

# A Pilgrim's Badge With Saints Peter and Paul

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The *Pilgrim's Badge* was a product of a monopolized business run by the remaining people in Rome during the fourteenth century. These badges were typically made out of lead and were around two inches by two inches, with loops that made it easy to sew onto a cloak or hat. They were mass produced and sold to passing pilgrims who partook in the age-old journey to holy sites, which demonstrated that the wearer had completed the journey to Rome.<sup>1</sup> This particular badge has both Saint Peter and Saint Paul molded onto the facade with an inscription that says "Sign of the Apostles Peter and Paul." (See **Figure 1** for an image of the badge.) Badges varied with different figures gracing the front, but the most common ones had these saints on it due to their significance to Italy and Rome itself. After the pilgrim purchased the badge, a priest or someone of similar rank would bless it with holy water or by touching it to a relic. In either case, the badge would become holy and would protect the wearer for several years to come. The badge would then be sewn onto the pilgrim's cloak or hat and worn on the return trip. The *Pilgrim's Badge* was found in Torcello, Italy, which could mean either that the wearer lived around the area or died there on his way home. The badge was also split in half and is missing the lower right hand corner, which only adds to the mystery of its fate. The artist behind this particular badge is unknown but it was most likely commissioned by the Catholic Church in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Bell and Richard Dale, "The Medieval Pilgrimage Business," *Enterprise and Society* 12, no. 3 (September 2011), 621.



**Figure 1** *Pilgrim's Badge of Saints Peter and Paul, 13th -14th Century. Lead brooch, 1 5/16 x 1 9/16 in. British Museum, London.*

Pilgrimages in general, served plenty of purposes, but were mainly a typical remedy to the fear of eternal damnation in the middle ages. Some sites such as Canterbury and Santiago de Compostela were great spots to pilgrimage to for the Northern Europeans, but Rome was still the hotspot for Christian tourism in Europe. People all around Europe decided to travel to Rome and purchase a badge so that they could be the most pious in their town, but also gain eternal salvation. In particular, August was deemed by William of Ventura and various other famous pilgrims the most holy and the most attractive month in which to travel to Rome.<sup>2</sup> This implies that the pilgrims would have to start their journey early in the year; about three to four months before arriving in order to account for travel lag, or leave in August and spend the winter in Rome.<sup>3</sup> In the summer months, the excruciating heat and moisture would have created a cesspool of disease for the pilgrims as well as those who surrounded them. This was true for malaria as

<sup>2</sup> Debra J. Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 192.

<sup>3</sup> Birch, *Pilgrimage*, 190.

well as the Bubonic Plague, all which thrived in that hot Italian environment. The winter months were easier to handle, but the plague arrived in Italy in December of 1347 and was able to spread with the pilgrims who were on their way home. The plague was so bad at one point that Pope Clement VI almost called off the Jubilee of 1350, but figured the money raised was more important than the lives at stake and continued the celebration.

These badges, as well as other souvenirs, allowed Rome and the surrounding area to have a stable economy. With the Church's monopoly on the production and sale of the badges, as well as other religious products (i.e. indulgences and prayer books), all of the money stayed within reach. Before the 1300s, the leader behind Rome's economy was the pope, but, when he and his papal curia left, the only driving force behind the economy were the pilgrims. This happened earlier in the fourteenth century, during the Great Schism, when the papacy moved to Avignon due to some complications involving popularity in Italy versus France. In other words, after the death of Pope Boniface VIII, the papacy feared the power of French royalty and decided to move. The new pope was French and had a great amount of support from France once he had taken up shop in that area. This fact alone left Rome in shambles with a small population and very little appeal. The people who remained in Rome worked for the pilgrims and sold these badges, as well as lodging and food.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the original draw that Rome had diminished some because there were no real authorities that remained. Instead, petty priests and lower men of the cloth performed the duties ordained by the Church for the pilgrims. Although Rome and the surrounding area had a depleting economy, the pilgrims kept it alive. These Christians traveled to the seven major basilicas in Rome, which held the most holy shrines and relics in the area. The basilicas formed a route that weaved in and out of the city walls in order to imitate the

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Byrnes, *Encyclopedia of the Black Death* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 273.

routes to Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Thus, despite the countless relics and basilicas in Rome's possession, it still sought to imitate the grandeur of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land in order to gain economic stability.

The typical travel time to Rome from the outreaches of Europe, such as England or Spain, was around three to five months, depending on the pilgrim's choice of transportation. Most could only afford walking and they saved their money for badges and other souvenirs upon arrival in Rome. Along the roads, many dangers threatened the pilgrims, ranging from bandits and disease.<sup>6</sup> Technically, the badge was supposed to protect the wearer on the return trip, but that meant that these people were in grave danger on the way to Rome. When they arrived in Italy, they traveled alongside the ocean, either through Florence or straight through Siena, until they reached Rome. Before the plague, this route would not have had as many dangerous implications, but the most infected places were in this area along the coast. Upon arrival, the pilgrims would travel to each of the seven basilicas and purchase a variety of objects according to the stop. They needed medical care, clothing, food, lodging and other things they may have lost on the way.<sup>7</sup> After they purchased everything on their list as well as the badge, they would travel back home feeling less anxious about their salvation. Some pilgrims never made it home, but those that did were respected amongst their peers for taking the grandiose journey for salvation. In comparison to the modern age, these pilgrims would be similar to the tourists buying flags and other cultural memorabilia.

Badges represented a lot more than just salvation in the 14th century, as they often brought the plague with them. However, these pilgrims did not stop traveling to Rome after the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Debra J. Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Adrian Bell and Richard Dale, "The Medieval Pilgrimage Business," *Enterprise and Society* 12, no. 3 (September 2011), 621.

plague, even if they had seen death or had experienced a close call themselves. Almost every rush of pilgrims carried the plague with them, especially in 1400 and later. Despite these constant onsets of death and disease that the pilgrims brought, they still arrived all year long and from anywhere in Europe. With the addition of new basilicas and other holy sites, Rome expanded for these crusaders. Only when the papacy returned to Rome, did the city truly burst with pilgrims and prestige. However, this particular advancement came with the awful onslaught of more and more disease, especially when the population of Rome increased. Scholars today believe that groups of pilgrims were one of the ways that the plague spread to nearby cities.<sup>8</sup> Badges were still being produced after the first wave of the Bubonic Plague, and sold to any pilgrim who wanted proof of his journey, but he would bring back more than just a lead brooch. Despite the dangers of the road and the plague that was no stranger to the Europeans, pilgrims walked proudly along the pilgrimage route to get to Rome in order to save their souls.

In essence, this *Pilgrim's Badge* represents more than just a holy relic. The lead faces of Saint Peter and Paul help protect the wearer as well as provide a good excuse for respect upon return. The pilgrim sewed the badge onto their cloak with pride and wore it about town with the implication that they were the most pious and had a lovely seat awaiting them in heaven. However, this badge did not only bring hope, it also brought the promise of a deadly disease. Pilgrims were known for spreading the Bubonic Plague throughout the fourteenth century, and they continued to travel in the sweltering heat to get to the holy sites. Some would die and others would carry the disease home, and in the end their badges had more blood on them than they had holy water. Rome needed these pilgrims for economic help, but essentially, Europe could have done better without a severe spread of their most devastating disease.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph P. Byrnes, *Encyclopedia of the Black Death* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 273.

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