Portraiture of Our Lord : a painting after the type of the emerald vernicle presented by Bajazet II. to Innocent VIII. Preserved at Douglas, Isle of Man.

From a drawing and photograph communicated by Miss Wilks, of Douglas.

THE EMERALD VERNICLE OF THE VATICAN.

By C. W. KING, M.A.

No monument of any art could approach in high and holy interest to the one asserted to be preserved in the Treasury of the Vatican, were it possible to give credence to the statement accompanying its pretended copy. This statement, attached to a copperplate engraving, or to a photograph from the same, now commonly to be seen in the London print-shops, runs thus :—"The only true likeness of Our Saviour, taken from one cut on an emerald by command of Tiberius Cæsar, and was given (*sic*) from the treasury of Constantinople by the Emperor of the Turks to Pope Innocent VIII., for the redemption of his brother, taken a captive of the Christians."

But in *this* instance the claims of both prototype (supposing there really to be one) and of copy may be dismissed at once, a single circumstance sufficing amply to disprove them. Any eye slightly practised in art will immediately detect that the character of the design in this head is neither antique, Roman, nor even Byzantine, but bears the unmistakeable stamp of the *naturalism* of the Italian Revival. In fact, if compared with the head of the Saviour in Raphael's "Miraculous Draught of Fishes" (so well known to everybody by its perpetual republication in various forms), it cannot fail to be discovered an exact transcript from that celebrated work. Nevertheless it is probable enough that a real engraved gem (an *emerald*, too, considering the importance of the object to which the material was devoted) may have served for original to the print, and have impudently usurped the honours of a lost predecessor of the same kind. An Italian gem-engraver, working at any period subsequent to the "divine" painter, would of necessity have adopted his conception of the sacred countenance as the most authoritative model he could take for his art. Commissions for religious subjects were commonly given to the greatest

glyptic artists of the Cinque-cento and subsequent schools by their ecclesiastic patrons—witness the elaborate crystal plaques and medallions done to the order of Clement VII. and the Cardinal Farnese by Valerio Vicentino and Castel-Bolognese, of which Vasari has left full particulars in his *Lives* of those artists. And what is yet more cognate to the present subject, the masterpiece of Carlo Costanzi (and which cost him two and a half years of incessant labour[1]) executed for Benedict XIV., was an immense table *emerald*, two inches in diameter, having for obverse the head of St. Peter in relief, for reverse the portrait of the Pontiff himself. It was intended to adorn the *morse* or clasp fastening the sumptuous cope worn only at the grand festivals of the Church.

Having thus cleared the ground of a pretender who carries his modern origin so conspicuously impressed upon his face, I will proceed to bring under the notice of our Society another of like nature, but whose pretensions are of a very different order, possessing at least the required character of type, backed by a very respectable and indisputable antiquity to countenance them. This is a painting on panel traditionally re-

ported to have been found in the old convent of St. Bride at Douglas, Isle of Man, degraded to the office of a barrel-lid. Rescued thence the picture came into the possession of Dr. Moore (the rector), who bequeathed it in the year 1783 to the Grammar School-house of that little capital as a most precious legacy, with the memorandum that its counterpart was then preserved at Greystoke in the collection of the Duke of Norfolk. The existence of this interesting picture was recently communicated to me by a local correspondent, Miss Wilks, of Douglas, a lady as distinguished for her knowledge

[1] According to his contemporary, Mariette, in his "Recueil des pierres gravées en creux du Cabinet du Roi," pub. 1750.

