

# Strange Creatures AND MIXED MESSAGES...

Mary Deevy, project archaeologist with Meath County Council National Roads Design Office, describes a 13th-century ring brooch from a medieval house excavated at Boyerstown, on the route of the M3.



Fig. 1  
Close-up of the inscription on the front of the Boyerstown brooch. (ACS Ltd)

Strange writing and stranger creatures inhabit a beautiful silver object found recently at Boyerstown, west of Navan, Co. Meath. The object is a medieval ring brooch dating to about the 13th century. Ring brooches, which were used to fasten clothing, were worn by both men and women throughout medieval Europe. They were worn by people at all levels in society and varied accordingly in the nature of the material from which they were made—ranging from precious metals and gems to cheap, relatively mass-produced copies in bronze or pewter. The brooch is typically tiny, just 30 mm in diameter, but close inspection reveals the nature of the markings on the front and back.

The inscription on the front of the brooch (Fig. 1) is in Latin: IESVS NAZARENVS REX I. This is a shortened version of the titulus, that is the inscription placed above the head of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion: IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDÆORVM, which translates as 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. In the Middle Ages such inscriptions were not simply a reflection of religious devotion but were also believed to have amuletic properties. The use of the titulus was believed to be a defence against violent death or sudden harm and was very common on jewellery, including ring brooches, across Europe. The same inscription, this time abbreviated to IHCNRI, appears on another ring brooch from Ireland, also from County Meath, found at Trim.

The strange creatures appear on the reverse of the brooch. There are four creatures, each in its own separate panel (Fig. 3). Two of the creatures, occupying opposite panels, appear to be naturalistic depictions of birds. While such images may be purely decorative, it is also possible that they are symbolic and relate to the message relayed by the inscription. The long feathers and beaks of the birds suggest they could be pelicans (Fig. 2), and both appear to have a mark on their breasts. In the Middle Ages pelicans were thought to be particularly attentive to their young, even to the point of providing their own blood when no other food was available. Like many sea birds, pelicans feed their young by regurgitating fish caught at sea, but the extension of this to blood apparently may have arisen because these birds were susceptible to a disease that left a red mark on the breast. To the medieval viewer, however, the pelican's apparent sacrifice provided a symbolic link to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The use of this image in medieval art and literature is known as 'pelican in piety'. Perhaps it is stretching the interpretation a little, but traces of red enamel that originally filled the recesses between the raised decoration on the brooch might lend a further hint in favour of this interpretation.

Fig. 2  
Detail of pelican and red enamel on the reverse of the brooch. (ACS Ltd)

Fig. 3  
Strange creatures on  
the reverse of the  
brooch. (ACS Ltd)



At first glance the other two creatures appear birdlike, but markedly different in that they have stunted wings and a short tail—perhaps like juvenile birds, again apparently supporting the above interpretation. However, closer inspection reveals a shocking deformity. The ‘birds’ have human heads. One of the heads is clearly female, with medieval beaddress and hairstyle—coiled hair tied up at the sides (Fig. 4). The head of the opposing figure is less clear. The hairstyle looks typically male—short with curled ends—but the face is difficult to discern.

Creatures with female heads and the bodies of birds were known as sirens and have their origins in classical mythology. They had beautiful singing voices that had an extraordinary power to seduce and this was how they lured unfortunate sailors onto rocks, where they would be shipwrecked and die. Sirens appear in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Odysseus barely escapes their powers by plugging his ears with beeswax. A more common version of the siren is the mermaid with a female head and torso and the body and tail of a fish. Male sirens are a very unusual occurrence, but are not unknown in classical and medieval art. In the Middle Ages stories about sirens and mermaids became a vehicle for Christian religious and moral teachings: the siren was a symbol of temptation and deception, a warning to those who took delight in worldly pleasures, a path that would lead straight into the arms of the devil.

It is not immediately obvious how this symbolism fits with the religious or amuletic inscription on the front of the brooch. Unless, that is, it was a present from one lover to another, with a mixed message—on the one hand, calling on Christ to protect the wearer, on the other hand, a not so veiled warning to the wearer of the perils of infidelity.

The brooch was found during the early stages of excavation of a medieval house at Boyerstown, in advance of the M3 Cloncc–North of Kells motorway scheme. Once the excavation has been completed, excavation director Kevin Martin, Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, will hopefully be able to speculate further on the life of the owner of this ambiguous brooch.

Fig. 4  
Detail of seen on  
the reverse of the  
brooch. (ACS Ltd)

