

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

AT ITS FORTY-FOURTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 26, 1884,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY,
1883—1884.

ALSO

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WITH APPENDIX.



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XXI. ON THE SIGNET OF EROS. Communicated by
C. W. KING, M.A., Trinity College.

[March 3, 1884.]



FIG. 1. VICTORY, standing, in the act of reading from an open scroll held in both hands, as if proclaiming some great success in war. In the field to the left (?) the club of Hercules, placed vertically: on the other side, the name of the owner, EROS, similarly arranged in a straight line. Intaglio in the later Greek style, on brown sard.

THIS elegant device offers many points for consideration, which taken together appear to me to invest the signet with much historical, not to say romantic, interest. Before the question of original ownership can rationally be discussed, it is necessary to determine with such accuracy as is attainable the date of the work.

The style of the engraving is in itself so pure, that it would at once be pronounced *Greek* of the Lysippean school, were it not for the signature in Latin characters; which does not betray (as is often the case) any sign of being the interpolation of some later possessor. To me, this inscription is the most trustworthy criterion of the times to which the engraving ought to be assigned: for both in the form of the letters, and still more in the manner of their disposition on the field, it exactly coincides with the fashion in such things (as the coins attest) that prevailed during the last century of the Roman Republic; but neither previously, nor subsequently to that same period.

A clue of like nature as to its date is offered by the fact that we have here a *Greek* name written in Latin characters; which betokens a time when Greek was as yet a "language not understood of the people in general"—the very time when Q. Cicero, blockaded in his camp by the Eburones, wrote his despatches to Cæsar in Greek letters (though not in the Greek tongue), in order that they should not be read, if intercepted by the enemy, that is, by the Roman deserters in their camp. Under the Empire, on the contrary, when a smattering of Greek was as universal an accomplishment as that of French is amongst ourselves, all Grecian names were inscribed on signets in their proper characters; and persons pretending to superior refinement even went so far as to Grecise their Latin patronymics.

These considerations alone, even though unsupported by other internal evidence, would furnish reasonable grounds for supposing our Eros a contemporary of Julius Cæsar. But in this particular, the *person* himself would be of no greater interest to us than any other one of the thousands of his day that had sufficient taste to imagine a pretty seal-device, and sufficient money to pay a skilful artist to embody it in a gem. But upon further examination of the details, a symbol obtrudes itself on our notice which reveals perhaps (if I have not in-

terpreted it by too lively an exercise of the imagination) the whole history of the man. This key to the problem is the *Club of Hercules*, so conspicuously set up in the middle of the design, to the actual detriment of its beauty; a thing evidently done, because the fact which its presence announced to the recipients of the impression was of an importance that far outweighed all considerations of art: the social position of the sealer was made known to all the world by the view of this prominent badge of his *clientela*.

Our next step, therefore, in this inquiry is to hunt out in the series of Consular coins what noble family claims such a badge for its own; and the *gens Antonia* offers itself at the very opening of the search. Plutarch records that the most celebrated of the family, the amorous Triumvir, was mightily proud of his traditional descent from *Anthon*, a son of Hercules, in honour of whom he named his first-born *Anthyllus*, and affected to copy his divine progenitor in his bearing and his costume, as much as he resembled the statues of him in his manly countenance. Heaven itself seems to endorse his claim to relationship, for, conspicuously amongst the omens of his approaching downfall, the statue of *Anthon*, standing at *Alba Longa*, burst into a profuse sweat that could not be dried by wiping: the Temple of *Heracles* at *Corinth* was struck by lightning; and his colossus at *Athens* carried from its basis by a mighty whirlwind. To publish to the world so respectable a genealogy, the Triumvir puts on a bronze coin the bust of *Hercules*, or more probably *Anthon* (for the features are undeniably those of *Antony*), carrying the Club on his shoulder¹: and in order to symbolize the closeness of his union with *Octavius* during the short-lived second Triumvirate the same *Herculean* weapon forms the sole type on the obverse of a

¹ The reverse conveys a most extravagant compliment to *Antony*, for it reads L. A. ΡΩΜΗΣ, typifying the new birth of *Rome* under his auspices.

denarius (fig. 2) of his youthful colleague, which had been minted by their joint authority.

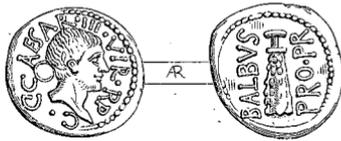


FIG. 2. Denarius of Octavius.

Who then was this Eros, that he should in this elegant pictorial way have placed himself under the patronage of the family Antonia? That he was of servile condition is at once manifested by his *name*, containing a presage of future love and favouritism, like so many others of the class (Cestus, Earinus, Narcissus, Phlegon, Tryphon), and hinting that he was intended, at his outset in life, to gain the good graces of his master by his personal charms (*flore corporis*), as the fashion then was; and by successive stages to grow up from the "deliciae domini" into the respectability and influence of a trusted *libertus*.

To such an Eros, faithful unto death, did the despairing Antony turn for the last medicine of his woes; and when that faithful freedman evaded the obligation of his oath by plunging the sword into his own heart, he exclaimed, "Nobly done, my Eros! thy love would not suffer thee to see thy master die, but thy example has taught him what he ought to do."

It is not often that one of these minute relics of antiquity comes before us, for the connexion of which with any historical event or personage so many plausible (if not convincing) arguments can be found as in the present instance. The times to which the work belongs are indicated by its workmanship and by the peculiarity of the legend: the introduction of the family cognizance indubitably declares its connexion with the family of Antony: whilst the name of the owner agrees with that of a person known to have had the right of assuming such a badge of dependency. And after all, in a case like this, where

demonstration is impossible, imagination may be allowed a little scope in strengthening the arguments that aim at establishing the reality of so interesting a monument.

This gem turned up at a miscellaneous sale in Town in the spring of 1883, where it was bought on the commission of Mr Lewis, who like Horace's

“Impiger extremos currit mercator ad Indos,
Per mare pauperiem fugiens [quaerens?], per saxa, per ignes”

in his chase of these fascinating butterflies of the flowery meads of archæology!