

# A New Reverse Legend for Rigold's Series I/C Groat-Sized 'Boy Bishop' Tokens

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## 1.1: Introduction, the celebration of St Nicholas in East Anglia

As observed by S. E. Rigold in 1978<sup>1</sup>, the series of 'Boy Bishop' type tokens are a phenomenon virtually exclusive to East Anglia<sup>2</sup>. Manufactured in lead-alloy and cast in large numbers, they are thought to have played a key role in the 'St Nicholas' Bishop' custom that lasted from St Nicholas' Day till the Feast of the Holy Innocents or 'Childermass' (6<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> December). Tradition holds that these pieces were produced centrally in Bury St Edmunds and subsequently distributed during processions by an elected 'Boy Bishop', perhaps as commemorative pieces or so that they could be exchanged for food and drink as part of Christmas festivities. Although initial observations focused on pieces produced in Bury itself, the subsequent discovery and publication of tokens naming the towns of Ipswich, Ely, Sudbury and even the village of Blaxhall<sup>3</sup> has revealed the presence of the ceremony in similar forms at least across a large portion of East Anglia. Certainly, this was a tradition which extended beyond the precincts of Bury Abbey and the confines of the town's walls.

## 1.2: Historical work on 'Boy Bishop' tokens, current classification

Encountered relatively frequently in Suffolk, Norfolk and East Cambridgeshire, the prevalence of such tokens has proliferated in recent years due to the advent of the metal detector. Despite their growing numbers, little formal work has been undertaken on these pieces since the publication of Rigold's seminal paper-in which he classified these tokens into eleven series. Despite being now over 40 years old, this classification has largely stood the test of time and represents the means by which new finds are attributed by the Finds Liaison Officers who work in the above areas. However, it is natural that in the intervening period some new variants and types have emerged, one of which is the subject of this short note.

## 1.3: Rigold's series I, chronology, reverse legends found on tokens belonging to this group, description of the two new variant pieces

One of the more common type of 'Boy Bishop' tokens consist those of Rigold's series I; the so-called 'Neat Bury Series'<sup>4</sup>. There are ten types encompassed within this group: types A-D consist of groat and half-groat sized pieces, while E-J are exclusively penny-sized. As these pieces demonstrate forked ends to the dividing cross on the reverse it is thought that the majority were issued at the very end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, seeing as in this respect they emulate the reverses of Henry VII facing-bust type groats issued from the mid 1480s onwards.

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<sup>1</sup> Rigold, S. E. 1978. The St Nicholas or 'Boy Bishop' Tokens. *Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* vol. 34, part II, pp. 87-101. Bury St Edmunds: SIAH

<sup>2</sup> Rigold 1978, p. 87

<sup>3</sup> See PAS record SF8981

<sup>4</sup> Rigold 1978, p. 93

As previously published in Rigold's work there are a number of reverse inscriptions known from the groat-sized pieces from Series I, which occur in various debased or abbreviated formats and indeed are variously combined with each other. It should be noted that these inscriptions originate from a diverse range of sources, including; the Book of Revelation, several antiphons sung variously in honour of Henry VI or as liturgical accompaniment to Advent, and the hagiography of St Nicholas in the *Legenda Aurea*.

ECCE NOVA FACIO OMNIA-*Behold, I make all things new.*

SANCTE NICHOLAE ORA PRO NOBIS-*Saint Nicholas, pray for us.*

AVE REX GENTIS ANGLORUM MILES REGES ANGELORUM-*Hail, King of the English, soldier of the King of Angels.*

SOSPITATI DEDIT EGROS-*He gave the sick unto security.*

VOS VOCASTIS ME, ECCE ADSUM-*You have called me, behold-here I am.*

The newly observed variant legend can be corresponded most closely within the broad context of types A-D, specifically as a variant of type C. At present, the author knows of two extant tokens in the public domain which correspond to this new typological entry, both described below.

1. Complete cast lead-alloy groat-sized 'Boy Bishop' token, reverse legend variant of Rigold's series I/C. Obverse: PIE.NICHOLAE.ORA.PRO.NOBIS, mitred head facing, flanked by letters 'S N'. Reverse: [VO]S VO/CASTI/S.M[E E/CCE AD]/ECCE/SACE/DOSM/[..]N[..], long cross fourchée quartering token, three pellets in each angle within inner pelleted border, legend in two concentric rings around. Diameter: 26.54mm. Weight: 5.7g. Found February 2017 near Little Abington, Cambridgeshire. PAS: SF-99EDB2. Image courtesy SCCAS/PAS.



2. Incomplete cast lead-alloy groat-sized 'Boy Bishop' token, reverse legend variant of Rigold's series I/C. Obverse: P[IE.N]ICHOLAE.ORA.PRO.NOBIS, mitred head facing, flanked by letters 'S N'. Reverse: VOS VO/CASTI/S.ME E/C[CE AD]//ECCE/SACE/DOSM/A[...]S, long cross fourchée quartering token, three pellets in each angle within inner pelleted border, legend in two concentric rings around. Diameter: 29.27mm. Weight: 5.01g. Found April 2017 near Rattlesden, Suffolk. PAS: SF-071B96. Image courtesy SCCAS/PAS.



#### 1.4: Discussion of the new reverse legend variant, full reading/translation and discussion of its origin

Whereas use of the external 'vos vocastis' formula is well attested in the corpus of existing tokens of series I/C<sup>5</sup>, it is the internal inscription which appears to be completely unparalleled in the corpus of tokens currently available for study and unpublished in any academic work. Usually, the latter is rendered simply as 'ave rex gentis', but here an entirely new inscription is visible. In virtually all other respects, the appearance and inscriptions on the 'normal' examples of I/C and these new pieces are practically identical (though evidently cast from a different set of moulds).

In the case of both tokens the fourth quarter of the internal reverse legend is either heavily worn or mostly missing, a factor that initially prevented full and coherent reading alongside the usual inaccurate spellings of Medieval Latin. However, perseverance duly paid off and it is now evident that the correct reading of the legend is as follows: ECCE SACEDOS (sic) MAGNUS. This seems a reasonable interpretation, given that on the second token the first letter of the fourth quarter is clearly an 'A' and the last a rather squashed 'S', while on the first token the third letter can be ascertained as a Lombardic 'N'. In summation, this inscription clearly represents a slightly corrupted form of ECCE SACERDOS MAGNUS (*Behold the*

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<sup>5</sup> Rigold 1978, p. 94

*great priest*), the title /opening phrase of an antiphon set within both the Liturgy of the Hours and the *Graduale Romanum*.

### **1.5: Conclusions, closing remarks**

The author considers it likely that although these tokens are apparently the only two of their type to have entered the public domain thus far (having scoured the Suffolk and Norfolk HER/PAS as well as Rigold's work) others may exist hitherto unrecognised in private collections. Any information and images of comparable pieces pertaining to this new variant type would be most gratefully received.

### **Abbreviations:**

**HER**-Historic Environment Record

**PAS**-Portable Antiquities Scheme

**SCCAS**-Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service