

SOME NOTES ON THE TRADITION OF FLAYING, INFLICTED IN PUNISHMENT OF SACRILEGE; THE SKIN OF THE OFFENDER BEING AFFIXED TO THE CHURCH-DOORS.

It may be known to some of our readers, who have chanced to visit the eastern counties of England, and are acquainted with the picturesque site of the little town of Linton, or the adjacent rural hamlet of Hadstock, that a strange tradition yet darkly subsists amongst the peasantry in that locality, dating, as it would appear, from times anterior to the invasion of the Normans. It relates to the cruel and summary vengeance there supposed to have been inflicted upon a sacrilegious Dane. Few years have elapsed, since the curious traveller who visited that secluded spot, upon the borders of the counties of Essex and Cambridge, was wont to be directed to the north door of the little church, regarded by some as of Saxon date, to seek beneath the massive clamps and hinges for a relic of the Pirate Northman, whose skin had been attached to the door, a ghastly memorial of ecclesiastical vengeance, and a warning to all who might approach the church with like unhallowed intention.

I am not aware when the earliest mention of this singular tale was recorded by any antiquarian writer of the last century. Sir Harry Englefield laid before the Society of Antiquaries, in 1789, a plate of iron, taken, by permission of the rector, from the door of Hadstock church, Essex, with a portion of skin, considered to be human, found under the iron.

The tradition regarding that church had been recorded by Morant, in his History of Essex, with the statement that a second similar tale had been preserved in the village of Copford, in the same county. These, however, are not solitary examples of the existence of such popular relations in England. Having learned that one of the doors of Worcester cathedral had been reputed by common belief to bear a coating of human skin, the circumstance appeared so singular, connected with the village traditions in a remote eastern county, already mentioned, that I was induced to address myself to a zealous and intelligent investigator of Worcester-shire antiquities, Mr. Jabez Allies, F.S.A., through whose

kindness my curiosity was quickly gratified. The singular fact had, indeed, previously arrested the attention of the indefatigable Worcestershire antiquary, the late Dr. Prattinton, of Bewdley, amongst whose extensive collections for the History of the County, bequeathed to the Society of Antiquaries of London, and preserved at Somerset House, occurs the object thus described;—

“A portion of skin, supposed to be human, according to the tradition that a man, who had stolen the *sanctus*-bell from the high-altar in Worcester cathedral, had been flayed, and his skin affixed to the north doors, as a punishment for such sacrilege. The doors having been removed, are now to be seen in the crypt of the cathedral, and small fragments of skin may still be seen beneath the iron-work with which they are strengthened^a.”

Having been induced to follow out the investigation suggested by such ancient traditions, with the conviction that all means of adducing evidence to substantiate or disprove them would quickly be destroyed, in the present course of church restoration, I sought without delay to procure specimens, undeniably authenticated, of the supposed human cuticle in question, with the intention of submitting it to the test of scientific examination by one of our most skilful comparative anatomists.

By the prompt kindness of Mr. Allies I shortly received, not merely a fragment of the skin taken from the great northern doors of the cathedral of Worcester, but a careful drawing from actual measurement, for which my best thanks are due to Harvey Eginton, Esq., F.S.A., of Worcester, whose knowledge and judgment in all that is associated with ancient architecture is most honourably esteemed in his county. The old doors had been removed about forty years since to the crypt, and replaced by new wood-work: their date is considered by Mr. Eginton to be the fourteenth century, and there can be little doubt that they are coeval with the work completed during the time of Bishop Wakefield, when the north porch, the principal entrance from the city, is supposed to have been erected, about the year 1386. The vaulting of the north aisle of the nave had only been constructed towards 1327.

^a A Catalogue of Antiquities and Miscellaneous Curiosities in the possession

of the Society of Antiquaries of London, p. 46.

On close examination of the old doors, which, as usual in principal entrances of large churches, were in several pieces, so that the lower leaves only, or a moiety of them, might be unfolded, unless some occasion of unusual ceremony required the whole to be thrown open, Mr. Allies succeeded in obtaining from the inner side of the door, where it was traversed by a massive bar of wood, several small portions of skin. The wooden bar corresponded in position with an exterior one of iron, attached by bolts or nails passing through the internal bar of wood, and there riveted. He was decidedly of opinion that the skin had been laid upon the wooden leaves of the door, at the time of its original construction. "I recollect," observes Mr. Allies, "a horrid tale used to be told when I was a boy, that some person in times of yore had been skinned alive for sacrilege, and that his skin was nailed upon the inside of the north door of the cathedral. This tradition is still known to several persons in this city, who recollect seeing the skin on the inner surface of the doors, previously to their removal."

The supposed human skin obtained from Worcester, in consequence of the obliging researches of Mr. Allies and Mr. Eginton, was forthwith submitted to a gentleman eminently skilled in the use of microscopic observation for investigating minute details connected with comparative anatomy. I allude to Mr. John Quekett, Assistant Conservator of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, by whom I was favoured with the following report.

