

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

AT ITS FORTY-EIGHTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 21, 1888,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY
1887—1888.

ALSO

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XXX.

BEING No. 4 OF THE SIXTH VOLUME.

Cambridge:

DEIGHTON BELL & CO.; MACMILLAN & BOWES.

LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS,

1891.

Price 7s. 6d.

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WITH APPENDIX.



Cambridge:

DEIGHTON, BELL & CO.; MACMILLAN & BOWES.

LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS.

1890.

Cambridge:

PRINTED BY C. J. CLAY, M.A. AND SONS
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

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XX. THE FALL OF CAPANEUS: AN ETRUSCAN INTAGLIO.
Communicated by C. W. KING, M.A.

[April 30, 1888.]

THE religious and mystic spirit of the Etruscans, apparent in all their works, is nowhere more conspicuous than in the choice of subjects for their signet-devices. They evidently sought that these articles, of such importance in those times, in all the relations of social life, should, small as they were, not be destitute of some useful moral:

“Centuriae seniorum agitant expertia frugis.”

From the Dorian legends, that had superseded, or been grafted on, their primitive Nature-worship, which was utterly devoid of imagery¹ or even symbolism (for no traces are to be found of either), they selected such warnings against sin as Philoctetes stung by the serpent in the very act of betraying the deposit of his dying lord: the impious Theseus fixed eternally upon his iron chair before the gates of Hell: or the unconquerable Hercules a victim to the potency of wine. But of all these lessons none was more popular (as was natural in a sacerdotal community) than the fate of *Capaneus*, struck down by Jove's lightning from the Theban walls which he had sworn to scale, even in Heaven's despite. This scene the Tyrrhene

¹ Plutarch mentions a tradition that *idols* were strictly prohibited by Numa: and that they were not admitted into the Roman temples until the 175th year of the City.—*Vita Numa*.

engraver has repeated over and over again¹, and generally lavished upon it his utmost skill, always with some variation in the pose of the figure and in the details, for the exact reproduction of any signet-device was, for obvious reasons, strictly prohibited by law². Of all these varied representations none has ever come under my notice so curious in its treatment and so valuable from the archaeological point of view, though far surpassed in beauty by many of its predecessors, as the calcedony upon which I propose to offer the following observations.

Capaneus, a nude, but helmeted, figure—according to the rule of perfected Greek art for Heroic types—is kneeling and falling backwards from the stroke of the thunder-bolt, which is seen at his breast in the shape of an eight-rayed star, not in that of the conventional *fulmen*³. He is in the moment of being dashed from the scaling ladder, which is tumbling about him, shattered into three pieces. The city-walls are briefly typified by a round tower, flanking a gate, only shown in half, in order not to interfere with the principal figure: the summit crowned with battlements of a peculiar form: and the mighty blocks of which it is constructed indicating the Pelasgian architecture of Amphion. The hero's figure is well drawn, and the sudden collapse of vitality in death from such a cause is indicated with considerable effect: but it is the *adjuncts* to the

¹ No less than three, all excellent in their way, are inserted in the '*Impronte Gemmarie*'—gems unpublished before 1830; and several more have subsequently come to my knowledge.

² Notably by Solon. It must be borne in mind that the ancient *seal* was the modern signature, and equally to be protected against forgery.

³ In representations of the Death of Capaneus, the lightning which strikes him has the figure of a large *Star*. That such was the established mode of representing the actual flash as distinguished from the weapon *fulmen*, appears from Virgil's expression (*Aen.* II. 693):

Intonuit laevum et de cœlo lapsa per umbras

Stella facem ducens multa cum luce cucurrit,

and again Diomedes, "triste Minervae *sidus*" (XI. 260).

scene that now constitute the chief value of the picture to the mind of the intelligent archaeologist. There can be no doubt that its artist, for want of better authority to guide him, put down for the Cadmean gate the portal of his native city¹. Not the least remarkable feature in its construction are the tall slender battlements, topped with balls, so strongly reminding the *prehistoric* Cantabrigian of the Jacobean pinnacles of our own Great St Mary's steeple, ruthlessly swept away some forty years back by the then newly generated Gothic mania, now happily fast calming down. Such battlements show the appropriateness of the name of *pinnae* as applied to these defensive appendages by the Romans, who could only have got them from their original teachers in art, their Etruscan neighbours. *Timber*, evidently, is their material, as it was (probably) that of the upper part of the fortification of every low Cyclopean wall, otherwise so easy of ascent: a supposition confirmed not merely by the nature of the case, but by the timber *brattice* known actually to have given the desired height to mediaeval fortifications much more elevated than these were. On the other hand, the walls of cities "fenced up to heaven," with which the Phoenician artist was familiar, are always represented in his works (*paterae* and coins) as finished off with a *serrated* line cut in the *stone* parapet.

A medallion of Antoninus Pius exhibits the Cyclopean gateway of Alba Longa, as it stood in his day, supporting the gigantic figure of her famous son, and flanked by two lofty *lantern-towers*, whose slender proportions make us suppose their

¹ That faithful pictures of objects then existing were in this manner preserved, is made certain by a most interesting and important monument now in the Museum of Volterra. In the bas-relief ornamenting a small alabaster sarcophagus, representing the siege of Thebes, the *arco dei Giganti* of the Etruscan town, still standing, is exactly represented with the three immense heads at its springing and keystone, just as the sculptor saw them, more than two thousand years ago, with every feature perfect, but now reduced, by time's corroding tooth, to black and shapeless blocks.

construction no other than woodwork: and that accurate archaeologist, Virgil, would certainly not have "lugged in by the head and shoulders" (to use a vulgar but most applicable expression) Priam's wooden look-out¹ into his otherwise perfect picture of the Taking of Troy, had he not been compelled by the fact of its forming a prominent feature in the then existing history of that event.