of the antiquities of her insular home as for the intelligent zeal with which she prosecutes the study and preserves the memory of its fast-fading traditions. To her kindness I was indebted for a careful tracing of the outline of the head, fully sufficient to certify the style, a facsimile of the inscription underneath, and the other necessary particulars of the description. The face is shown in profile, with the eyes somewhat bent downwards, the hair golden, the beard short and bifurcated, the upper folds of the drapery white, the lower dark-blue. The type of this portrait is evidently derived from the detailed description of Christ's personal appearance contained in the celebrated letter of Lentulus to Tiberius, first cited by our Anselm of Canterbury :—"A man indeed of lofty stature, handsome, having a venerable countenance, that the beholders can both love and fear. His hair verily somewhat wavy and curling, somewhat brightish and resplendent, flowing down upon his shoulders, having a parting in the middle of the head after the fashion of the Nazarenes. A forehead flat and full of calmness, without wrinkles or any blemish, which a slight tinge of red adorns. The nose and mouth beyond all praise, having a beard, full and ruddy, of the same colour with his hair, not long but forked. His eyes of changeable colour (*variis*) and brilliant." For the further information of such as may happen to possess that deservedly popular book, Walsh's "Ancient Coins, &c., as Illustrations of Christianity," I add that the face in this painting is identical with that on the medal figured by him on Plate I., which latter will come to be considered in another place, inasmuch as its existence appears in some degree to elucidate the subject of our inquiry.

The lower quarter of the panel is occupied by an inscription, here and there obliterated by accident, of which a facsimile, so far as modern print will allow is here given :—

"This Prefent fimilitude of our lord an . . . Sauiour Jesus Christ imprinted in Amerilde by the Predefefors of y^{e} Greate Turke and fent to the Pope . . . . ente the . . for this cause for a token to redeme . . . his brother y^{t} Was taken prifoner . . . ."

Persons conversant with old English writing will at once perceive that spelling and lettering combine to prove this inscription not possibly later than the reign of Elizabeth, nor, on the other hand, earlier than her father's time. But, as I

am informed, this writing, ancient as it is, presents every appearance of having been *painted over* the original painting, that is, upon the lower part of the bust, obliterated for the purpose. There is consequently proof positive that the picture must be at least three hundred years old, and in all probability very much older : in fact, everything in its appearance would warrant us to refer it to the Italian school of the fourteenth century.

The chief value of this inscription is that it carries back the tradition concerning the emerald Vernicle (*vera icon*), by its own antiquity, to within a century of the date assigned for the first appearance of the gem in the Treasury of the Vatican. The next step is to examine into the *probability* of the story which this inscription records. The historical facts briefly stated are these :—Zizim, son of Mahomet II., having disputed the succession with his elder brother, Bajazet II., being defeated in the great battle of Brousa, took refuge with the Soldan of Egypt, Kaibai, and after a second unsuccessful trial of his fortune, with D'Aubusson, Grand Master of Rhodes, who sent him to France in the year 1482. From France he was conveyed, at his own request, to Rome, in 1488, whither both his brother and the Soldan sent embassies on his account, but with very different views. Bajazet promised the Pope, then Innocent VIII., the large sum of 40,000 zechins annually for the *safe* though honourable keeping of a respected though formidable brother, whilst Kaibai made large presents to the Head of Christendom in the hopes of securing aid from the Franks against his much dreaded enemy the Turk. Onophrius Panuvinus, his contemporary, the continuator of Platina's Lives of the Popes, mentions that Bajazet, besides the pension, made the Pope a present of the spear of the Crucifixion (the far-famed lance of Longinus), doubtless regarded at the time by donor and receiver as equivalent to a much larger amount, and which at once, skilfully wielded in pontifical hands, proved to the new possessor the very wand of Hermes. This gift suffices to prove that the recent usurper of the throne of the Byzantine Cæsars found still something left in their old storehouse of relics to dispose of when he chose. Onophrius does not indeed mention this emerald (perhaps because he was sceptical as to its genuineness), yet it is very conceivable that amongst the costly gifts of either Turk or Egyptian

was included an emerald (or plasma, which usually passes for its precious congener in these circumstances), actually bearing the head of the Saviour, and proceeding from the early Byzantine school. These gem-works, when the art was lost to the Franks, regularly figure amongst the presents of the Byzantine emperors to the kings of the West. One of the most valued objects in the *Trésor de S. Denys*, was a large lapis-lazuli engraved with the head of Our Lord on one side, of Our Lady on the other, probably the gift of Heraclius to Dagobert, he being named as the donor of the next article on the list, a silver-gilt reliquary. Now, supposing such a gem to have been received at Rome under such remarkable circumstances, nothing could have been more natural than to account for its origin by applying to it, with very slight amplification, the popular legend concerning Lentulus and his communication to his imperial and inquisitive master, and by making the latter embody the information so received in the most precious material nature could supply.