"I have carefully examined the portion of skin which you forwarded to me for my inspection, and beg to inform you that I am perfectly satisfied that it is human skin, taken from some part of the body of a light-haired person, where little hair grows. A section of the specimen, when examined with a power of a hundred diameters, shews readily that it is skin, and two hairs which grow on it I find to be human hairs, and to present the characters that hairs of light-haired people do. The hairs of the human subject differ greatly from those of any other mammalian animal, and the examination of a hair alone, without the skin, would have enabled me to form a conclusion. I may state that this is the second occasion in which, from the hairs alone, I have been enabled to pronounce an animal substance to be human."

Encouraged by this result, I lost no time in the endeavour

to obtain a fragment of the Dane's exuviae from Hadstock, in order to subject it to a similar test. Through the kindness of the Hon. Richard Neville, who had noticed the tradition preserved at that place in his interesting memorials of researches made by him near Chesterford and Audley End^b, I obtained such a sample. The door, being much decayed, had been removed in 1846, but part of the original wood-work, with the massive nails which served to attach the skin, is in Mr. Neville's possession, as also a piece of the robber's hide, of considerable thickness, and considered to have been tanned previously to its being laid upon the wood. This relic had been given by the rector of Hadstock, the Rev. C. Towneley, to Mr. Neville, who, in a very obliging manner, supplied me with a portion to facilitate my enquiries. Again I had the satisfaction of receiving from Mr. Quekett an answer wholly corroborative of the popular tradition. His opinion was thus expressed:—

“I have been again fortunate in making out the specimen of skin you last sent me to be human; I found on it three hairs which I have preserved; I shall shortly send you a drawing of them, as compared with one from a living subject, and you will at once see their identity. I should further state that the skin was in all probability removed from the back of the Dane, and that he was a fair-haired person.”

On communicating this satisfactory verdict to Mr. Neville, he informed me that Mr. Towneley had likewise just ascertained the fact by scientific examination of these remains. The next step was directed by the information supplied by Morant, in relation to the church of Copford, in Essex. On communicating the object of enquiry to the rector, the Rev. Kennett C. Bayley, he kindly sent me the following reply: “There are no remains of skin on the door at the present time. I have, however, in my possession, a short MS. account of the parish, written during the incumbency of John Dane, 1689—1714, wherein is the following: ‘the doors of this church are much adorned with flourished iron-work, underneath which is a sort of skin, taken notice of in the year 1690, when an old man of Colchester, hearing Copford mentioned, said, that in his young time he heard his master say that he had read in an old history that the church was robbed by

^b *Antiqua Explorata*, the result of Excavations made by Hon. R. C. Neville, &c. p. 34. Saffron Walden, 1847. 8vo.

Danes, and their skins nailed to the doors; upon which some gentlemen, being curious, went thither, and found a sort of tanned skin thicker than parchment, which is supposed to be human skin, nailed to the door of the said church, underneath the said iron-work, some of which skin is still to be seen."

Mr. Bayley added, "Since writing the above I have heard that what remained of the skin was removed about four years ago. I hear, however, of two pieces in this neighbourhood, and if I can succeed in procuring either of them, I will forward it to you." This obliging promise was fulfilled on the ensuing day. The fragment had been taken by a carpenter in the parish from underneath the iron-work of the door, about the year 1843, when the church was under repair. He gave it to a Mr. Eley, a miller at Copford, from whom it was procured by Mr. Bayley.

The issue of the third appeal to the discriminating judgment of Mr. Quekett proved likewise conclusive. His answer was this: "I am happy to tell you that I have succeeded in making out the Copford specimen to be human, as well as the others; I have shewn the hairs from this as well as from the others to some friends who were sceptical, but they are now quite of my opinion. I have had drawings made, and I desired the artist to draw a human hair by the side of the others, so that there can be no doubt of the identity of the hair. I must ask you to allow me to mention the subject at our Microscopical Society, to shew how valuable the microscope is in determining doubtful points of this nature."

The value of natural science as a friendly ally to archæology in supplying conclusive evidence on a question which must, without such aid, have been left to vague conjecture, has been strikingly shewn in the present instance. The singular corroboration of the truth of popular tradition, thus undeniably established, may serve to remind us that no circumstance, however apparently trivial or absurd, is without utility in the investigation of the history and usages of ancient times.

Having an opportunity of stating these facts to Lord Braybrooke, he had the kindness to communicate the following curious passage from Pepys' Diary, taken from the highly valuable additions which have been made by his lordship in the recently published edition of those remarkable memoirs.

"April 10, 1661. To Rochester, and there saw the cathedral observing the great doors of the church, as they

say, covered with the skins of the Danes." In early times the Thames had been frequently the resort of the Danes, and the men of Kent were continually harassed by their rapacious cruelty. In the year 999 they went up the Medway to Rochester, according to the Saxon Chronicle, and made a most fatal foray, overrunning nearly all West Kent. Rochester cathedral was rebuilt by Bishop Gundulph, towards the latter part of the eleventh century. He succeeded to the see in 1077.

