

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

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REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

**Cambridge Antiquarian Society,**

AT ITS THIRTY-SIXTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 15, 1876,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY  
(INCLUDING THE ANNUAL REPORTS XXXIV, XXXV),  
1873—1876.

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ALSO

**Communications**

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XVIII.

BEING THE FOURTH AND CONCLUDING NUMBER OF THE  
THIRD VOLUME.

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COMMUNICATIONS,

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XXX. ON THE ANCIENT ONYX KNOWN AS THE 'MANTUAN VASE,' IN THE GRAND-DUCAL MUSEUM AT BRUNSWICK. Communicated by the Rev. JOHN B. PEARSON, B.D., Emmanuel College.

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[May 10, 1875.]

BEING at Brunswick in January last, I took the opportunity to inspect the famous Mantuan Vase which had been restored to Brunswick in the preceding year, after a disappearance of more than forty years. An excellent description of it has been published at Stuttgart in the *Kunsthanderwerk* for 1874 by Professor Riegel, the Director of the Museum at Brunswick, under whose charge the Vase now is; but, as this publication is perhaps but rarely to be met with in this country, and is not accessible in Cambridge, I have made a translation of the memoir, with a view of bringing it more easily to the notice of the members of the Antiquarian Society. I have not reproduced the plate; but a sketch and description of the Vase, including the mounting, will be found in the Leipsic *Acta Erudit.*, 1683; and also in Gronovius' *Thesaurus*, Vol. VII., 1699.

TRANSLATION OF PROFESSOR RIEGEL'S MEMOIR ON THE  
'MANTUAN VASE.'

*History.* The Onyx Vase represented on the two accompanying plates, formed a part of the collection of the Ducal House of Gonzaga at Mantua, when the city, during the war of the Mantuan succession, was captured and plundered by an Imperial force under Colalto on the 18th

July, 1630. It fell at the time into the hands of a private soldier, who for the value of its gold fittings sold it to an Imperial officer, Baron von Sirot, for 17 "schwere" ducats. Baron Sirot made a present of it to his Commander, Duke Franz Albert of Sachsen-Lauenburg; who, finding that the Milanese goldsmiths valued the vase at 20,000 ducats, made von Sirot, by way of compensation, a present of 2,000 ducats. After the Duke's death, in 1642, the vase remained in possession of his widow; and on her death, in 1666, it passed to her elder sister, the third wife of Duke August of Brunswick, more generally known as the founder of the Library at Wolfenbüttel. On her death in 1676, it passed to her son, Duke Ferdinand Albert of Brunswick, the founder of the Beveren line: which succeeded to power in the person of Ferdinand Albert II., generally referred to as Charles I. Charles I. by a convention in 1766 bought in the claims of the rest of the agnates to the vase and other art treasures; and incorporated it with the rest in 1767 in the museum he had founded at Brunswick in 1753. In the autumn of 1806 it was taken away to be secured from the French, but replaced in the Museum in 1814. In January, 1830, Charles II., giving suitable receipts for it, had it taken to the Grand-Ducal residence. However, on the 7th September in the same year, the day of the escape of the Grand Duke, no traces of the vase were to be found; in the autumn of 1873 it was found among the effects of the deceased Duke at Geneva, and 27 March, 1874, handed over to the writer of this memoir, for the Museum, in his capacity as its Director. It is now included among the Art Collections of the Ducal family, as was intended a hundred years ago.

