

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

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PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society.

AT ITS FORTIETH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 24, 1880.

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY
(INCLUDING THE ANNUAL REPORT XL),
1879—1880.

ALSO

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MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XXII.

BEING THE FOURTH AND CONCLUDING NUMBER
OF THE FOURTH VOLUME.

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XXIX. THE TRIUMPH OF CONSTANTINE. Communicated by the Rev. C. W. KING, M.A. Trinity College.

[May 10th, 1880.]

A CAMEO of great importance in itself, and by far the most important of all similar works of the Lower Empire hitherto published, came lately into the possession of my correspondent, Tobias Biehler¹, of Vienna; to whose kindness I am indebted for an excellent autotype, of the size of the original, from which the wood-cut on page 393 has been engraved. It is an agate-onyx of very considerable dimensions (6 × 4 in.), being the eleventh in point of magnitude of those already existing in any cabinet; the relief is kept rather flat in the white stratum.

The subject is an Emperor crowned by a Victory who stands behind him, borne in a triumphal car; the four horses walking, and led by a soldier in front. The Emperor holds the reins in his left hand, but in his right a scroll (*volumen*) instead of the customary eagle-tipped sceptre:

“...volucrem quae sceptro surgit eburno”

a deviation from the hitherto unvarying rule in that particular, which is certainly not without its significance. Before him is carried the *Labarum*, of the exact pattern described by

¹ Herr Biehler acquired it from the widow of a Greek named Tyrtra, who said that it was purchased in Italy about thirty years ago.

Eusebius in giving the history of its celestial dictation to Constantine, being a mere square piece of some precious cloth¹, surmounted by the Monogram of Christ in its simplest form

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the very one revealed by the Saviour himself to the emperor in the memorable vision of the night preceding the decisive battle with Maxentius. It is worthy of notice that the pole of the sacred banner is not the ordinary spear-staff, but a rough tree-stem, like that regularly used in the construction of a trophy; thus recalling the expression of Venantius Fortunatus,

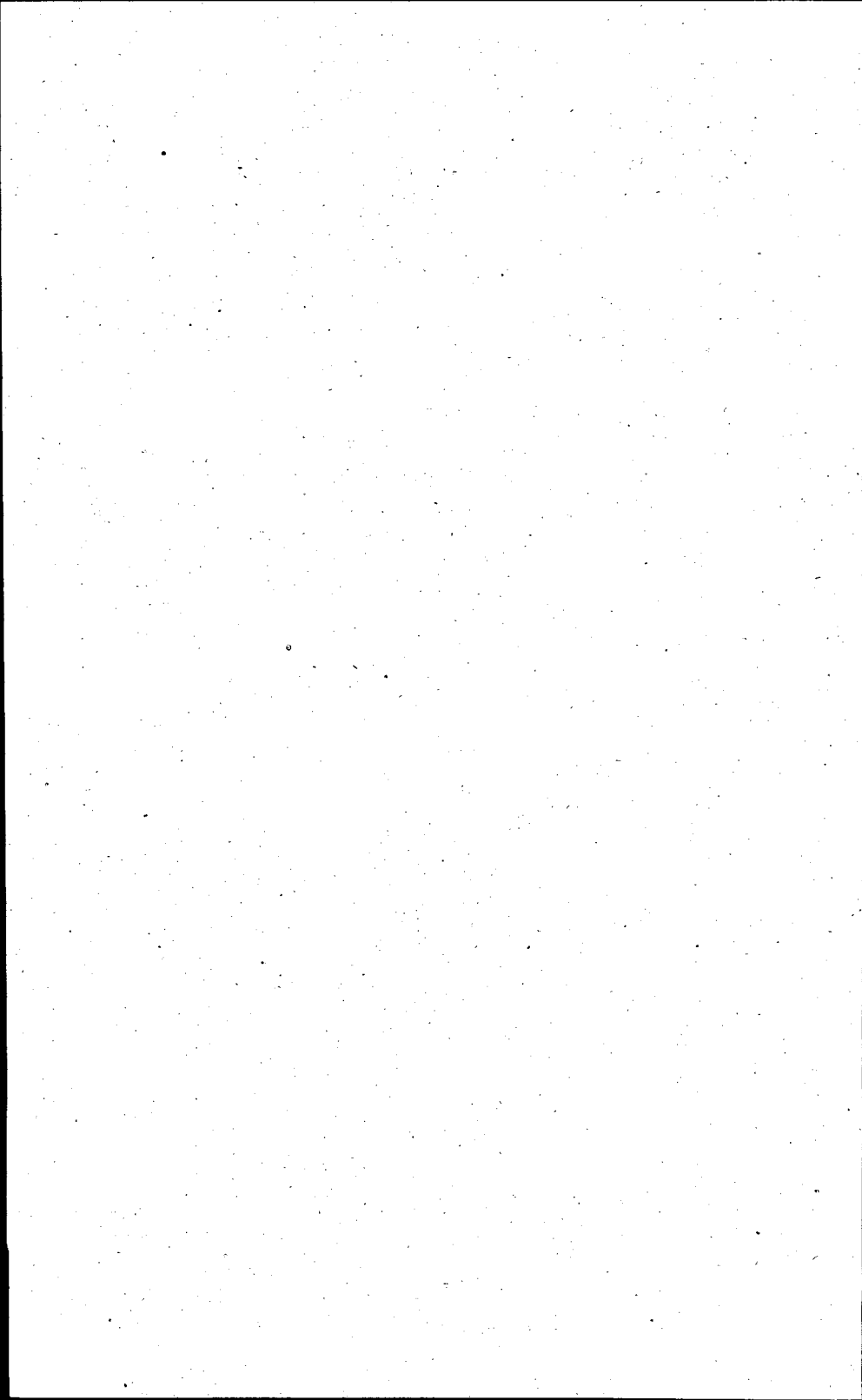
“...super crucis tropæo dic triumphum nobilem.”

