

I.

NOTES ON THE ROYAL HEART PRESERVED AT ST MARGARET'S
CONVENT, WHITEHOUSE LOAN, EDINBURGH. BY Miss J. M.
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It is perhaps not generally known to the members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland that St Margaret's Convent, Whitehouse Loan, in this city, possesses an interesting relic of the Plantagenet kings in the form of the heart of one of them, which has been embalmed and enclosed in a leaden casket.

The following notes on this subject are entirely suggested by inquiries undertaken by M. Alexandre Pommier, Juge au Tribunal Civil of Orléans, a noted French archaeologist. They are largely a translation of the paper prepared by him for the Archæological Society of that city.

Presumably it will be of interest for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to possess a record of all that is known of this relic, and in preparing such a record I wish to thank the Mother Superior of St Margaret's Convent, custodian of the relic, for her kind courtesy in furnishing much valuable information on the subject.

I understand from M. Pommier that lately there has been some suggestion in the French press as to the propriety of the present French Government following the example of Napoleon III., who, in 1867, proposed to cede to England the effigies of the Plantagenet princes in the old Abbey of Fontevrault, near Saumur. Whether this proposition be entertained by the Government or not, it adds a fresh interest to the relic now in Edinburgh, which, though its origin may be disputed, certainly came from Fontevrault. I shall try, in these notes, to throw some light on its origin, and also to follow its wanderings from Fontevrault to St Margaret's Convent, Edinburgh.

There were altogether six members of the Plantagenet line buried in the so-called Cemetery of the English Kings at Fontevrault:—

I. The first, and greatest, was King Henry II. (Curt Mantle), who died at Chinon in 1189.

Matthew of Paris, the chronicler of the thirteenth century, speaks of King Henry II. being buried with all pomp and ceremony at Fontevrault, but Sir James Ramsay¹ cites many authorities for the fact that he was abandoned and robbed by his servants at the last, and then hastily buried.

¹ *Angevin Empire*, vol. i. p. 245.

Besides Henry's tomb, we find those of—

- II. Richard Cœur de Lion, d. 1199.
- III. Jeanne (or Johanna) of England, sister of the above, and wife of Raymond VI., Count of Toulouse, d. 1199.
- IV. Eleanor of Aquitaine, widow of Henry II. and mother of the before-mentioned royal personages, d. 1204.
- V. Isabella of Angoulême, widow of John (Lackland), d. 1246.
- VI. Raymond VII. of Toulouse,¹ son of Jeanne of England and of Raymond VI.

Each of these six Plantagenet royalties had a distinct sepulture, with a monument surmounted by a recumbent effigy of the deceased. Of these effigies, four still remain (figs. 1 and 2). Three are figures of colossal size, hewn out of tufa rock: the fourth, that of Isabella of Angoulême, is smaller, and carved in wood; it has more artistic merit. All four are painted in colour.

In the year 1817, the Regent, afterwards George IV., asked for these four statues, but the Prefect of Maine and Loire upheld the right of the province to their possession.

The monuments remained intact in their original state till the year 1504.² In that year the Abbess Renée of Bourbon altered the position of the recumbent effigies, and even opened the underlying sepulchres. In 1562 the Huguenots ravaged Anjou and sacked the Abbey. In 1682, in the course of so-called improvements, the tombs were again disturbed, and by that date the monuments of Jeanne of England, wife of Raymond VI. of Toulouse, and of her son, Raymond VII., seem to have disappeared. Finally, in the year of the Revolution, 1793, the populace rose and utterly broke up the tombs, destroying the inscriptions and digging up the graves in hope of buried treasure.

What treasures the marauders discovered we do not know, but we can trace one relic disturbed in those troublous times, namely, the embalmed heart, the subject of these notes.

Rightly or wrongly, it has been known from those times till recently as the heart of Henry II.

The following letter, written in answer to inquiries as to its origin, in the year 1887, by M. Desnoyers, Vicar General, and Director of the Historical Museum at Orléans, gives its history in so far as he knew it, and he seems to take for granted that it was the heart of King Henry II. He says:—

¹ Raymond VII. is said to have been represented beating his breast in repentance for having embraced the doctrines of the heretics. See Cook's *Old Touraine*, vol. i. p. 80.

² Bordier and Charton's *Histoire de France* reproduces (p. 274) the statue of Eleanor, and (p. 312) that of Richard Cœur de Lion.

