle has writing on it but this cannot be read.

The second is a cast in hard shellac (Fig 2). (diameter 77mm) This has traces of a whitish material possibly gum on the reverse. On the back are two numbers painted in black paint. The older is number '36' and the more recent 'M133' with M19 scored through four times. This impression has at some time been broken into four pieces. Three were saved and have been stuck together. The fourth was presumably lost and the impression now lacks the outer part of the beginning of the inscription.

The design on the obverse of the cast shows within an eight-lobed rosette, with trefoils in the cusps, a haloed eagle looking back over its right wing, and grasping with both claws, a scroll. The legend on the scroll cannot be read. Part of the inscription is missing on the cast. The legend around the edge is difficult to read but the letters SIGILL...TIS LENN can clearly be made out. The design and enough of the inscription survives to be certain that it is a mould showing the obverse of the town seal of Kings Lynn. It may have been taken from the matrix, a surviving seal

impression or a cast of this seal. The difference in size suggests that it is unlikely to have been taken from the mould above.

This town seal of Kings Lynn, whose matrix still survives in King's Lynn, is in two parts – the obverse with the eagle and the reverse with St Margaret amidst an architectural framework. It was described by Gale Pedrick as 'one of the finest creations of its kind'. 2.

He assigns it to the thirteenth century, and the commonly accepted date is 1220 and 1240. Since it was admired so much, there were many impressions taken from it. The most recent publication of the Kings Lynn seal was by Virginia Glenn who, in 1999, illustrated a modern cast from the matrix. 3

It is unlikely that the mould in Glastonbury was taken from the obverse of the matrix, since surviving impressions from the matrix, for instance, in the Society of Antiquaries Library are much sharper.

Impressions of the seal exist. For instance the British Library has a green wax seal cut from a charter. 4. The British Library also has a sulphur cast from the matrix, on the back of which are the letters and number NF 118 applied by a brush. 5. There is also one described as 'Red covered with paper before impression : very imperfect'. This seems to be the closest to the Glastonbury cast. 6. Casting in sulphur was used for casting gems in the 18th century and later the inscription on the Rosetta stone. The success of this may have provided an example for the development of casting seals. 7

2. GLSGA 2006/44. Previously numbered M18. Height 91mm Width 64mm.
Figs 3 obverse and 4 reverse.

A sulphur cast, scratched on the back with the number 832 underlined. On the back (Fig 4) is stuck a paper label with angled corners on which is written in ink in a sloping copper plate hand 'Medal found in St Joseph's Chapel Glastonbury 34'. On the paper above is written in ink M18 crossed through three times and M474.

The handwriting suggests that 34 refers to 1834. St Joseph's chapel is an alternative name for St Mary's chapel.

The oval seal cast shows on the obverse (Fig 4) a King seated on a throne with curved foot board crowned holding a sceptre in right hand and orb in left. The legend reads SIGILLUM SANCTI EAD..... GIS....IRIS

The legend clearly identifies this as the twelfth-century seal of the Benedictine Abbey of Bury St Edmunds. If this was a cast taken from the matrix, it would have shown the inscription entire. Since part of the inscription was missing before the cast was made, it is clearly from a wax seal once attached to a document. The Glastonbury example is

coloured green and has been cracked and repaired at the top. An exactly similar sulphur cast with exactly the same gap in the inscription exists in the British Library. This is painted on the back with a brush SF5 in black. The cast was acquired by the British Library in the nineteenth century. This version of the cast was engraved in 1805. 8

There is also a cast in the Society of Antiquaries (SAL seal drawer B3) (Fig. 5) with exactly the same parts of the inscription missing and therefore taken from the same wax seal. This sulphur cast is coloured light olive green. There is another cast in the Society of Antiquaries (SAL seal drawer B3) from Caius 4 (Fig 6) from a different wax seal which shows tag at top and right side missing. This is presumably taken from the Archives of Caius College, Cambridge.

Bury St Edmunds was among the earliest of the monastic houses to use a seal. The early history of seals of monastic houses has been traced by T. A. Heslop. 9.

The third seal cast is

3. GLSGA : 2006/45. Previously M19. Figs 7.

Sulphur cast with M19 and M475 written in ink on back. The sulphur is coloured red on the obverse, and the back show the characteristic holes of a sulphur cast.

Oval cast in two pieces the upper (height 42mm width 36mm) and the lower (height 22mm width 29mm). In the centre a standing figure, with a flat head or a headdress with long flaps, holding a long staff in his right hand which ends at neck height in a cup? His left hand holds a rectangular object in front of him from which hangs a rectangular bag with raised decoration on it. His feet are missing. The inscription on the right reads ...GILL' ECCLES... and on the left ...SI. DE S' IACUS REALE.

It is clearly the seal of a church with a figure of the patron saint with a praying figure beneath. If the raised decoration on the bag was a shell, it is likely that the figure was St James. This would accord with the reading IAC'US. St James of Compostella is the most likely candidate and so the cast is likely to be from a church dedicated to him at an uncertain place, possibly Reale. Seals with the iconography of St James have been described by John Cherry and a number were published in the Catalogue *Santiago* 10

If Reale is correctly read, then there are two places in France that might have used these four letters as the beginning of their Latin names. One is Réamur in the Vendée and the other is Réallon in the Hautes Alpes. 11. The lower part may be from the same seal, and it appears that the end of the staff is on the lower fragment. If so, there is a substantial part missing. The bottom part has a praying figure under a trefoil arch. The inscription reads ... I TRONI S' NINO.... If the two parts do belong together, (and if they do, a portion is missing), the total legend would have read ...GILL' ECCLES... I TRONI S' NINO...I. DE S' IACUS REALE.

