

# Lilies for Our Lady: a medieval graffito at St John's church, Bromsgrove

by Murray Andrews

The Grade I listed medieval church of St John the Baptist is Bromsgrove's oldest and finest standing building, and is a familiar sight to drivers used to the journey south of Birmingham via the M5. Established some time before the Norman Conquest, possibly as an Anglo-Saxon minster, the church is notable for its impressive Perpendicular clerestory and collection of medieval alabaster monuments, as well as its lofty Victorian spire – the tallest in all of Worcestershire.<sup>1</sup> Less famous, though no less interesting, is its small collection of historic graffiti, which can be found scattered across the exterior walls around the tower, buttresses, and south aisle.

Like many other medieval churches in the county, Bromsgrove's graffiti corpus is dominated by 'cross marks' and inscribed names and letters, including the ubiquitous 'VV' glyph commonly, though not uncontroversially, associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>2</sup> One of the more unusual specimens, however, can be seen on the south side of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century tower, and takes the form of a well-cut fleur-de-lis with a pointed central petal and two scrolled outer petals (Fig 1). Most of the lower half of this graffito is now missing, but traces of the cross-bar and stalk can still be seen flanking a patch of mortar positioned beneath the two outermost petals.



Fig 1: Fleur-de-lis graffito at St John's church, Bromsgrove. Photo by author.

The fleur-de-lis is one of the most distinctive artistic motifs of the European middle ages, and has featured on coins, seals, statues, and manuscript art since at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> To modern eyes, its most familiar use is as a heraldic charge, where the symbol has long been associated with the Capetian dynasty of medieval France and, during the Hundred Years War, with the English claim to the French throne.<sup>4</sup> While the fleur-de-lis was never a common element of the heraldry of medieval Worcestershire, it nonetheless appeared on the arms of some county landholders. The most notable of these are surely the Dukes of York, who held the manors of Bromsgrove and Ribbesford in the later 15<sup>th</sup> century, and whose late medieval heraldry employed a variant of the English royal arms quartered with the French fleur-de-lis.<sup>5</sup> It also featured as a motif on the arms of a small number of families connected to the Cantilupes, whose traditional arms bore three fleurs-de-lis, and whose Herefordshire branch employed three leopards *jessant-de-lis*, i.e. leopards with fleurs-de-lis issuing from their mouths.<sup>6</sup>

However, the most widespread use of the fleur-de-lis in the medieval period was not as a heraldic symbol, but rather as a religious symbol. During the first millennium the fleur-de-lis was primarily understood in Christological terms, reflecting a popular allegory of Christ as 'the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys' (Song of Songs 2:1). By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, the motif acquired distinctively Marian connotations, exemplifying her purity and virginity as 'the lily among thorns' (Song of Songs 2:2).<sup>7</sup> This iconographic association was often manifested in religious art, where the lily in its naturalistic and fleur-de-lis forms eventually became a saintly attribute. As such, depictions of the Blessed Virgin Mary on altarpieces and manuscript art frequently include a lily flower somewhere in the composition (Fig 2), a convention that is often observed in church art from Worcestershire. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century wall paintings at St Nicholas' church in Pinvin, for example, feature a scene of the Annunciation in which the Virgin and the archangel Gabriel stand either side of a lily-pot, and a similar depiction on a now-lost stained glass from the church of SS Peter and Paul, Birtsmorton, included a large lily in a yellow pot with a broken letter M behind it.<sup>8</sup> The same scene also appears on a 15<sup>th</sup>-century stained glass panel at St Margaret's church, Alstone, a former Worcestershire exclave, although the lily is shown there in the hands of the archangel instead. The iconographic links between the lily, the fleur-de-lis, and the Blessed Virgin Mary were not restricted to church art, and identical symbolism can be observed



Fig 2: The lily as a medieval Marian symbol: scene of the Annunciation by Willem Vrelant of Flanders (d. 1481), a pilgrim badge depicting the Annunciation, and an ampulla, possibly from Walsingham, bearing a Marian crown ('The Queen of Heaven') surmounted by a fleur-de-lis. Images © The Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC BY-SA 4.0, and public domain courtesy of the Getty Museum.

on more modest medieval religious artefacts like pilgrim badges and ampullae (Fig 2).<sup>9</sup>

Given this iconographic context, how best might we interpret the graffito from St John's church? Despite the tenorial connections between the Dukes of York and 15<sup>th</sup>-century Bromsgrove, a heraldic or armorial reading seems most unlikely: the fleur-de-lis is not enclosed by a shield, a *sine qua non* of medieval heraldic graffiti, and, as only a partial component of the Yorkist arms, a solitary fleur-de-lis scratched into a wall could hardly serve as an effective signifier or identity marker. Conversely, a religious interpretation seems entirely plausible, not least due to the graffito's position scratched into the wall of a 14<sup>th</sup>-century church tower. If the graffito was produced sometime in the two centuries before the Reformation, as seems likely on stylistic grounds, it might best be seen as an unofficial (and presumably unsanctioned) manifestation of devotion to the Virgin during the 'golden age' of the Marian cult, and would therefore provide an important and so-far unique addition to the corpus of medieval devotional graffiti from Worcestershire.<sup>10</sup>

## References

1. Brooks, A., and Pevsner, N., 2007 *The Buildings of England: Worcestershire*, New Haven, 191–4. The origins of St John's church are discussed in Bond, C.J., 1988 'Church and parish in Norman Worcestershire', in J. Blair (ed.) *Minsters and Parish Churches: the Local Church in Transition, 950–1200*, Oxford, 199–258, esp. 134; for a contrary view, see Dyer, C., 2000 *Bromsgrove: a small town in Worcestershire in the Middle Ages*, Worcester.

2. On cross marks, see Andrews, M., 2023 'Cult or contract? Cross mark graffiti in Worcestershire churches', *Worcestershire Recorder* 107, 8–10. The interpretation of 'VV' symbols is discussed in Champion, M., 2015 *Medieval Graffiti*, London, 55–6 and in Easton, T., 2016 'Apotropaic symbols and other measures for protecting buildings against misfortune', in R. Hutton (ed.) *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain. A Feeling for Magic*, Basingstoke, 39–67, esp. 40–4.

3. Pastoureau, M., 2004 *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen Âge occidental*, Paris, esp. 99–110.

4. Fox-Davies, A.C., 1969 *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, London, esp. 205–7.

5. Moger, O.M., and Hartland, E.M., 1913 'Bromsgrove', in W. Page and J.W. Willis-Bund (eds), *The Victoria History of the County of Worcester. Vol. 3*, London, 19–33, esp. 22–3.

6. For example, the Sodington family of Mamble: Grazebook, H.S., 1873 *The Heraldry of Worcestershire*, London, 529. The Cantilupe arms are featured on the 14<sup>th</sup>-century heraldic tile pavement at Bredon: Holland-Martin, R., 1932 'Medieval tiles in Worcestershire', *TWAS NS* 10, 33–42.

7. Pastoureau *op cit* fn 3, 101–2.

8. Rosewell, R., 2008 *Medieval Wall Paintings in English & Welsh Churches*, Woodbridge, 302; Green, M.A., 1934 'Old Painted Glass in Worcestershire. Part I', *TWAS NS* 11, 33–63, esp. 50–1.

9. See, for example, Spencer, B., 2010 *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London: 7. Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, Woodbridge, 135–59.

10. The vitality of the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary in pre-Reformation Bromsgrove is otherwise reflected by the maintenance of a light and altar to Our Lady in St John's church during the early 16<sup>th</sup> century: Kew, The National Archives, PROB 11/16/176.