

A Late Medieval reliquary pendant from Wragby, Lincolnshire

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The 15th Century was a time of upheaval in England as successive Yorkist and Lancastrian claimants to the throne manoeuvred both politically and eventually militarily to assert their dominance. At such a time, personal devotion was an important aspect of people's lives and integral to society's world view and sense of morality.

This small, lozenge shaped pendant, now missing its suspension loop, is an example of such an object of personal devotion from that turbulent time. Made from gilded silver, the pendant has a sliding front cover, inside which an object could be placed to keep it safe. The exterior of the pendant features incised designs of the face of Christ on the sliding cover, and the Agnus Dei (the Lamb of God) on the reverse. Both of these images were possibly originally enamelled. The pendant is paralleled by objects such as the wonderful Middleham jewel and is very similar to a recent find from Hockley in Essex, now in the collections of the British Museum and featuring the image of Saint Helena and bearing the names of the three Magi. Both of these parallels are in solid gold, however, and the Wragby pendant must have been seen as a lower value equivalent at the time.

The contents of such pendants are of course of extreme interest, and the hope that a piece of the true cross may be contained within is ever present as the cover is slid open for the first time in over 500 years. Unlike the Middleham jewel and the Hockley pendant, the Wragby pendant did contain objects, in the form of organic matter and two coins. The coins were corroded together, and are extremely worn and clipped. Identification of them has revealed that they are contemporary with the pendant. The first is tentatively identified as belonging to the second reign of Edward IV (1471-1483), the second as a York mint penny of Henry VI, issued in the late 1420s or early 1430s. The extremely worn condition of the coins suggests that they may not have been placed in the pendant until much later, though we can never reconstruct the intentions of the owner and the personal significance the coins may have had. Their inclusion in the pendant seems unlikely to have been simply a means of storing small change.

An amount of organic matter was also present inside the pendant, and this was examined by the British Museum's Department of Conservation and Scientific Research using scanning electron microscopy. Their research identified, amid the soil that had crept inside the pendant during its time in the ground, a rabbit hair, a human hair and a fragmented body or head louse. Whether these remains relate to the original wearer of the pendant remains unknown. The rabbit hair could represent a rabbit fur cloak, or just as easily have been introduced post deposition.

The pendant is therefore an unusual and important addition to the museum's late Medieval collections, and we would like to take this opportunity to thank the Friends of Lincoln Museums and Art Gallery for their generous support with this acquisition.



Fig 1: Pendant front and back



Fig 2: Pendant interior



Fig 3: Coin 1



Fig 4: Coin 2