"This heart, buried in the church of the Abbey of Fontevrault, was taken from its tomb in 1793, when the church was profaned by the impiety of the Revolution. It fell into the hands of a resident¹ who preserved it carefully in its leaden case as a curiosity. It was purchased from him by a native of Orléans, M. Crétie, writing-master, who lived in the Rue Royale. He had formed a collection of curiosities, and seized the chance of adding to it by including in it the heart of Henry II. After the death of M. Crétie, part of his collection was bought in 1825 by the curators of the Museum,² and the Royal Heart was among the objects thus sold by his heirs. It was exhibited in the Museum till the year 1857, when Monseigneur Gillis (Bishop of Lymira)



Fig. 1. Effigies of Henry II. and Isabella of Angoulême at Fontevrault.

came to Orléans to preach the panegyric of Joan of Arc. He visited the Museum, and, the Director having brought it before his notice, he expressed a desire to take it back to England. The municipality authorised him to remove it. It was given to him. I, the subscriber, certify the exactitude of these details, to which I have been witness.

(Signed) DESNOYERS, VICAIRE GÉNÉRAL,
Director of the Historical Museum.

"ORLÉANS,
"March 19, 1888."

This letter from M. Desnoyers mentions that the heart was in the possession of an unnamed resident (probably, though not certainly, of the village of Fontevrault) before it was purchased by M. Crétie of Orléans. The latter individual, a modest writing-master who died in

¹ Probably of Fontevrault.

² Of Orléans.

1818, seems to have been a man of eclectic tastes, whose collection included stuffed birds, shells, fossils, ornaments—in fact, any object of rarity or interest which came in his way.

The relic consists of an embalmed and desiccated human heart, enclosed in a heart-shaped leaden case, the two sides of which were soldered together but are now beginning to open at the bottom and at one side. There is no inscription or ornament of any kind on the leaden envelope. This is, in its turn, encased in a strong cedarwood box with

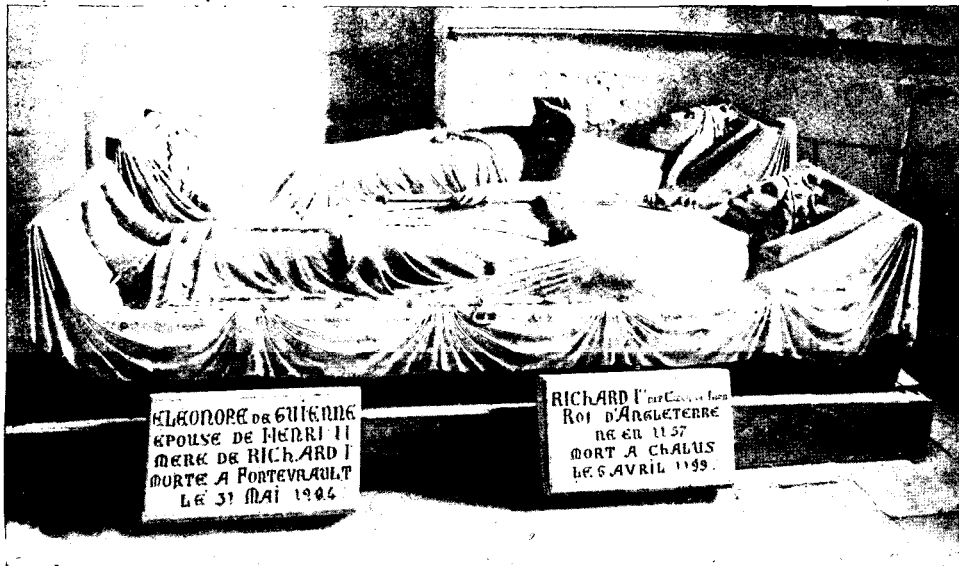


Fig. 2. Effigies of Richard I. and Eleanor of Aquitaine at Fontevault.

lock and key, and labelled on the outside, "Heart of Henry II. of England."

In the archives of the Municipal Council of Orléans we find an allusion to the gift of the heart of King Henry II. to Monseigneur Gillis in the minutes of a meeting of Council on May 19, 1857.

M. Eugene Vignat (Mayor) moved:—

"That the Museum of Orléans possessed the heart of Henry II., King of England, died in Chinon in 1186 [a mistake for 1189], and buried at Fontevault. The heart, encased in a leaden casket, has been at the Revolution removed from its funeral urn. Monseigneur Gillis, Bishop of Edinburgh, acquainted with this fact, has manifested a desire to take back this precious relic to his own country."

The Mayor asked the consent of the Council to give the heart to the Bishop, to be offered by him to the English Government in the name of the town of Orléans.

Permission was granted unanimously.

Monseigneur Gillis had suggested that a condition should be attached to this gift, namely, that the heart should be interred in the Royal Vaults at Westminster with religious rites,¹ and, failing the fulfilment of this condition, the municipality consented to the relic remaining in his own possession.