But there was another and very sufficient cause for assigning the authorship of this emerald to Tiberius. Martinus Scotus (d. 1086) had copied from a certain Methodius the following legend :—"The Emperor Tiberius was afflicted with leprosy. Hearing of the miracles of our Lord, he sent for him to Jerusalem ; but Christ was already crucified, and had risen and ascended into heaven. The messengers of Tiberius, however, ascertained that a certain Veronica possessed a portrait of Christ, impressed by the Saviour himself upon a linen handkerchief, and preserved by her with reverence. Veronica was persuaded by them to come to Rome ; and the sight of the sacred image restored the Emperor to health. Pilate was then sentenced by him to death for having unjustly crucified the Lord." This Cæsar, moreover, had the reputation, throughout the Middle Ages, of a great connoisseur in gems, like that royal Faustus, the Regent Orleans, seventeen centuries later, of whom he was, in many respects, the prototype. Both had passed the better part of their lives, under the cloud of court disfavour, occupied in the cultivation of "curious arts," astrology, alchemy, and the like ; and of both the term of power was equally unlucky, a certain ill fate balking the effect of their wisest measures, until, in despair, they drowned themselves in unrestrained voluptuousness.

It is, however, quite unaccountable to me how this legend of the emerald, most assuredly "vetus et constans opinio," came to escape the notice of all writers on the subject of vernicles, not being once alluded to by Peignot in his elaborate essay, "Récherches sur la Personne de Jésus Christ," published in 1829; nor by Heaphy in his "Examination into the Antiquity of the Likeness of our Blessed Lord," in the Art Journal, iv. s. vol. vii., 1861; nor again by the latest writer upon the subject, the author of the article, "Portraits of Christ," in the Quarterly Review, vol. cxxiii. p. 490, who has evidently taken immense pains to make his researches thoroughly exhaustive.

The medal, to which passing reference was made above, and of which specimens are not uncommon, was in existence as early as the opening of the sixteenth century, for it is described as a most precious antiquity (being supposed contemporary with its prototype) by Theseus Ambrosius, who flourished under Julius II. and Leo X. Passing over the other absurdity of this notion on the grounds of ancient usage, art, and language of the legend, it suffices to point out that its material, *white bell-metal*,[2] and its *fabrique* being a *sand-cast*, not struck with a die, conclusively declare it to proceed from the century before Ambrosius' date, the period when the manufacture of medals thus produced most especially flourished in Italy. Throughout this period, before the invention of the coining-press, casting in sand from a wax pattern was the sole effectual method of executing those medallions, or, rather, small bas-reliefs, of large diameter and highly-raised designs, the easily produced memorials of the celebrities of the age which have come down to us in such otherwise inexplicable abundance. The medal, therefore, whose sacred antiquity struck Ambrosius with so much awe, can only belong to the generation preceding his own: Gothic art never produced anything of the like nature; and had it originated in ancient times, even those of the Christian emperors of the West (which its style also entirely controverts), it would have been made by a die like the other medallions of the same princes.

Nevertheless the existence of this medal may be fancied

[2] The same is the material of the famous statue of St. Peter, a work of the Quattro-cento school– a sufficient refutation in itself to the Protestant joke about "the christened Jove."

indirectly to support the tradition concerning the emerald of Bajazet. Supposing a new *vera effigies* to have come to Rome in so conspicuous a manner, and with so august a voucher for its authenticity as the Grand Turk himself, it would necessarily excite the highest interest and devotion amongst all who flocked to St. Peter's shrine, and nothing could be more obvious to its wonderfully *intelligent* proprietors than the multiplying the relic (with the spiritual advantages accompanying the sight) by converting its imprint into the popular form of a medal. An analogous instance offers itself in the linen impressions of St. Veronica's far-famed *Sudarium*, still regularly kept on sale at the same temple. The inscription, in the modern Hebrew character, filling the reverse of the medal in question, may be supposed to countenance in some slight degree the conjecture above hazarded as to its invaluable prototype: "The Messiah has reigned, He came in peace, and being made the Light of Men, He lives."