Hitherto I have been unable, after repeated enquiries at Rochester, to trace any other statement regarding this fourth example of such a singular tradition; but the report of so minutely accurate an observer as Pepys must be regarded as of unquestionable authority. Lord Braybrooke subsequently observed that he had been informed by Mr. Neville that the north door of Hadstock was that upon which the skin was nailed, and suggested the enquiry, "Was this the case at Copford as well as Worcester?" because that aspect was always unpopular for purposes of interment, the sun never shining on the graves so situate." Mr. Bayley has since informed me that the skin was on "the south door, none on the north."

Other examples, it has been reported to me, are to be found in the north-eastern parts of the country, in the neighbourhood, probably, of the coast, long infested by the cruel plunderers from the North, and I hope that these notices may prove the means of drawing forth further information on the subject. I have thought the facts which have come to my knowledge well deserving to be recorded in full detail, at the risk even of appearing tediously circumstantial. In a very few years it would be impracticable to substantiate these traditions by a chain of conclusive evidence, such as I have now been enabled to adduce. That so barbarous an exhibition of summary punishment should have been permitted in comparatively uncivilized times, in remote and defenceless villages, exposed by their vicinity to the coast to frequent inroads of the pirates of the Baltic, may appear less extraordinary, but it must be admitted that the exposure of the skin of a criminal within the walls of cathedral churches, or upon the doors of their most frequented entrances, was a savage display of vengeance, which it is very difficult to comprehend. At Worcester, moreover, this was done in no days of barbarism, or disregard of judicial enactments: the reign of Richard II. was marked by the rapid advance of civilization, the introduction

of foreign refinements and luxury. It is, indeed, possible that the skin, in that instance, might have been the vestige of a punishment inflicted long previously; but its preservation in such a place, and at times such as the period when the northern part of that cathedral was erected, is a fact most startling and incomprehensible.

The question here suggests itself, by what authority, by what judicial enactment, was this barbarous punishment inflicted, not merely as summary vengeance in a moment of great popular indignation, in remote localities where the administration of the laws might be imperfectly maintained, but inflicted with the sanction of the Church, and the remembrance of the sanguinary deed carefully perpetuated. Many examples of such horrid torments might be found in ancient history, such as the martyrdom of St. Bartholomew by the Armenians, the cruel end of the Emperor Valerian, in the third century, flayed alive by Sapor, king of the Persians, or the fate of the Chief Justice Itinerant in the north of England, Hugo de Cressyngham, in the reign of Edward I., who was flayed by the exasperated Scots at Strivelyn, A.D. 1296. Knyghton thus describes the indignity thus inflicted upon the king's treasurer. "*Quem excoriantes Scoti dividerunt inter se pellem ipsius per modicas partes, non quidem ad reliquias sed in contumelias, erat enim pulcher et grassus nimis, vocaveruntque eum non Thesaurarium sed Traiturarium regis*"^c. Such atrocities have been committed in every age, on occasions of despotic tyranny or lawless commotion^d.

Punishments of a very dreadful description were doubtless sanctioned by law in the Anglo-Saxon and later ages. In some of the early judicial enactments expressions occur which, at first sight, would induce the supposition that flaying was a punishment of no rare occurrence. "*Corium forisfacere, corium perdere, corium carere, cute privare, corio componere*"^e, and similar phrases appear, however, to have implied only such excoriation as might be inflicted by severe scourging, and for this it was mostly permitted to make a composition,—*corium redimere*,—called in Anglo-Saxon, *hyd-gild*, money paid by an offender to save his skin. It is indeed

^c Knyghton, *Decem Scriptorum*, col. 2519.

^d It is affirmed that amongst the dreadful cruelties of the French Revolution at the close of the last century, the skins of

the victims were tanned and made into boots.

^e See Ducange, *Corium, Decoriare, Cutis, Crines, &c.*

possible, that in very rude times actual excoriation was inflicted, and afterwards commuted for severe fustigation, described in the dreadful terms above mentioned; and occasionally it would appear that flaying is really implied in these enactments. For example, in the laws of Henry I., it is ordained that if any man slay his lord, there should be no redemption,—“*nullo modo se redimat, sed de comacione (scalping) vel excoriacione, severa gentium animadversione dampnetur, ut diris tormentorum cruciatibus, et male mortis infortuniis infelicem prius animam exhalasse, quam finem doloribus excepisse videatur*.”

Much more might be said in regard to the curious question of the legality of “*excoriatio*,” literally inflicted in pursuance of judicial ordinances of medieval times, but I must leave the subject to the consideration of those who are more versed than myself in ancient laws. The penalty for sacrilegious theft was mostly of unusual severity: according to the laws of Alfred, robbery in a church was punishable by fine, and the guilty hand was to be struck off: this, however, might be redeemed[§]. In the case of spoliation by barbarian invaders, where probably successive bands had repeatedly laid waste the sacred fabric, it seems very probable that the enormity of the crime would readily be admitted as a justification of the most savage punishment. I am strongly inclined to the opinion that flaying was not a specific punishment for any particular offence or class of offences, but was an arbitrary mode of inflicting the penalty of death, in such instances as these, where the vindictive excitement of the occasion could not be satisfied by any ordinary modes of punishment.

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[†] Ancient Laws and Institutes of England, vol. i. p. 579.

[§] Ancient Laws, vol. i. p. 67.