

# STRANGE CREATURES...

## and mixed messages?

Mary Deevy describes a thirteenth-century ring-brooch found recently during the excavation of a medieval house at Boyerstown, Co. Meath

**S**trange writing and stranger creatures inhabit a beautiful silver object recently found at Boyerstown, west of Navan, Co. Meath. The object is a medieval ring-brooch dating from about the thirteenth century. Ring-brooches were worn as clothes-fasteners by both men and women throughout medieval Europe. They were worn at all levels of 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, only 3cm in diameter, but close inspection reveals the nature of the markings on both the front and back.

The inscription on the front of the brooch is in Latin, IESVS NAZARENVS REX I, and is a shortened version of the titulus—the inscription placed above the head of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion—IESVS NAZARENUS REX IVDAEORVM, 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, throughout Europe. The same inscription but 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 of them, each in a separate panel. Two of the creatures, in opposite panels, appear to be naturalistically depicted birds. While such images may be purely decorative, it is also

possible that they are symbolic and relate to the message of the inscription.

The long feathers and long beaks of the birds may suggest that they are pelicans. 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 seabirds, pelicans feed their young by regurgitating fish caught at sea; the extension of this to the giving of blood may have arisen because the pelican used to suffer from a disease that left a red mark on its breast. The pelican’s apparent sacrifice (to the medieval viewer) thus 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’. Traces of red enamel that originally filled the recesses between the raised decoration on the brooch might further hint towards this interpretation.

At first glance the other two creatures appear bird-like, but different in that they have stunted wings and short tails—perhaps like juvenile birds, thus apparently supporting the above interpretation. Closer inspection, however, reveals a shocking deformity. The ‘birds’ have human heads. One of the heads is clearly female, with medieval headdress and hairstyle—coiled hair tied up at the sides. The head of the opposing figure is less clear. The hairstyle looks typically male—short with curled ends—but the face is less clear.

Creatures with female heads and the bodies of birds, known as sirens, originated in classical mythology. They had beautiful voices with an extraordinary power to seduce, and they lured sailors onto rocks where they would be shipwrecked and die.

They appear in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Odysseus barely escaped their powers by plugging his ears with wax. 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 very unusual but not unknown in classical and medieval art.

In the Middle Ages, stories of sirens and mermaids became a vehicle for Christian religious and moral teachings. The siren was a symbol of temptation and deception, and a warning that those who take delight in worldly pleasures will become prey to the devil.

It is not immediately obvious how this symbolism fits in with the religious or amuletic inscription on the brooch, unless perhaps it was a present, from one lover to another, with mixed messages—on the one hand calling on Christ to protect the wearer, and on the other giving 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 Clonee to North of Kells Motorway scheme. When excavation director Kevin Martin of ACS Ltd has finished excavating the house on behalf of Meath County Council, he may be able to speculate further on the life of the owner of the brooch. ■

Above right: The obverse of the Boyerstown ring-brooch.

Below right: The reverse of the Boyerstown ring-brooch.

