

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

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REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

**Cambridge Antiquarian Society,**

AT ITS FORTY-THIRD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 7, 1883,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY,  
1882—1883.

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ALSO

**Communications**

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XXV.

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WITH APPENDIX.



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XVI. OMPHALE, IN THE SPOILS OF HERCULES.  
Communicated by C. W. KING, M.A., Trinity  
College.

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[5 March, 1883.]

THE discovery of an antique *cameo* in British soil is so rare an event that any well authenticated instance deserves to be brought under the notice of archæologists. The gem, here figured to the actual size, was found about two feet from the



surface, in the course of excavations for the laying of gas-pipes in the ancient city of Caerleon, *Isca Silurum*, some time in the year 1882. The material is a sardonyx of three layers, but so bleached by the heat of the funeral pyre to which it had accompanied its original owner, as to present the appearance of a piece of oyster-shell; and to remind us forcibly of what Propertius noticed in the changed looks of Cynthia's ghost:

Et solitam digito beryllon *adederat* ignis.

The subject is a theme much affected by Roman art on account

of the strong contrast it involves of the extremes of Beauty and Savagery combined—the Head of the Lydian queen Omphale, equipped with the Nemean Lion's hide, of which she has despoiled her submissive lover, Hercules; whom for a similar reason the same artists often depicted with face under the veil of his imperious mistress. The work is a masterpiece of its class, the face is finely modelled and full of life, in all the conscious pride of beauty, and the shaggy character of the lion's skin is represented with much fidelity to nature: the relief too is high, and, when assisted by the naturally contrasted colours of the yet uninjured material—which would render the lion's hide in buff, the face in pearly white, and the background in dark brown—the design must have come out with great effect.

These compositions, besides their elegance, have an historical interest attached to them; for there can be no doubt that many among their number preserve the portrait of a woman of great note and influence for good in her day, represented too under a character that typifies the nature of that influence. Conjugated heads of Hercules and Omphale are very numerous on gems, of which the style bespeaks one and the same period, and that the highest epoch of Roman art, the second century of our era. This sudden outburst of taste in *one direction* is sufficiently explained to us by the history of the times, in the seven years' ascendancy of the celebrated *Marcia*<sup>1</sup> over the "Roman Hercules," as he styled himself, the emperor Commodus. What are the finest medallions in the imperial series exhibit his head, covered with the lion's neck, and *conjugated* with the portrait of Marcia with helmet and *petta*, in the character of Queen of the Amazons—nay, even his own signet bore his Amazonian enslaver for its device<sup>2</sup>. And though the

<sup>1</sup> The protectress of Pope Victor I. and his flock.

<sup>2</sup> "super hoc ad procuratores meos literas misi quas ipse signatas accipias signo *Amazonio*" (Capitolinus, *Clod. Albin.* II.).

historian does not condescend to further particulars of the emperor's degradation, it naturally follows that the Lydian episode in the career of the demi-god supplied many parallels to artists desirous of paying court to the fair enchantress of his preposterous imitator. She often is seen in gems of the epoch just referred to, not merely in a bust, but at full length; and wielding, though with difficulty, the mighty *club* for which she has exchanged the *distaff* with her lover.

As the dimensions of this cameo considerably exceed those of an ordinary ring-stone, it must have been employed in some other form of personal ornament. It may have graced the large oval *fibula*, which acting like the modern *solitaire* fastened the *paludamentum* of the Tribune in command of the legion which kept in awe the fierce Silures<sup>1</sup>; as such a use for a cameo is conspicuously exhibited in the gem portrait of Caracalla in the grand "Family of Severus," belonging to the Paris cabinet; or if the owner were a Roman lady, carried so far into the remotest West by the tide of political circumstances, this cameo formed the central pendant to a necklace—the customary manner of displaying works of the kind that entered into the *mundus muliebris*, as many examples which are come down to our times complete sufficiently attest.

<sup>1</sup> The Welsh name of the place signifies, "The Camp of the Great Legion upon the Usk."