*The Golden Mountings.* As we have mentioned, the Vase in 1630 had a mounting of gold, which it still possessed when taken out of the Museum by Duke Charles in 1830. The mounting consisted of a *base* (Fuss-Gestell), several (two?) hoops, spout, handle, and covering. However, the vase, when discovered at Geneva, had been stripped of its gold mounting, and also exhibited on its upper edge an abrasure (see plate), which it apparently suffered from the forcible removal of the mounting. This removal of the mounting seems actually to have been perpetrated by the Duke Charles himself at the time of his escape; a supposition in favour of which we have the discovery of the case that should have contained the vase, in the carriage the Duke had quitted at Osterode (a town in Hanover, on the road from Brunswick to Göttingen). The injury fortunately is very slight, and at a point where the vase exhibits no engraving of any kind. Now that the vase, for the first time for many centuries, can be inspected without its gold mounting, there can be no doubt whatever that it was originally without any mounting, at any rate such a mounting as that which it had recently. At most, it can only have had a slight base, and a small stopper. The deep flutings (Riefeln) and the lower aperture for the spout, which the recent mounting required, are disfigurements, and are additions of

a subsequent date; they prove themselves to be workmanship of a barbaric style by the fact that they are carried without the least scruple through parts of the design engraved in the stone; while nevertheless they are so happily, or perhaps we may say, so tastefully made, that in former times no one hesitated on the original adaptation of the mounting to the vase, as a work of art generally. The view we have just mentioned (that the mounting was originally adapted to the vase), which was shared by the best-informed persons, and consequently cannot be looked upon as superficial, is seen however, now the mounting is away, at once unquestionably to be erroneous. With reference to the time at which this golden mounting, removed by Duke Charles, may have been added, the drawings to be found in the Museum leave its late-gothic character beyond question; as however one cannot recognize precisely whether the mounting is Italian work or no, to fix its date precisely must be considered out of the question. A general idea of the form may be gained from the vignette at the head of the memoir, taken from an old engraving.

*Substance and Style* (Stein und Technik). The Mantuan Vase is cut out of a sardonyx of a kidney form; it is composed of white and reddish-brown layers to the number of five or six, very transparent in places where the colour is deep. It is also hollowed out inside, so that it forms a vessel in the form of an ointment jar, and on its exterior, is modelled in the style of a cameo in an artistic form. This laborious manipulation of the hard stone, displaying not only much perseverance and skill, but also a fine artistic spirit, must have required a considerable number of years, and will always excite much surprise. Mineralogists cannot pronounce distinctly on the locality where the stone was found, but are of opinion that in and for itself it does not merit a high position. Consequently the excessive value of the vase is to be found in the scientific and artistic treatment, its painstaking manipulation in the interior and exterior; and in the method and manner in which the artist has succeeded in happily combining the parti-coloured layers, the transparency, and the brilliance of the stone, together with the smooth prominent figures, in an original, and—as a work of art—extremely pleasing result.

The coloured representation of the vase, given in the picture, gives an idea of these peculiar features; although, as a matter of fact, we may not forget, that the full brilliance of the stone, and the delicate combination of we cannot say how many shades, can naturally not be perfectly reproduced by a mere representation. As for the style in which the figures in relief are finished, from a scientific point of view, it seems somewhat indistinct, compared with the style of execution in other celebrated cameos; this fancy is soon seen to be somewhat deceptive, as one readily recognizes that the execution clearly and distinctly sets forth all that the artist designed. And for all this, it is still considerably more slightly

executed (*weicher gehalten*), than for instance that in the great cameos at Vienna, so that, combined with the effect which the brilliancy and transparency of the stone exert on one, this deception explains itself completely. By this scientific mode of treatment, the peculiar distinction of our vase is certainly augmented in no slight degree.

*Size.* The Vase is 156 millimetres (about  $6\frac{1}{8}$  inches) high, and the diameter at the broadest point, 65 millimetres ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches); that of the circular stand which supports it, 33 millimetres ( $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches).