A similar sentiment may perhaps have suggested to the engraver this remarkable change in the representation of the labarum from that in which it appears on the other monuments of its times. This is preceded by a standard inscribed S. P. Q. R., the bearers of both being concealed by the horses of the car; as are also the lictors, whose fasces are seen elevated in the air above the horses' backs, in the upper field of the composition. Behind the car stand a senator in the toga, and a matron in full dress; both in front face; the former is pointing to the labarum, and evidently relating to his companion all the circumstances of its introduction into the scene. At the opposite end of the design stands another matron in a similar position: who with the soldier leading the quadriga, forms a balance to the other pair. As neither of these female figures carries any distinctive attribute, they are not allegorical personages (who might have been expected in a representation of this sort), but are merely introduced to represent the crowd of spectators.

The skilful composition and good execution of details strike

¹ “From the transverse pole...a sort of hanging cloth was suspended, a royal texture, covered with a variety of precious stones.” (τοῦ δὲ πλαγίου κέρως...ἐθόνη τις ἐκκρεμῆς ἀπηώρητο, βασιλικὸν ὕφασμα, ποικιλίᾳ συνημμένων πολυτελῶν λίθων φωτὸς ἀγαῖς ἐξαστραπτόντων καλυπτόμενον *Vita Constantini*, I. 31.)





us with surprise in a work coming so far down into the Decline as the presence of the Christian banner obliges us to place it, and contrast most favourably with the style of the contemporary¹ "Triumph of Licinius" (Paris Cabinet), the latest of the class previously known. This in form is an oval of 4 by 2½ inches, and exhibits in flat relief the emperor erect upon his triumphal quadriga, seen in front face. Over his head on either side float Sol and Luna, each bearing a long flambeau to indicate their character, and each presenting to him a globe, to typify that the East and the West are obedient to his power. Two Victories lead the off-horses; one bears a trophy, the other the *labarum*, emblazoned with the portraits of two emperors; an important circumstance, upon which the attribution of the subject to Licinius is principally founded. On the foreground are strewn the corpses of the vanquished foe, artistically grouped in various attitudes of prostration. The design has considerable merit in point of composition, although the figures themselves betray the stiffness marking the period, and bear much analogy in execution to the earliest productions of the regular Byzantine school. The most unlooked-for superiority of style and execution in the piece before us at first excites suspicion of its modern origin, which, doubtless, it will be very difficult to dispel. But, after the minutest examination of all the evidences offered by the work itself, they equally combine in proving its genuine antiquity.