The Bishop's interview with Lord Palmerston, then Prime Minister, resulted in the annexed condition being refused, and Monseigneur Gillis brought the relic home to his house in Edinburgh. He conceived the idea of building a chapel in the convent church of St Margaret's, dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, where the heart of Henry II. should be united with relics of that saint. He applied to the Vatican for relics of St Thomas, which were granted; and also received from Sens part of a stone altar at which it was known that Thomas à Becket officiated when he took refuge at the pontifical court of Alexander III. in that town. The Bishop's plan was, however, frustrated by his death, in 1864, and he left the heart with other relics by will to St Margaret's Convent, Whitehouse Loan, where it still is, though the fact does not seem to be very generally known.

In the year 1888 doubts suggested themselves to the owners of the heart as to its true origin. They chiefly arose from an article signed "John Williams," which appeared in *Notes and Queries*.² The article is as follows:—

"I remember seeing in the year 1828, in the Museum of Orléans, the heart of King Henry II. of England, which was formerly preserved in the Abbey of Fontevrault. A hole, as far as I recollect, had been corroded in the leaden case which enclosed it, through which was visible a shrivelled object. This royal relic was a few years since given by the authorities of Orléans to Bishop Gillis of Edinburgh, to be by him handed over to the English Government. How has it been disposed of? My principal object, however, in sending you this note, is to express my persuasion that a mistake has been made as to the king, and that it is not the heart of Henry II., but of Henry III. Henry II. was buried at Fontevrault; Henry III. at Westminster. There is no historical evidence, as far as I know, of the heart of the former having been preserved separate from his remains. As his body was buried in the Abbey, there would be no particular reason for keeping the heart separate in the same establishment. If separated, it would surely have been sent to England.

"The manner of his burial,' says Baker, 'was thus. He was clothed in his royal robes, his crown upon his head, white gloves upon his hands, boots of gold upon his legs, gilt spurs at his heels, a great rich ring upon his finger,

¹ Narrative preserved at St Margaret's Convent.

² *Notes and Queries*, 2nd ser., xi. pp. 166-167, March 2, 1861.

the sceptre in his hand, his sword by his side, and his face uncovered and all bare.'

"There is, however, incontestable proof of the heart of Henry III. having been consigned to the Abbess of Fontevrault, to be preserved in that monastery. This is clear from the following decree of his son Edward I., dated 3rd December 1291, and to be seen in Rymer :—¹

"The King to all and sundry (whom it may concern), greeting,

"Whereas we have understood for certain that Lord Henry, of famous memory, formerly King of England, our father, having himself for long lived at the monastery of Fons Ebrolodus (Fontevrault) promised his heart, after his death, to the same monastery, and the Abbess—dear to us in Christ—of the foresaid monastery, arriving lately in England, prayed that that heart, according to the promise aforesaid, be delivered to her: Walter Abbot of Westminster, dear to us in Christ, delivered the entire heart foresaid in the presence of the Venerable A. of Durham, and R. of Bath and Wells, Bishops, and of our beloved and liege Edmund our brother, William de Valence, our uncle, and very many our other lieges, on Monday, next before the feast of the Blessed Lucy, Virgin, in the twentieth year of our reign, in the church of Westminster, to the foresaid Abbess, by our good will and command, to be carried away to the foresaid Monastery of the Fons Ebrolodus, and to be buried in the same. In whose, etc. (probably in witness whereof). The King being witness in London.

"The third day of December.'²

"I would ask, therefore, if the above-named relic be the heart of Henry II., what has become of the heart of Henry III.? The mistake, if mistake it be, probably originated in the patent fact of Henry II.'s interment in the Abbey. I am, however, quite ready to surrender my opinion to anyone more competent to enlighten us. (Signed) JOHN WILLIAMS.

"ARNO'S COURT."

The Reverend Mother Superior, Mary Bernard Clapperton, whose attention had been directed to the foregoing article, instituted inquiries in various quarters, and a correspondent in Angers, in touch with M. Célestin Port,³ decidedly echoes the opinion of Mr Williams that the heart was not that of Henry II., but of his grandson Henry III., which was enclosed in a golden vase and buried in the sepulchre of his mother Isabella of Angoulême. The golden vase may have utterly disappeared at the time of the Revolution, if not before.

In view of the fact that the leaden case of the heart bears no inscription, the question is difficult, if not impossible, to decide. There are, however, two arguments in favour of its having belonged to Henry III. They are:—

I. We have no contemporary testimony that Henry II.'s heart was embalmed or buried separately. We *do* know that his burial was hurried

¹ Rymer, vol. i. p. 376.

² This date is erroneous. In 1291 St Lucy's Day (December 13) fell on a Monday. The Monday before would be December 8.

³ Author of *Recueil Archéologique de Maine et Loire*.

and neglectful, though his son, Geoffrey, the Chancellor, saw that a certain ceremony was observed at the interment.

II. We have King Edward I.'s writ of 1291 distinctly entrusting his father Henry III.'s heart to the Abbess of Fontevrault.

