

**ART. XXXVIII.—Two Letters from Ralph Carr Ellison, Esq.,
to G. J. Johnson, Esq., of Castlesteads, Cumberland, con-
cerning the Ancient Roman Ring found some years ago at
that place, with a supposed Cross engraved upon it.**

Read at Castlesteads, August 28th, 1879.

Rome, April 21st, 1878.

DEAR Captain Johnson,—I had the pleasure of seeing your daughter and Mrs. Littledale before they left Rome, and at Miss Johnson's suggestion, I left one or two of the sealing-wax impressions of your Roman Ring engraved with a cross and two palm-fronds (found at Castlesteads) in her hands, to be shown to the Rev. Mr. Palmer, who has given much attention to paintings and symbols from the Catacombs. On seeing this gentleman some days subsequently, he amazed me by saying that he thought the device might be pagan, and might constitute a symbol in celebration of *two victories*, as indicated by the two palm fronds, seeing that the palm was certainly in use as symbolic of victory anterior to Christianity. I asked him whether he was aware that the engraved side of the stone had been concealed, until by falling from the table the setting was fractured, and how that was compatible with a pagan origin of the ring?

He replied, "Oh, I judge from the object itself, without reference to anything else; the cross is surmounted by something like a helmet." I remarked that I brought the impression to Rome to be submitted to Commendatore De Rossi when I should have an opportunity. Mr. Palmer then said, "I have put the impression into De Rossi's hands, and if he tells me his opinion you shall know it." So my interview with Mr. P. respecting the ring terminated.

But wishing De Rossi to be thoroughly certified how and where, and with what other articles the object was found, and above all, that he should possess the most important concomitant evidence of the concealment of the engraved side of the stone, I obtained an introduction to him from Sir Adolphus Paget, our Ambassador, and took with me your card with several of the impressions upon it. He had received that given by Mr. Palmer, but listened with lively interest to my statement as to the discovery of the ring, and the subsequent discovery of the device upon it, through mere accident.



I said nothing about Mr. Palmer's opinion, but remarked that I could only interpret the representation as one of some Christian martyrdom by crucifixion, if not The Crucifixion. De Rossi said, without a moment's hesitation, "It is 'Notre Seigneur lui même,' beyond doubt." In that case, I asked, how is the second palm-frond to be explained? "Oh, for the sake of symmetry, and nothing more." I forgot to ask him about the slanting garland upon the likeness of a human head at the summit of the cross, for I never doubted it to be the crown of thorns. I left the impressions, all but one, in his hands. To my apprehension, the cross is represented as seen, not from the front, but from a position in the rear.

Ever Yours,

RALPH CARR ELLISON.

P.S.—De Rossi further said, that in addition to the motive of fear of persecution, was to be considered that of the possible fear of exposing the likeness of the cross to *pollution* in the daily course of life, amidst a society still mainly non-christian. He pronounced the ring to be singularly interesting.—R. C. E.

Dunstan Hill, Gateshead, June 9th, 1879.

Dear Captain Johnson.—The impression of your most interesting Roman gem (finger-ring) from Castlesteads, conveyed to me in gray sealing-wax, has been carefully photographed, in a greatly magnified aspect, by Mr. Piper, of Newcastle, who, though chiefly employed in the Savings Bank, cultivates the photographing of architectural objects and the like, with remarkable skill, patience, and success.

I do not at all regret that we have had the object thus reproduced of such a magnitude as to admit of being studied to advantage.

It appears to me to be a sign or symbol of the Cross of our Lord, but not a Crucifix or likeness of the Crucifixion; and as the symbol is surmounted by a helmet and was found in a frontier camp of the Empire, I think we may infer that it was a conventional military form of the sacred emblem representing the Cross as a defence against the perils of a soldier's life, and against the terrors of death.

If we refer to Gibbon, ch. xx., where he adverts to the statue erected by the Emperor Constantine to himself at Rome, "bearing a cross in its right hand, with an inscription which referred the victory of his arms and the deliverance of Rome to that salutary sign, the true symbol of force and courage." The historian proceeds:—"The symbol sanctified the arms of the soldiers of Constantine; the cross glittered on their helmets, was engraved on their shields, was interwoven into their banners, and the consecrated emblems which adorned

the person of the Emperor himself were distinguished only by richer materials and more exquisite workmanship." In his notes, Gibbon refers to his authorities, (which are contemporary,) namely, Athanasius, and the Christian poet Prudentius.

You will perceive that the helmet shows the jointed chin-guard which was known to the Romans.

Faithfully yours,

RALPH CARR ELLISON.

The above two letters were read to the Society at Castlesteads, and the gem exhibited, with the enlarged photographs, mentioned by Mr. Ellison. From these a woodcut of the gem has been made by Mr. Utting, of twice the breadth of the gem. It is given on page 526, and is more accurate than that given in the Lapidarium Septentrionale, at page 238.

The Rev. T. Lees observed that when Mr. R. S. Ferguson informed him that a Roman gem containing a Christian cross had been found at Castlesteads, he hailed the discovery with the greatest satisfaction, as he was extremely anxious to gain evidence of the existence of Christianity in this district during the Roman occupation. A very careful study of the enlarged photographs of impressions of the gem had not convinced him of its Christian character, and now the inspection of the gem itself, and of unmagnified impressions, compelled him to resign, with the greatest regret, any idea of its Christian origin. He felt convinced that the object represented was really a trophy of the usual form, consisting of the helmet* (in this case set on side-ways, with the cheek-piece prominent), hauberk, and three bucklers: two of the bucklers being placed at the extremities of the cross-piece of the frame, and at right angles to the plane of the gem, and the third buckler laid horizontally at the foot. Trophies almost precisely similar in character may be seen standing on the "spina" of the circus maximus represented on a Florentine gem of

* The helmet has its sides gadrooned like those of Cromwell's time.

a chariot race, of which an engraving is given on p. 89 of the fifth edition of Smith's Smaller Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities.

Canon Dixon expressed his concurrence in this view, which was generally adopted by the members of the Society, to the exclusion of any idea that the gem had any Christian significance.
