**Public access description**

Firearms became more and more sophisticated during the 16th-century, particularly after the development of the wheel-lock firing mechanism, a spring-loaded ignition system which allowed guns to be loaded and ready to fire before use. Despite this increased efficiency, a number of accessories were required to load and operate the firearms.

The main charge, placed in the barrel with the shot, was carried in a powder flask. Smaller flasks such as this example were priming flasks and contained fine-grain powder for priming the pans of wheel-lock firearms. The flask has four suspension rings for attaching to a bandolier, a type of sling worn over the shoulder or around the waist, from which hung the various accessories required for a weapon including spanners for the mechanism, measured charges, powder flasks and priming flasks.

This priming flask bears the arms of Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, Bishop of Wurzburg (born 1545, Prince Bishop 1573, died 1617) and the date 1574. It is one of several identical flasks suggesting it may have been part of the equipment of the bishop's guard soon after he took office.

The flask is cast with figures based on the plaquettes of one of the most significant woodcut artists of the 16th century, Peter Flötner (born Thurgau, Switzerland, 1485-96, died Nuremberg, 23 Nov 1546)). Flötner produced several series of plaquettes depicting figures from history. The figures on this flask represent two from his series The Twelve Ancient German Kings and depict, on the front, Ariovistus who was defeated by Caesar in 58BC, and on the reverse, Aminius who, in the Teutoburg Forest in AD9, destroyed the feared legions of Quintilius Varus whose decapitated body lies at his feet.

Flötner was a sculptor, medalist, cabinetmaker, woodcutter and designer. He worked initially in Augsburg from around 1512 to 1516 before moving to Nuremberg where he became a citizen in 1522. His workshop catered for armourers, bell-founders, goldsmiths, pewterers and medalists supplying them with plaques made of lead, tin, bronze and solnhofen limestone. They were used like pattern books. The plaques were arranged in lines and a clay or plaster mould was made from them. In these moulds wax models were cast which were then applied to the outside of the wax models of bells, mortars, flasks and tankards before they were cast in metal.

**Descriptive line**

Gilt brass, flask with four suspension rings, the front and back faces cast in relief with figures of kings taken from plaquettes by Peter Flötner (d.1546), and decorated with the arms of Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, Bishop of Wurzburg, South Germany, dated 1574; Arms and Armour

**Physical description**

This gilt brass priming flask is of oblong section tapering towards a plain nozzle with spring cap, its lever ending in a dog's head. The incurved sides are deeply engraved with interlaced strapwork and foliage and are mounted with four suspension rings. There is a detachable sliding panel on the base. The front and back panels are cast in relief with two figures of kings, Arminius and Ariovistus, the latter with the arms of Sweden, taken from plaquettes by Peter Flötner. Above Ariovistus are the arms of Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, Bishop of Wurzburg (born 1545, Prince Bishop 1573, died 1617) and the date 1574, while on the opposite face above Arminius is the engraved letter 'L'.

**Dimensions**

Height: 10.2 cm closed, Height: 10.6 cm open, Width: 7.8 cm Closed, Width: 6.9 cm Open (body width), Depth: 2.2 cm

**Museum number**

M.1630-1944

**Object history note**

This priming flask bears the arms of Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, Bishop of Wurzburg (born 1545, Prince Bishop 1573, died 1617) and the date 1574. It is one of several identical flasks suggesting it may have been part of the equipment of the bishop's guard soon after he took office.

Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn was a prominent figure in counter-Reformation Germany, expelling protestants from his diocese and forcing through wholesale conversions to Catholicism. He left a lasting legacy in Wurzburg, restoring the university there and founding the Julius Hospital.
The flask was given to the Museum by Walter Leo Hildburgh in 1944 and its history prior to his ownership is unknown. Hildburgh was one of the V&A's most dedicated and generous patrons. Born in New York in 1876, he trained as a scientist. Initially he collected ethnography but after 1914 he turned to the decorative arts. Encouraged by successive Keepers of Metalwork, he accumulated huge collections of Spanish and German metalwork. He regularly gave the Museum presents at Christmas and on his birthday. His will set up a fund for future purchases, administered in the spirit of his earlier acquisitions.

Historical significance: The flask is finely decorated and has survived in excellent condition. It is cast with figures based on the plaquettes of one of the most significant woodcut artists of the 16th century, Peter Flötner (born Thurgau, Switzerland, 1485-96, died Nuremberg, 23 Nov 1546). These flasks are dated 1574, twenty-eight years after Flotner died.

Flötner produced several series of plaquettes including The Virtues, The Seven Deadly Sins, Eminent Women of Classical Antiquity and The Seven Gods of the Planets. The figures on this flask represent two from his series The Twelve Ancient German Kings and depict, on the front, Ariovistus who was defeated by Caesar in 58BC, and on the reverse, Aminius who, in the Teutoburg Forest in AD9, destroyed the feared legions of Quintilius Varus whose decapitated body lies at his feet.

Examples of the Twelve Kings series in lead are in the Museum Mayer Van Den Bergh, Antwerp and in silver (13 kings) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. The V&A owns an example of the Charlemagne plaquette (110-1867). These plaquettes closely resemble the woodcuts of 12 kings by Flötner in Ursprung und Herkunft der zwölf ersten alten Könige und Fürsten Deutscher Nation, published by Hans Guldemundt of Nuremberg in 1543.

Flötner was a sculptor, medallist, cabinetmaker, woodcutter and designer. He worked initially in Augsburg from around 1512 to 1516 before moving to Nuremberg where he became a citizen in 1522. Changes in Flötner's style after around 1530 suggest he may have travelled to Italy. His emblem was a mallet and skewchisel.

Flötner's workshop catered for armourers, bell-founders, goldsmiths, pewterers and medallists supplying them with plaques made of lead, tin, bronze and solnhofen limestone. They were used like pattern books. The plaques were arranged in lines and a clay or plaster mould was made from them. In these moulds wax models were cast which were then applied to the outside of the wax models of bells, mortars, flasks and tankards before they were cast in metal.

Historical context note
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There are at least seven other identical flasks to this surviving, including one in the James A. De Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor (see References), and others in the Museo Lazaro Galdeano, Madrid, the Museo Marzoli, Brescia and the Bayerisches National Museum, Munich.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O97572/priming-flask-unknown/