To take these evidences in detail: the horses of the quadriga exhibit the true Roman stiffness of movement—the human figures all the squatness of the Decline that invariably stamps its sculptures, large or small alike; the costume of the soldier, far from being the conventional Homeric *thorax* (beyond which the Cinque-cento School had no other idea of antique armour), is a

¹ Published and figured for the first time by Chabouillet in the *Revue Archéologique*, 1853, pl. 206, pp. 764—769.

thick tunic, probably of quilted linen, together with a helmet—particulars bespeaking the late period of the Roman military system when all body-armour had been discarded by the effeminate infantry, whose defence was then reduced to the shield—whilst the dress of the civilians has a reality about it that looks as if copied from the life.

The Caesar wears the laurel-wreath, marking his character of "Imperator;" whilst the Victory holds the *triumphal* crown above his head, and thus discharges the duty of the "sudans publicus," who stood in the same place in the times of Juvenal.

One thing remains to be considered—the nature of the *volumen*, so conspicuously elevated in the triumpher's hand. The character of the event here commemorated forbids our taking it for the folded napkin, *mappa circensis*, used for giving the signal for the chariot-races, and therefore the regular badge of the Consul, after his chief function had degenerated into presiding at the Hippodrome. Is it possible that this roll, held up so significantly as if pointing to the *Chrisma* topping the labarum, may be the Book of the Gospels, and thus indicate the source to which the pious victor ascribes the triumph which this monument perpetuates?

Much labour and skill has been expended by the artist upon the *face* of the triumphing Caesar, in order to leave no doubt as to his identity; and with such success that the well-known, Augustus-like, profile of Constantine may be recognised at the first glance. Nevertheless, the family likeness is so strong in all the sons that his successor, Constantius, may be the real actor in the scene—a supposition not without some circumstances in its favour that may recommend it to our preference. There was a great revival of the glyptic art during the long and luxurious reign of the last-surviving son of Constantine, as is manifested by the abundance and fine execution of his gold medallions, and—what bears more directly upon the

present question—by his celebrated sapphire¹ signet, an engraving the difficulty of which would have baffled the skill of the best ages that preceded his. The action, too, of pointing to the Chrisma would well befit the character of a prince who passed the fateful hours of the Battle of Mursa in prayer with his chaplains in a neighbouring church, instead of charging at the head of his *cataphractarii* as his father would have done. No great weight, however, is to be given to this consideration, if we are disposed to believe the statement of Eusebius², that Constantine himself, upon gaining possession of Rome, erected his own statue bearing a spear tipped with the Monogram of Christ, in memory of his celebrated vision. This statue is, very probably, the original of the figure on the well-known coin of his son, with the legend “Hoc signo victor eris.”

That historical compositions, even more elaborate in detail than the present cameo, were not beyond the artistic ability of Constantine's period, is curiously attested by an ivory bas-relief³ preserved in the Cathedral Treasury at Trèves, and figured on page 399. Here we see that nursing-mother of the Church, the

