

What can we discover about identity in medieval London from the tale of the bearded female saint?



Object in focus

Pilgrim badge, late 14th-early 15th century

What is it?

The Museum of London hosts a huge collection of medieval pilgrim badges, which were purchased by Christians at holy sites dedicated to God and the saints of the Christian Church. They were believed to protect the wearers from harm and to heal the sick.

These badges often depicted saints or other religious icons. Experts have recently identified the depiction on this late 14th – early 15th century badge as one of Christ. However, originally, it was thought to be a representation of the bearded female saint, Wilgefortis.

Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

The legend of St Wilgefortis seems to date to 14th century Portugal. She is said to have been a princess who converted to Christianity and took a vow of virginity. When her pagan father tried to force her to marry the King of Sicily, she prayed to God to save her, and, on the day of her wedding, she woke to find that God had blessed her with a fully grown beard. When the groom saw this, he called off the wedding, but Wilgefortis' father was so angry that he crucified her. Having been slain for her devotion to God, she became a martyr of the Christian faith.

Idols and statues cropped up across Europe of a person being crucified, wearing a dress and boasting a full beard. St Wilgefortis, who disrupted the idea of the gender binary, had become an iconic religious idol who was celebrated by the medieval Christian Church, rather than being the target of criticism.

St Wilgefortis was worshipped by unhappily married women, or those who did not wish to marry at all. It wasn't until the 16th century that the clergy tried to suppress her story and image.



Late 14th – early 15th century pilgrim badge depicting Christ

Today we might refer to London's LGBT+ community. It's important to remember this is modern terminology that would not have been used during the medieval period.

Further information

The Museum of London has an internationally important collection of medieval pilgrim souvenirs. Discover more on our website: collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/group/19998.html

Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Use your whiteboard to display an image of the pilgrim badge. Give students a couple of minutes to consider the following question on their own:

What words would you associate with this image?

Pilgrim badges were precious symbols of a holy journey. Pilgrims displayed them on their cloaks and hats to show pride in the connection they had to their Christian faith.

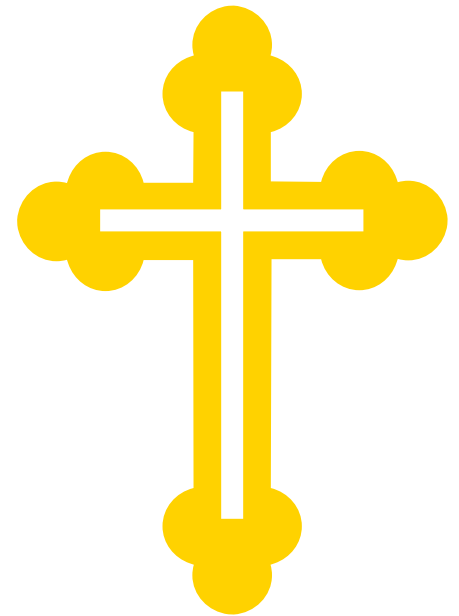
You could use this to introduce how St Wilgefortis – a person who breached strictly defined medieval gender binaries – was sometimes used as a precious symbol by medieval women who wished to challenge the norm by remaining unmarried.

Now ask students to choose an object, symbol or image which they believe represents their identity. There are lots of ways in which you could address this, for instance:

A group discussion

Students could draw the symbols/objects which relate to them

Make a display of objects brought in by the students. Each student could write a 'museum label' to accompany their object.



The Museum of London collection contains many medieval pilgrim badges, including this one depicting St Thomas Becket

We've created a suite of resources on London's LGBT+ History, just for you. Discover these and other resources for secondary schools on our website: museumoflondon.org.uk/schools/learning-resources