That delightful specimen of an antiquary of the old school, the amiable Comte de Caylus, has published this very intaglio accurately drawn, in that inexhaustible storehouse of his long-continued gatherings, the *Recueil d'Antiquités*.² But in explaining the subject, he has exhibited a deficiency of *esprit*, and an expenditure of misapplied reading, truly to be wondered at in a Frenchman of Voltaire's times. He begins by looking at the picture *upside-down*, whereby he converts the hero into a *tumbler* throwing a somersault; and the architectural part into a weird-looking machine in which, to his infinite satisfaction, he discovers the undescribed *Petaurum*, that so delighted the Roman populace in the days of Lucretius and Manilius. His mistake is the more surprising from his having already given in the previous volume, the same subject, without the masonry indeed, but with the name KAIIANO inscribed (the first four letters in a monogram), which, however, he has, most unaccountably, been unable to decipher³, or to divine the real nature of the subject, but

"Aliquando bonus dormitat Homerus."

¹ "Turrin in praecipiti stantem, summisque sub astra
Eductam tectis
Adgressi ferro circum, qua summa labantes
Juncturas tabulata dabant, convellimus altis
Sedibus, impulimusque. *Aeneid* II. 460.

² Tom. v. pl. lxxxvi. 2.

³ Merely remarking that the characters differ from those usually found on Etruscan gems. Tom. iv. pl. xxxvii. 4. By a strange oversight, he repeats the same gem, a white agate, in Tom. vi. pl. xxv. 3, with pretty nearly the same observations.

Although no description is extant of the real form of the *Petaurum*, we may be sure it was very unlike the object with which the too sagacious Count identifies it on our gem.

Manilius' expressions¹ are sufficiently definite to show that the machine was of the nature of a balance which threw one acrobat aloft in the air, whilst the other descended in a horizontal flight²: it was in fact a combination of our vertical swing and the "flying trapeze." Caylus, on the contrary, understands by the term a contrivance that shot out the performer by means of a strong internal spring, being worked on the principle of the cannon which, lately, projected the fire-fly Zazel into the clouds (of smoke) for the shuddering admiration of the visitors to the Westminster Aquarium. New inventions in this line are but forgotten tricks resuscitated. The fable of "Spring-heeled Jack," the highwayman, was an actual fact to the Romans, when the Emperor Carinus (who, as Diocletian said of him, did at least make his subjects laugh) exhibited amongst the other wonders of his magnificent Games, an acrobat termed *neurobates* "who by means of springs concealed in his boots flew up to an incredible elevation in the air³."

The notion of a machine for producing a semblance of flying over the heads of the spectators was naturally suggested by the military engines of the period, the motive power in all of which was a *spring*; that being the sudden recoil of a long lever acted upon either by the tension of twisted ropes of sinews, or a counterpoise of great weight. Such engines were capable of

¹ v. 439.

² The performers, no doubt, being equipped with *wings* to improve the illusion. Shortly before Nero's death, a *flying* boy was dashed to pieces at his feet in crossing the amphitheatre.

³ *Neurobatem, qui velut in ventis cothurnatus ferretur, exhibuit: et ichnobatem qui per parietem urso eluso cucurrit: et ursos mimum agentes: et item centum salpistas uno crepitu concinentes:—*these last an anticipatory German brass-band, and a fitting orchestra to the theatrical bears. (Vopiscus, *Carinus*, cap. XIX.)

tossing to a distance far greater weights than the human body (for which purpose, indeed, by soldiers of special cruelty they were sometimes abused): the catapult of Archimedes, with three well-aimed shots of ten talents (six hundredweight), entirely shattered the *sambuca* of Marcellus, as it drew near his walls across the harbour of Syracuse, mounted on the decks of eight galleys fastened together. The use of these *tormenta* survived in actual warfare down to a much later period than is generally supposed. Stevechius, in his edition of Vegetius, gives a large and detailed drawing of an *onager* (or *trébuchet*, to use its very expressive mediaeval name) constructed during the German Wars of the Emperor Charles V. for the purpose of reducing to capitulation the garrison of a castle situated upon an island on the Rhine, which had set at defiance the light cannon of its assailants. This tremendous machine, its motive power derived from the sudden drop of an immense weight at the short arm of the lever—threw from the opposite river-bank into the middle of the fortifications the carcasses of *dead horses*, whose intolerable stench quickly effected what gunpowder had failed to do. The good old Count with his imaginary *petaurum*, and the cognate ideas suggested by its mechanism, have led us far astray from the "Fall of Capaneus," which must have passed through many vicissitudes of Fortune, lively and tragical, since the gem escaped from his cabinet, which it adorned in the year 1762. It turned up, at last, mounted for a bracelet with six other antique intagli, in banded-agate, nicol, sard, and red jasper, at a recent London sale (May, 1883); whence, following the law of "Natural affinity," this rarity of its class was attracted into the ever-growing *dactyliotheca* of Mr S. S. Lewis, where Hermes grant that it may find an abiding resting-place!