

## FORGERIES OF ANTIQUITIES.

By JAMES HILTON, Esq., F.S.A.

At the monthly meeting of the Institute on December 5th, Mr. James Hilton, F.S.A. (Hon. Treasurer), exhibited some leaden and other metal forgeries, and made some remarks about them intended as a caution to collectors and students of archaeology when visiting the shops of dealers in such objects, and to account for the display of the like objects on the table. He said that a friend had recently purchased one such object somewhere in London (that now exhibited), and which was alleged by the vendor to be an early Christian relic, in size about 7 inches by  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches, formed of lead or pewter, as a diptych of the Vesica shape, *i.e.* an elongated oval, the two leaves being held together by a clumsy hinge attachment, one leaf representing a half figure wearing a sort of crown, his arms and lower limbs concealed by a floral design, and a rude representation of the dove on the summit, the other leaf showing a personage holding a sceptre or mace, an inscription in rude antique letters on the back, and a loop for suspension on the summit. It seemed to have been injured by some corrosive application and by burial in earth or mud. His friend said, "What do you think of that?" Mr. Hilton quickly formed an opinion and without reply produced another object, saying, "What do *you* think of that?" a circular thin flat object like a medal or medallion about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter, with a design and inscription on both sides and a projecting loop for suspension, formed of brass or some easily fusible metal, and in a good state of preservation. His friend at once remarked that the letters were nearly alike in both objects. The inscriptions convey no meaning, they are but an array of letters ignorantly used, not even arranged into words, in fact, utter nonsense. Without hesitation Mr. Hilton pronounced both to be forgeries or absolutely spurious, saying also that the circumstance might be mentioned at

the next meeting of the Institute as a caution to unwary collectors and against fraudulent or perhaps ignorant dealers, seeing how easily his friend had been imposed upon.

Mr. W. H. St. John Hope, Vice-President, now joined in the narrative by particular request, and spoke to the following effect. He pointed to the display on the table which, through the kindness of Mr. C. H. Read, he was able to exhibit on the present occasion; it comprised two dozen apparently genuine objects of antiquities, part of a large collection, medallions, small vases, and objects difficult to describe, all made of lead, pewter, or brass. The medallions often exhibit, in some variety, a figure wearing head-gear, like a diadem with five upright spikes and rude meaningless inscriptions; others show two men preparing to fight with weapons, also inscribed, some dated as early as 1002 in modern so-called Arabic figures, many differing in variety of detail, but similar in type, some perfect, others purposely injured, to give the appearance of genuine antiquity. Mr. Hope narrated the history of these objects as follows:

A new dock was formed about the years 1857 and 1858, by excavating at Shadwell on the shore of the river Thames, which dock now forms part of the "London Docks"; two men occupied as "shore-rakers" known to the labourers employed as "Billy" and "Charley," distributed among the latter the objects in question, the labourers selling them as genuine "finds" to the dealers in curiosities. In this way an active trade went on, and it is known that upwards of two thousand objects passed eventually into the possession of the dealers' customers. The deception was not altogether successful; the *Athenæum Journal* published some articles exposing it. A dealer, fancying that they applied to him, brought an action for libel against the *Athenæum*. It was tried at the Guildford assizes on 5th August, 1858, and is reported in the *Times* newspaper on the following day. The case was decided against the plaintiff, principally on the ground that he was not alluded to personally and by name. One good result came from the action—the evidence of the witnesses led to the exposure of all the circumstances and frauds, revealing much that would otherwise never

have been made public. Indeed, some of the witnesses, antiquaries of repute, gave their opinions in favour of the objects, that they were genuine "pilgrims' badges" of the alleged early dates.

None of the medallion-like forms were struck from coinage dies; on the contrary, all are without doubt cast in moulds of rude and ignorant make and of one and the same origin. The two "shore-rakers," Billy and Charley, were found at their place of work by a persevering investigator, who managed to gain admission while they were busily employed in making the moulds and castings, and he was able to possess himself of some of them and of the tools used in the fabrication. Thus was set at rest all doubt and mystery which for a time surrounded this remarkable series of frauds.

More extended particulars may be seen in the *Archæological Journal*, Vol. XXI., for 1864, pp. 167, 168, the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, Vol. I. of Second Series, pp. 360-364, and in the *Times* and the *Athenæum* as above stated.

Our thanks are due to Mr. Hope for his kind help and for his concurrence in the writer's motive in reviving an almost forgotten event.

It may not be considered out of place to repeat here an explanation of the word *Vesica* used in the commencement of this paper. It is from the pen of the late Mr. Matthew H. Bloxam, a much esteemed member of the Institute, in his work, *The Principles of Gothic Ecclesiastical Architecture* (eleventh edition, 1882, in three volumes), at p. 137 of Vol. I., where in a note concerning the *Vesica piscis*<sup>1</sup> he says, "It is the figure of a fish, whence the term originated, and was one of the most ancient of the Christian symbols, emblematically significant of the Greek word *ἰχθῦς*, which contained the initial letters of the names and titles of our Saviour. The symbolic representation of a fish we find sculptured on some of the sarcophagi of the early Christians discovered in the catacombs of Rome, but the actual figure of a fish afterwards gave place to an oval-shaped compartment, pointed at both extremities, bearing the same

<sup>1</sup> Literally the swim-bladder of a fish, hence, for simplicity, the fish itself.

mystical signification as the fish itself, and formed by two circles intersecting each other in the centre. This was a most common symbol used in the Middle Ages, and, thus delineated, it abounds in Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscripts. Everywhere we meet with it during the Middle Ages, in religious sculptures, in painted glass, on encaustic tiles, and on seals, and the form is yet retained on the seals of many of the ecclesiastical courts."

Elsewhere will be found the Greek words, the initial letters of which are only referred to in the foregoing extract,

*Ιησους Χριστος Θεου Υιος Σωτηρ.*

*Anglicè*, Jesus Christ the Son of God the Saviour.

This acrostic is very ancient and was known long before the invention of printing, when accents as we now know them were introduced in great variety. Therefore it is here printed bare of accents.