

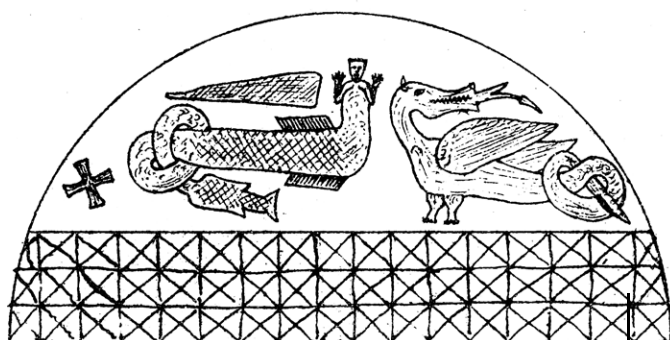
ART. XXI.—*An Attempt to explain the Sculptures over the South and West Doors of Long Marton Church. By the REV. THOMAS LEES, M.A.*

Read at Penrith, January 19th, 1881.

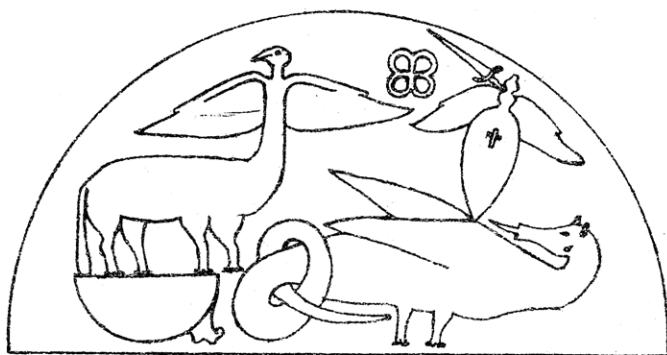
IN accordance with our Lord's declaration, "I am the Door," we often find the tympana of church doors of Norman date adorned with representations of events from His sacred life. A careful consideration of Mr. Cory's drawings soon convinced me that these mystic figures were not intended to represent this class of subjects. There was, however, another and entirely different meaning attached to doors. The assertion of the Apostle that "we must, through much tribulation, enter into the kingdom of God," caused the architects of Norman times to use round their doors mouldings referring to various kinds of martyrdom. "In the early ages of Christianity, it was a matter requiring no small courage to make an open profession of Christianity, and to join one's self to the Church Militant; and this fact has left its impress in the various representations of martyrdom surrounding the nave doors of Norman, and the first stage of early English churches as well as in the frightful forms which seem to deter those who would enter."* Hence I turned my attention in another direction, viz., to the legendary history of the Saints to whom the church is dedicated; and there I found, as I conceive, a key to the meanings of the strange forms with which both tympana are filled. The dedication is a singular, and, I believe, a unique one. It is in honour of SS. Margaret and James. Mr. Parker ("Calendar of the Anglican Church,") says that two hundred and thirty-eight English churches are named in St. Margaret's *sole* honour, three are named conjointly to the B.V. Mary and

* Neale and Webb: Introductory Essay to the Translation of Durandus, p. lxlx. St.

Long Marton Church



Over West Door



Over South Door



St. Margaret, one to SS. John and Margaret, and one to St. Margaret and All Saints ; but he mentions none to St. Margaret and St. James. Some of them may be named from St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland, but this church is of too early a date to be dedicated to her ; and I hope to prove in this paper that the patrons are St. Margaret of Antioch, and St. James the Less.

The story of St. Margaret, one of the oldest, strangest, and most popular of the Mediæval Legends, runs thus :— She was born at Antioch in Pisidia, and was the daughter of Theodosius, a heathen priest. Through the influence of her nurse she became a Christian, and her father consequently drove her from her home, and she took refuge with her nurse, whose sheep she kept. The prefect of the district, Olybrius, fell in love with her ; but, on her acknowledging herself a Christian, and refusing to entertain his proposals, threw her into prison, and subjected her to dreadful tortures. In prison the evil one appeared to her in the form of a dragon, and endeavoured to draw her away from the faith, but she completely overcame him by means of a cross she carried in her hand. Hence she is constantly represented as trampling on a dragon, and piercing him with her cross. Another form of this part of the story is that the dragon swallowed St. Margaret, and her cross sticking in his throat, she burst out from his body unharmed. After this she was again tortured by the prefect's command, and finally she was decapitated, and her soul emerged from the headless trunk in the form of a dove. This took place on the “tercio decimo kalendas. Augusti (*i.e.* July 20th,) A.D. 278.