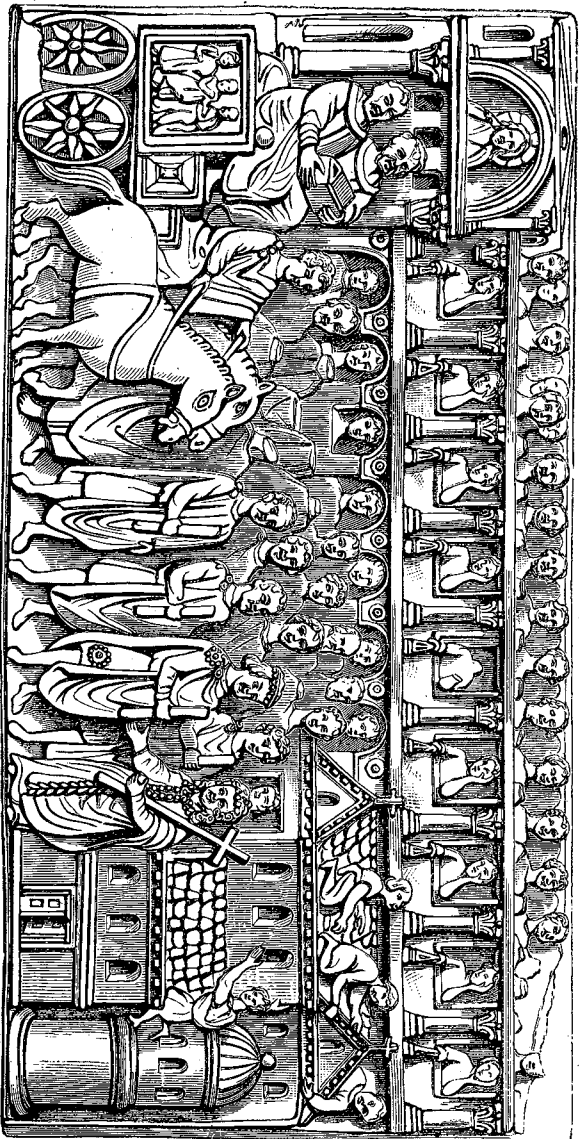
¹ This is the only imperial signet preserved, respecting whose original destination no doubt can be entertained; it is quoted as being in the Rinuccini Cabinet at Florence. The stone, of uncommon beauty and weighing 53 carats, is engraved with the representation of what the Roman Nimrod doubtless regarded as the most brilliant exploit of his inglorious reign. The Emperor is seen in the act of spearing a monstrous wild boar, entitled $\Xi\Phi\text{I}\Lambda\text{C}$, in the plains of Cæsarea, that city being typified by a recumbent female figure, with her name written in the phonetic orthography of the times as $\text{K}\epsilon\text{C}\alpha\text{P}\text{I}\text{A}\ \text{K}\alpha\text{P}\text{P}\text{I}\Delta\text{O}\text{K}\text{I}\text{A}\text{C}$. In the field, the *Latin* CONSTANTIVS AVG makes it manifest that the intaglio was destined for the emperor's own use as his “privy seal”—an inference supported by the very careful execution of the work, as well as by the high intrinsic value of the gem. Banduri gives a faithful drawing of this signet in the plate of Constantius's *aurei*, in his “*Numismata Imp. Rom., &c.*”

² *Vita Constantini*, l. cap. XL.

³ First published by Mr Westwood in the *Archæological Journal*, Vol. XX., page 148: it has also been figured to the original size ($5\frac{3}{8} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ in.), and described by E. aus'm Weerth in *Kunstdenkmäler des Christlichen Mittelalters in den Rheinlanden*, pl. LVIII. 1, bd. III., page 88.

Empress Helena, seated at the front door of her hardly finished basilica—a fact ingeniously expressed by two tilers still at work upon the roof. She bears a long Latin cross in lieu of sceptre, and several strings of immense pearls about her neck, to mark her imperial dignity. She is approached by a procession of many figures (originally twelve) headed by her son, to be recognised by the diadem round his head, and the huge jewelled fibula upon his shoulder, which fastens the imperial mantle. All these figures carry large wax tapers in their right hands, as in a triumphal procession. After them comes the group whose errand is the primary object commemorated in this memorial. Two *bearded* monks (thus distinguished from the lay actors) are seated on a square and lofty car drawn by mules—the actual *thensa* of the ancient religion, differing in nothing from that of Ceres save in the nature of the subjects carved upon its sides. These saintly personages carry between them on their laps a large coffer, containing the relics indispensable in the belief of the age to give virtue to the altar in the newly erected sanctuary. The entire scene is backed by the long façade of the Porta Nigra, its three tiers of windows filled with spectators—the middle one with ladies only, each of whom holds forth a lamp suspended from a short chain. In design this ivory carving exhibits a marked similarity to the cameo, especially in the squatness of the figures, the arrangement of the drapery, and the movement of the quadrupeds. But the execution of each displays the difference necessarily to be looked for in works, the one produced by a half-civilised Belgic carver, and the other by the most skilful Greek then to be found amongst the *artifices Palatini*.

But whether we choose to see in Herr Biehler's cameo a commemoration of the triumph of the father over Maxentius, or of the son over the much more formidable Magnentius, some forty years later, it must be allowed that this work, in point of historical interest, ranks next to the "Gemma Augustea," and the "Apotheosis of Augustus."



UTTING S.C.