*Style.* The peculiar general style of the onyx, which we have referred to, rests, as has been already indicated in other words, on a spirited combination of the *elements of the picturesque* afforded by the coloured layers of the stone, and the modelled figures in relief upon it. For example, in the group which stands quite at the right hand in the coloured representation, we perceive the way in which the artist has worked up the drapery and hair of the sitting figure in the upper brown layer, and the arms, face, and feet in the white layer underlying it, and how, in order to bring out accurately the figure standing in the rear, he has got behind the wave-like indentation which the layer of white makes at this point. These picturesque ideas of the artist come out more plainly in contemplating the group which contains the priestess and the two torches. The whole of this group rests upon the dark ground of the stone; the female figure to the left in the rear, and the small male statue on the right, are preserved perfectly white; the priestess and boy are face, breast, and feet worked out of the same white layer, while the hair and drapery are cut out of the brown layer lying over the white one we have just mentioned, and the arms, as it were in relief, out of a second layer of white resting again on the brown one. The result is that the brown drapery, with its splendid brilliancy, and a charming luminous (*spiegelnden*) transparency that reminds one of the so-called water in precious stones, acts as a veil to the parts of the body situated behind it, which still gleam in white through it. How delicately the artist balanced each portion of the work, is proved for example by the two torches worked out in the layer of white in the middle, of which the foremost is somewhat the taller, and more defined in the substance, so that the one in the rear is not only in *perspective* smaller, but also darker, and apparently more distant, as the brown ground is visible through it. As a match to the elements of the picturesque, the forms in relief deserve our special notice. In the latter we recognize in general an excellent Grecian style, without, on that account, omitting to notice a few irregularities, such for instance as exhibit themselves in the figure of the child with the fruit basket, which is set by far too low. On the other hand the noble character of the figures and the animation inherent in most of the profiles should escape.

no one. Some inference for deciding upon its general style as a work of art, and so far an approximate estimate of its date, may be drawn from the bunches of fruit and heads of oxen, which form an ornamental circle round the vase above the figures portrayed upon it.

*The whole Representation* refers to the Festival of the Spring, in the form in which, agreeably to the ideas of the Greeks, it was celebrated in secret worship, at the so-called Lesser Eleusinia. The figures in relief, here reproduced in elongated form in the second of the Plates before us, divide themselves into three groups: in the middle there is the alliance of the goddesses, to the right four worshippers with offerings, and to the left the Priestesses. Each of these groups is locally separated from the other two; the one in the centre stands in front of what from its style of architecture we might call a temple: the group to the right, with festoons of drapery above it, has at the rear a sacred tree: the group to the left has a compartment to itself. Between this group and that of the goddesses there is a vine introduced, its foliage being sacred to Dionysus. An explanation of all the separate figures is impossible without protracted archæological investigations, and a comparison of some contradictory views. A few general explanations must suffice.

In the group of goddesses, we see Ceres' serpent-chariot, in it the goddess, with the ear of ripe corn in her hand, and at her side Triptolemus, the Hero of Secrets, who founded agriculture in Attica. Floating above the deities, we see a winged genius advancing in the air out of what may be a Hall of Columns; undoubtedly a personification of Zephyrus, spreading his moist beneficent pinions over a female form reposing on the earth, perhaps the goddess Gæa. We recognize here the elements of earth and air, which with the blessing of heaven (in a figurative form) are the means of bestowing the precious fruits on mankind. There approach this group of deities, on the right of the worshippers, first a female with the little pig sacred to Demeter as her offering, and a second with the kid sacred to Dionysus: adjoining these two females is a female in a sitting posture, with a basket of fruit in her lap, and an ear of corn in her right hand: behind the latter is a child upholding with both its arms a basket of fruit resting on its head. We may perhaps here find a recognition of the thought, that man, in gratitude for the blessings of heaven, is offering the first-fruits of the fruits bestowed on him to the Deity as a thank-offering, with a silent prayer for protection and favour for the future. The group to the left is different. Here the Priestess advances with the sacred torches, to visit the sacred festival, in which these offerings are presented. Her companion has a poppy in her hand, as a symbol of unlimited fertility. A lad advancing in front of her carries a basket with fruit: farther still in front of him stands the little figure of Priapus: the outline of his body has been remodelled by subsequent