Tympanum over South Door.—The main figure is a dragon with a knotted tail and a head very much resembling a pig's. This represents the demon who tempted St. Margaret in prison. The porcine head indicating his uncleanness, and the knotted tail his restricted power, for the dragon's chief power was supposed to dwell in the tail.

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From his back proceeds a dove (the emblem of St. Margaret), marked with the cross. The miracle of her deliverance from the dragon is represented in a similar fashion on the famous altar cloth at Steeple Aston, except that there she emerges in *propria personâ*, and holds the cross in her clasped hands. This cloth is work of the middle of the fourteenth century. With its pommel resting on the shoulder of the dove appears the sword to indicate the manner of her martyrdom. You will observe that both the dragons on the pictures have (besides knotted tails) stings protruding from their closed mouths, for, according to Hugo à S. Victor, "the devil's power lurks under his tongue, and does not lie in his teeth, because he is the chief of liars, and the venom is the falsehood which he utters with his tongue, and which brings souls within the power of his teeth." On the dexter side of the sword is a cross of very curious form. It is made by two twelfth-century letters "M," joined base to base. These are the initials of "Margaret Martyr," and a convincing proof that this picture refers to that saint. The letter M of a precisely similar shape, and used in the same way to form a cross, powders a scarf which St. Margaret wears across her chest in a representation from Mediæval embroidery given in Parker's Anglican Calendar. This cross, so strangely formed, occupies the chief point of the work, and indicates that it was through the power of the cross that St. Margaret overcame, and was delivered. The dexter side is occupied by a strange composite figure. From the headless body of a lion, a human form emerges, which, instead of a head, is furnished with the wings and the head of a dove. This, I think, refers to the Saint's bodily escape from that lion who goeth about seeking whom he may devour; and also the escape of her soul (in form of a dove) from the burden of the flesh at her martyrdom.

Beneath the feet of the lion, and close to the tail of the dragon, is an object which looks very like the fish creel
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carried by Scotch fishwives. I take it to represent a vessel from which the dragon has emerged. When St. Margaret, according to the Golden Legend, had overcome the demon, she asked him what he was, and he answered that his name was Veltis, that he was one of a multitude of devils who had been inclosed in a brass vessel by Solomon, and sealed fast with his seal; and that after Solomon's death this vessel was broken open by Babylonians who supposed it contained treasure, when the devils escaped to the air, where they were incessantly espying how to "assayle ryghtfull men." This wild story, which reminds us of our old friends the Jin and the fisherman, in the "Arabian Nights," is, I believe, represented by the two figures of the vessel and dragon at the foot of the composition. The centre of this stone is pierced by an oblong rectangular hole two or three inches in depth. This may have been used for the insertion of a bracket to support a statue or a light, or for a pole from which to hang a lamp.

Tympanum of West Doors.—The lower part of this tympanum is filled by shallow panel work very similar in character to some inserted in the west end of the neighbouring church of Milburn. The compartments of this panel-work are square, and filled in by crosses in saltire, which may be intended for stars. If this be the case, the carving may be a representation of the starry pavement of Heaven. The upper portion of the tympanum contains four figures. In the dexter-base is a cross patee, and before it, with its hands extended, its tail turned towards the cross, and its head (which in the drawing looks like a cat's, but which Mr. Cory informs me is unquestionably human), appears an undoubted mermaid, with a long knotted tail. To the sinister we have a dragon, with twisted tail. His breast and legs face the cross; but the head, which somewhat resembles that of a crocodile, is turned in the opposite direction as if contemplating flight; and from the closed mouth protrudes its tongue, with its barbed sting

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beneath it. Over the fishy part of the mermaid, which is extended horizontally at right angles to the human portion, appears a cloudy-looking object, broad at the sinister end, and tapering off to a point at the dexter. This I would suggest to be the fuller's bat or club with which St. James the Less was beaten to death. He, like St. Margaret, is asserted by tradition to have been also a dragon-queller; and to have been *crucified* "because he destroyed by holding up a cross a large dragon or serpent which the Phrygians worshipped." The more generally received tradition seems to be that he was thrown from the top of the Temple of Jerusalem, in a tumult A.D. 62; and not being killed by the fall was pounded with stones, and received the fatal stroke from a fuller's bat. He is always represented with a club of this peculiar shape. (Calendar. P. 72.)