It is interesting to note that Henry III. and his wife, Eleanor of Provence, on a tour through France in the year 1254, halted on the 15th of November at the Abbey of Fontevrault, and stayed there for five days, with the object of visiting his ancestors' tombs.¹ Henry, who loved churches, shrines, and monasteries, may then have determined the future destination of his heart, and have charged his son Edward to carry out his wishes.

It may be remarked, in conclusion, that the custom of separate interment for the heart of distinguished personages seems to have originated in Anjou in the twelfth century.² The heart, being the noblest organ of the human body, was sent as a token of special esteem and affection. It was usually, though not always, dedicated to a church or a convent; Richard Cœur de Lion, for example, directed his heart to be sent to the town of Rouen, in thanks for its fidelity.

There are so many instances of these separate interments that we can only cite a few examples:—

Dante in his *Inferno*, canto xii., speaks of "The Heart that still upon the Thames is honoured." This was the heart of "Henry of Allmaine," nephew of Henry III., and eldest son of his brother Richard, Duke of Cornwall and King of the Romans. He was murdered by Guy and Simon de Montfort on the altar steps of the parish church of Viterbo, "in God's bosom," as Dante calls it, in the year 1271. His heart, enclosed in a golden vase, was placed on the tomb of Edward the Confessor at Westminster, while his body was finally laid to rest in the Cistercian Abbey of Hayles, Gloucestershire.³

Henry of Allmaine's father, Richard, Duke of Cornwall and King of the Romans, was also buried at Hayles, while his heart was placed in the custody of the Friars Minor at Oxford.⁴

Coming nearer home, we find that Devorgilla, widow of John Balliol of Barnard's Castle, who died in 1269, reared at once to his memory

¹ Ramsay's *Dawn of the Constitution*, p. 149.

² M. Godard-Faultier, in the *Mémoires* of the Society of Agriculture, Science, and Art of Angers, vol. xxiv. p. 193 (1882).

Note.—On the subject of the tombs of the Plantagenets at Fontevrault, one may consult—

I. *Les Monuments de la Monarchie*, by Monfaucon, vol. ii. p. 113, plate 15.

II. A monograph by Louis Courajod in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 1867, vol. xxiii. p. 537 (from letter dated April 1816).

For these references, as well as for the greater part of the material included in these notes, I am indebted to M. Alexandre Pommier of Orléans.

³ See Sir James Ramsay's *Dawn of the Constitution*, p. 275, *et op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

the splendid pile of Sweetheart Abbey, "so called from her husband's embalmed heart in an ivory casket built in over the high altar. After her death it was placed on her bosom in the coffin."¹

A comparatively recent instance of this old custom is alluded to by Mr Patrick Begbie in two letters to the Society of Antiquaries to be found in *Archæologica Scotica*, vol. ii. p. 116. He writes that in the Valleyfield and Culross families there had long been a vague and undefined tradition of the existence of a Silver Heart in the ruins of the old Abbey of Culross. Whose the heart was, and where it was laid, were equally unknown, till in the year 1808 Sir Robert Preston of Valleyfield caused a square altar tomb, without inscription or name, which was in his burial aisle, to be carefully unbuilt. Beneath the tomb two stone slabs were found to be hollowed out, and to contain the Silver Heart in question, together with a leaden case, also heart-shaped, the use of which it is more difficult to determine. An inscription on the silver case showed that it contained the heart of Edward, second Lord Bruce of Kinloss, who was killed in a duel fought in 1613 with Sir Edward Sackville, afterwards Earl of Dorset, near Bergen-op-Zoom, in Holland. The body of Lord Bruce was interred in the great church of Bergen-op-Zoom, while his heart was sent home and deposited in Culross Abbey. After this discovery, and a record having been made of the whole circumstances, the two cases, silver and leaden, with their contents, were replaced between the stone slabs, and the tomb rebuilt as before. An inscription recording the ownership of the Silver Heart was placed above it.

There are even more modern instances of the persistence of this ancient custom, but the most familiar example to all Scotsmen is undoubtedly that of Bruce's heart. King Robert the Bruce, when dying at Cardross, directed that his body should be interred at Dunfermline and his heart sent to Jerusalem, to make the pilgrimage which he had failed to accomplish in his lifetime. The heart was taken to Spain by the good Sir James Douglas, and then brought home again to Scotland by Sir Simon Lockhart of Lee, and finally buried before the high altar of Melrose Abbey.

In making this disposition of his remains King Robert followed a well-established custom among royal and princely personages, which seems to have had its greatest vogue in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, and of which the heart of King Henry III. (as we may well assume it to be) now at St Margaret's Convent, Edinburgh, is yet another example.

¹ Sir Andrew Agnew's *The Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway*, vol. i. p. 93.