The original seal from which the cast was taken probably dates from the early fourteenth century, but this is more likely to be a nineteenth-century cast which has been broken.

Two Papal bullae.

Papal bullae are lead seals attached to authenticate Papal documents and letters, which are called bulls. They are often found on church and monastic sites. Roberta Gilchrist and Barney Sloane listed 19 papal bullae from monastic cemeteries, and suggested that the presence of such bullae in graves may have reflected entire papal documents, to which such seals were attached and which were then buried with the dead. 12

The second from Glastonbury came from the area of the monks' graveyard. Of the nineteen listed by them none is earlier than 1316 to 1334 or after 1431. Both the Glastonbury examples fall outside that range. I am grateful to Tim Pestell for giving me the opportunity to read his unpublished paper on 'Some observations on the use and occurrence of Medieval Papal Bullae'.

- 1) Leaden bulla of Pope Honorius III (1216-1227).
- 2) Bulla of Callistus III 1455-58. Found in 1911 during removal of earth that had accumulated over the area of the monk's graveyard immediately west of the cloister garth. Length 37mm, width 33mm. The inscription reads CALIS/ TUS PP/ III. 13

For other Callistus III bulls see 'Bull of Calistus III to Culgaith', Cumberland and Westmorland Transactions New Series XLV 1946, 193 (bull dated 5th May 1456, now in Tullie House Museum).

A copper-alloy seal (B96)

- 2) Copper-alloy seal. Pointed oval shape. The legend reads CREDEI MICHI. The device in the centre is a bird perched on a tree. It was discovered during excavations on the site of the Abbot's lodging in 1938. Length 29mm, width 19mm. 14

The seal probably dates to the thirteenth century. The legend is quite common and was probably often used for sealing letters. Crede Michi was categorised by A. B. Tonnochy as relating to love or friendship, and it was clearly widely used. Sometimes it occurs with the device of a bird (cat. no. 711 and 713), a cinquefoil (cat. no. 712) or a veiled bust (T714). 15. The inscription Crede Michi was used by people of standing such as John FitzMarmaduke, (died 1312) who sealed the Barons' Letter to the Pope in 1301. 16. The inscription was also used by William Ridell in 1337 on a seal with a nondescript beast like a stag. 17. Harvey and MacGuinness record other uses of Crede Michi. 18. A number of examples of seals with birds and mottoes of belief were catalogued by Richard Linenthal and William Noel. 19. They seem to show a clear association between the depiction of the bird and the inscription Crede Michi in various forms, though none exactly parallel the Glastonbury example. There is also a pen and ink drawing and wax impression of a seal in red wax (A470).

A possible seal from Glastonbury (B98)

This object of uncertain purpose is in the form of a hollow cube. On the base there is the letters IC surrounded by beading. And on the four sides there are the letters I H S, a heart, a scroll, and the head of Christ. The nature of these devices and the style of their depiction suggests a date in the first half of the 16th century. It is unlikely to be a reliquary, as has been suggested. The hollow interior suggests that something was affixed into it. This may have been of wood and it may have been an early form of desk seal with a wooden handle. Alternatively it may have been the base of a pointer. The letters IC perhaps refer to the owner of the seal, who would have impressed his initials on wax seals for letters or other documents. If it is a seal matrix, the form is difficult to parallel. 15mm long, 15mm wide. A list of objects in the Glastonbury Museum suggests that it was found in 1938.

Bibliography

Birch, Walter de Gray 1887. *Catalogue of Seals in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum, Vol 1*. London

Bligh Bond, F., 1914. 'Glastonbury Abbey : Seventh Report', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 1914, (LX) part ii, 41-45

Cherry, John, 2007. 'The depiction of St James Compostela on seals' in Sarah Blick, ed. *Beyond Pilgrim Signs and souvenirs : essays in memory of Brian Spencer*, Oxford

Douglas, D. C. 1932. *Feudal documents from the abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, London

Gilchrist, Roberta, and Sloane, Barney, 2005. *Requiem : The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britain*. London

Glenn, Virginia, 1999. 'Thirteenth- century seals – Tayside, Fife and the wider world', *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal*, 5, 146-162

Graesse, J. G. T., 1971. *Orbis Latinus*, Braunschweig

Harvey, P. D. A., and McGuinness, A, 1996. *A guide to British Medieval seals*, London

Heslop, T. A., 1978. 'The Romanesque seal of Worcester Cathedral', *BAA Transactions for 1975* (1978), 71-79

Hunter Blair, C. 1913. 'Durham seals' in *Archaeologia Aeliana* 3rd series, vol. 9

Klemperer, W. D. and Boothroyd, N., 2004. *Excavations at Hulton Abbey, Staffordshire 1987-94, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 21*

Linenthal, Richard, and Noel, William, 2004. *Medieval seal matrices in the Schøyen collection*, Oslo

Pedrick, Gale, 1904. *Borough seals of the Gothic period*. London

Peers, Sir Charles, Clapham, A. W. and the Rev. Prior Horne, 1939. 'Glastonbury Abbey Excavations 1938', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, LXXXIV, part ii, 135

Pestell, Tim. Unpublished paper on 'Some observations on the use and occurrence of Medieval Papal Bullae'

Santiago de Compostella : 1000 Ans de Pèlerinage Européen 1985. Exhibition catalogue, Europalia 85, Gant

Solé, R., Valbelle D. and Davies, W.V. 2006. *The Rosetta Stone*, The Folio Society, London

Tonnochy, A. B., 1954. *Catalogue of British Seal- Dies in the British Museum*. London

VCH Suffolk, 2, 72

Yates, Richard, 1805. *History of Bury St Edmunds*, London