

A WITCH-BOTTLE FROM DUKES PLACE, ALDGATE

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A stoneware jug of a type commonly known as a 'Bellarmine',¹ found on a site excavated by the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London, may be further evidence of the use of such vessels in charms against witchcraft in the second half of the 17th century.² During the cutting of a trench for a subway at Dukes Place, E.C.3, a whole stoneware jug was noticed in a section, seconds before being smashed by an earthmoving machine.³ The lower part of the jug survived intact and in the bottom there were nearly three dozen badly corroded copper alloy pins (Pl. 1). The jug was found in an upright position and may have been deliberately buried since it apparently lay at the bottom of a narrow pit, which was cut through deposits thought to be the fills of the early medieval city ditch.⁴ Unfortunately, the section collapsed before the pit could be recorded in detail or examined for other finds. The jug dates to the third quarter of the 17th century and was found in an area which at this period was haphazardly occupied by houses facing Houndsditch with gardens or yards between them and the city wall.⁵ Since the 17th-century levels did not survive it was not possible to determine the exact relationship of the pit containing the jug to these properties.

Merrifield has described five Bellarmine jugs from London which are considered to be witch-bottles;⁶ four contained pins and, variously, nails, nail parings, human hair and cloth hearts. All date to the second half of the 17th century and come from areas on the outskirts of the City of London, and in each case the jugs were apparently deliberately concealed (for example, in the Thames or its foreshore, a stream or its bank and in open country). The activities of so-called witches attracted a great deal of attention during the latter part of the 17th century⁷ and this may account for the number of 'white magic' charms against witchcraft dating to this period. Such charms were thought to transfer a spell from the victim back to the witch, accomplished by 'injuring' a representation of the witch. As Merrifield points out, the anthropomorphic Bellarmine jugs (Pl. 2) may have been used to represent the witch, while the pins or nails symbolised pain.⁸ It was also quite common for the victim's urine to accompany the pins or nails in the bottle, which was then carefully concealed. It was believed that by means of sympathetic magic—the link already established between the witch and victim—this particular charm would prevent the witch passing water, causing acute pain until the spell was lifted. It has been suggested that since urinary complaints were common in the 17th and 18th centuries some sufferers may have believed themselves to be the victims of witchcraft⁹—hence the use of urine in the charm.

The Bellarmine jug found at Dukes Place in many respects resembles the witch-bottles from London; its use as a container for pins, its apparently careful burial and its date suggest that it may have been used by a person believing themselves to be bewitched in order to counter the spell.¹⁰

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. M. R. Holmes 'The So-called "Bellarmine" Mask on Imported Rhenish Stoneware' *Antiq. J.* 31 (1951) 173–179.
2. Ralph Merrifield 'The Use of Bellarmine as Witch-Bottles' *Guildhall Miscellany* 3 (1953) 3–15.
3. Seen and rescued by P. Marsden and J. Maloney whilst visiting the site.
4. John Maloney and Charlotte Harding 'Dukes Place and Houndsditch: The Medieval Defences' *London Archaeol.* 3 No. 13 (1979) 347–354.
5. As shown on Faithorne and Newcourt's map of 1658 and Ogilvy and Morgan's map of 1676.
6. Merrifield *op. cit.* in note 2.
7. G. N. Clark *The Later Stuarts 1660–1714* (Oxford 1940) 401–2.
8. Merrifield *op. cit.* in note 2.
9. M. J. Becker 'An American Witch Bottle' *Archaeology* 33 No. 2 (1980) 20.
10. A small stoneware jug recently discovered on the site of Plaisterer's Hall, Noble Street, was also found in the vicinity of the city ditch. Its exact find spot is not recorded but this site is located over an area known to have been occupied by the medieval ditch. The jug though not a 'Bellarmine' is an import from Fretchen and is only some 11cm in height. However, it contained nine pins all of which had been carefully bent twice. It dates to the early–mid 17th century—somewhat earlier than the other witch-bottles—but may of course have been in circulation some time before its eventual deposition (Museum of London Accession No. 25437). I am grateful to Mr. Ralph Merrifield for drawing this to my attention.