Figure 2 A small penis plus testicles made of pewter that can be worn dangling from the wrist cuff. Photograph author’s own

stone and even on the edge of some seats in church. Great fun, when you know what you are looking for and if you consider that some Christian services lasted for 3 hours and people were obliged to attend. Perhaps these artisans were offering a humorous service too?

Symbols of desire

During the frustrating medieval days of ‘Courtly Love’ the man and woman were supposed to pine and wax lyrical, being able only to glance at those they desired without ever touching, except perhaps in a dance. This concept of pure knights and sighing damsels had cult status in England at one time in honour of the legend of King Arthur and also became fashionable in foreign courts such as in France. The result was a large quantity of art born out of pure frustration and no doubt given to those desired as a symbol of unrequited love. Many of these pieces tell passionate tales with black humour, such as the chest made in Berne in Switzerland showing a woman grating a man’s heart and another with a man covered in arrow quills as if martyred by a woman’s rejection of him.

What we can’t tell is if the artisans concerned were briefed in each case by the client or if they interpreted the passion and sexual desire of humanity. What is sure, however, is that these relics from the past tell brilliant and colourful tales of real lives: the lives of our ancestors in all their ribald glory.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their help and advice: Professor R Arnott, Director of the Centre for the History of Medicine, University of Birmingham Medical School, Birmingham and Dr G Williams, British Museum, London, UK.

Bibliography


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Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain. She holds an honorary degree for “services to history”. She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is also Curator of Tutbury Castle and is currently involved with a major research project with the British Museum, which is her excuse for why it is taking her so long to finish her PhD!