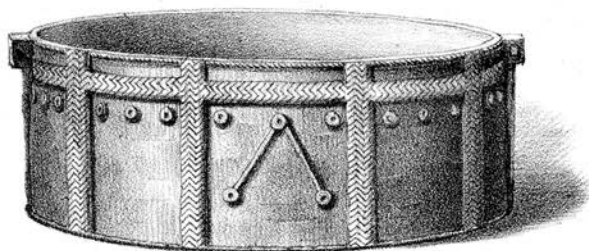
alterations. In this group again, the idea of fertility is indicated, and its continuance is intended to be the object of formal entreaty from the appointed Priestess. In the lower portion of the onyx, that where the figures are on a reduced scale, there are the instruments represented, such as were employed at the Festival of the Eleusinia: and also attributes of the two Eleusinian deities, Demeter and Dionysus, such as Thyrsus-staves, torches, masks, fruit-baskets, a serpent, &c., &c. In order perfectly to understand the general design of the representation, and the arrangement of the separate figures, we must always consider ourselves obliged to keep strictly in view the conditions which the formation of the stone imposed: the stone, so far from being made to suit the views of the artist, being that by which he was obliged to guide himself, so as to adapt himself to its various peculiarities.

*General Result.* The Mantuan Vase is a piece of antique (Grecian) workmanship, distinguished from other cameos by its unique form, that of an ointment vase; the large number of coloured layers, the transparency of the stone; the eminently picturesque style, the peculiar delicacy (*weichheit*) of the workmanship, and the subject of the design engraved on it. As to its original design and actual use we can only form conjectures: and the same is true of the place where it was manufactured. As to the age, on the contrary, we are justified in assuming that it belongs to the second half of the era of the Ptolemies, or that of the Roman Emperors down to Hadrian. We may conjecture with great plausibility that in the separate details of his representation, the artist has followed models of the most flourishing period of Hellenic art.

So far Professor Riegel's memoir. For my own part, I am satisfied that we have in the Mantuan Vase a real onyx unguent-vase of the classical era. From the time of Herodotus down to that of Virgil, and of the Evangelists, small jars of the kind were evidently used for the purpose; and the size indicated by the word *λίτρα* (less than a pound troy) answers fairly to the size of the Mantuan Vase. I may mention that the vase shows no tinge of dark red, a colour always found in the oriental onyx, a stone which the ancients and moderns agree in thus distinguishing from the common onyx.

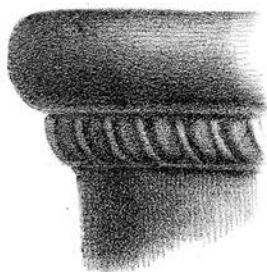
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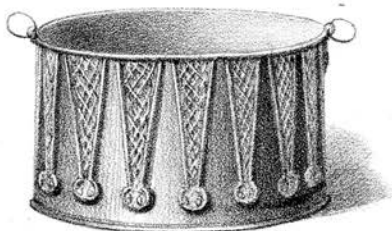
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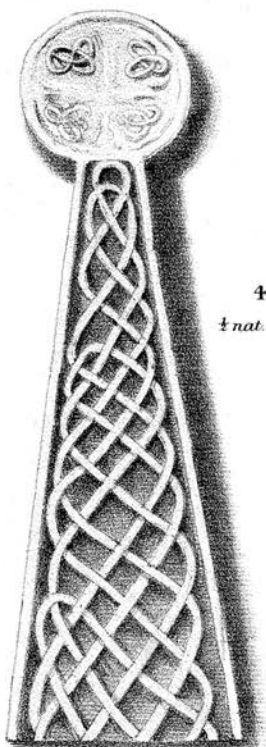
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*Camb. Antiq. Soc. Trans. Vol. IV, Part III, 1879.*  
*to face page xv.*



W.B.R. 1879.

POWDER FLASK,  
OF THE 16th CENTURY, IN THE COLLECTION OF W. B. REDFARN, ESQ.

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