The central figure of a marine creature I take to be another representation of St. Margaret, who was also known as Marina (from the Latin "Mare, the sea,") and Pelagia (from the Greek *Πελαγος*). This figure may also be a symbolical representation of the saint's triumph over the power of water, as shown in her miraculous escape from the water torture to which she was subjected by Olybrius, after passing through that of fire. By the great kindness of Rev. Herbert E. Reynolds, M.A., Priest Vicar and Librarian of Exeter, who is now publishing a splendid edition of Bp. Grandisson's "Legenda Sanctorum," and who has anticipated the publication of the July portion of the work by allowing me the use of his MS. of the lections for St. Margaret's Day, I am enabled to lay before you this portion of the Saint's acta in the Church Latin of the 14th century. The eighth lection runs thus:—"Tunc preses ait; afferatur doleum; impleatur aque. In quo manibus pedibusque ligatis diutissime teneatur, ut commutacio tormentorum poena sit gravior, non refrigerium. Impletur statim quod fuerat imperatum. Set ecce terremotus illico
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factus est magnus, vinculaque quibus ligata fuerat rumpuntur. Ipsa nichil lesa de aquâ egreditur, laudans et magnificans Jesum Christum: videntes autem populi mirabilia dei, clamorem ad sydera tollunt, verum deum dicentes Jesum Christum. Eadem hora duodecim fore millia crediderunt."

I think we may conclude that this composite figure is intended for St. Margaret's escape from the water, as she had formerly escaped from the interior of the dragon. The water is indicated by the fish, and the saint issues from it in *propriâ personâ*. The head of the dragon is that of an amphibious creature, and this may indicate that the demon instigated the application of the water-torture.

The teaching of the whole composition and of the fanciful legends on which it is founded I conclude to be this—that both St. Margaret and St. James were enabled to overcome the Evil One by trusting in the power of the Cross of Christ.

Before concluding I must again refer to the mermaid. Its occurrence here on the tympanum of a church dedicated to St. Margaret affords a strong confirmation of the correctness of the following conjecture made by the Rev. S. Baring-Gould in his "Lives of the Saints":—"It is, however, not impossible that representations of Aphrodite (the foam-born), Atergatis, or Derecto, rising out of a fish or dragon, with her symbol the dove, may have been mistaken in later times for St. Margaret, and helped towards the genesis of the legend." Like the Venus Aphrodite of the ancients, St. Margaret was regarded as the protectress during child birth, and was invoked against its pains. Hence the reason of so many dedications in her honour. She seems to have filled the niche from which Venus had been displaced in the Pantheon.

No one can look on these sculptures, I think, without coming to the conclusion that their tone is eminently Scandinavian. After reading the following extract from
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the "*Speculum Regale*," or King's Mirror, an Icelandic or Norse work of the twelfth century, which I quote from Mr. Baring-Gould's "*Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas*," one feels almost tempted to say that the Longmarton carver had resorted to that book for the description of a mermaid—"A monster is seen also near Greenland, which people call the Margygr. This creature appears like a woman as far down as the waist, with breast and bosom like a woman, long hands, and soft hair; the neck and head in all respects like those of a human being. The hands seem to people to be long, and the fingers not to be parted, but united by a web like that on the feet of water-birds. From the waist downwards this monster resembles a fish, with scales, tail, and fins. . . . This monster has a very horrible face, with a broad brow and piercing eyes, a wide mouth and double chin." Though not a strictly accurate description of our mermaid at Longmarton, yet the animal described in the foregoing extract may have formed the pattern from which the carver worked, and from which also he felt at liberty to deviate in such minor matters as mouth and chin, when appropriating the general form to the story of the saint. The name by which the author of the "*Speculum*" denotes the sea-monster is Margygr." Can this be derived from the name of our saint? In the *Kalendarium Celticum*, printed by the late Bishop Forbes, in his "*Kalendars of Scottish Saints*," she is called Mairgreg. The three words, Margareta, Mairgreg, and Margygr, may well be akin, and the last of them, at all events, does not differ more from the second than the second from the first. The Margareta of Southern Europe, having become Mairgreg in Celtic Scotland, needed but little more change to convert it to the Icelandic Margygr.