But setting this conjecture aside, there is another important question that must not be eluded, inasmuch as it involves a circumstance which might effectually prevent the recognition of the real emerald by a modern and too-knowing eye, supposing it still to repose in the Vatican cabinet. It is true that the Byzantines, from the very commencement of their empire, were fond of engraving sacred images upon green-coloured stones, substitutes for the too costly *smaragdus*. I have seen amongst others a plasma of such beautiful quality as might well be mistaken for emerald, bearing in relief the Saviour's bust in front face, at the side the sacred initials $\overline{\text{IC}}$ — $\overline{\text{XC}}$, executed in the highest style to which Byzantine glyptic art ever attained. Nevertheless, there is a possibility of a strange confusion of personages in the giving of the names to such representations. Even that very learned and practical antiquary, Chiflet, has fallen into a singular error in this actual particular. He figures a noble head of Serapis, wreathed with persea-branches, as that of the Saviour crowned with thorns,[3] and attributes its origin to the Carpocratian Gnostics, who are *accused* by Epiphanius of making and worshipping similar images. But the *calathus* capping the head would alone unmistakeably declare the

[3] No. 111 in the plates to his valuable "Macarii Abraxas-Proteus, seu Apistopistus." Antv. 1657.

presence of the patron god of Alexandria, did not the excellence of the engraving likewise bespeak the best period of the glyptic art, not the offspring of the decrepit ages when the Gnosis flourished. Chiflet calls the material *emerald*, and his word may be accepted in this instance without too much questioning, for the Greco-Egyptians frequently consecrated the most costly produce of their national mines to the embodiment of the conceptions of their gods. Examples in fine ruby as well as emerald have repeatedly come within my own observation. This interchange of personages, however, is facile enough to a beholder paying no attention to the distinctive attributes of the Alexandrine deity. Antique art has stamped the features of Serapis with that expression of profound thoughtfulness and majestic severity so well befitting his special character as Lord and *Judge* of the dead, the very character in which the Saviour came subsequently to be most usually depicted in early Christian work. Compare any of the numerous fine camei extant of the Serapis' head in front face with the better executed examples of the Byzantine Christ, for instance, as portrayed (for the first time) in coinage on the *solidi* of Justinian Rhinotmetus (685-711), and every draughtsman will detect and be astonished at their identity. The latter portrait, however, is said (on what authority I know not) to have been copied from the bronze statue of Christ which stood over the vestibule Chalcé of the imperial palace until destroyed by the great iconoclast, Leo the Isaurian, who has commemorated his substitution of the simple Cross in place thereof by an inscription still (or recently) to be read upon the marble.

Lastly comes the all-important question—Does this paragon of all glyptic monuments anywhere exist, with any probability of ever being recognized ?—an object of warmest adoration to devotee and to archæologist alike. Alas ! sober consideration compels an answer in the negative. Small chance had it of escaping that worse than "Spartacum vagantem," the mercilessly ransacking Spaniard at the lamentable sack of the Eternal City in 1527, unless, indeed, by special miracle (like that which protected the vernicle of Edessa) it should have had the good luck to be amongst the precious stones from St. Peter's Treasury, which Cellini assisted the Pope and his confidant, Cardinal Cornaro, to

sew up in their own robes when starved into surrender out of their last stronghold, Castel Santangelo.

The quantity of these jewels may be guessed from the two hundred pounds weight of gold which the veracious chronicler avers he obtained from melting down their settings.

Nay, even the last chance (on which I had once confidently reckoned, hoping against hope,) has finally disappeared. Clement, restored to the ruins of his power, *might* be supposed to have replaced the emerald, so cleverly rescued by his Florentine astuteness, within the gem casket of the Vatican—a collection which, during the peaceful interval between the Constable Bourbon and the Emperor Napoleon I., had through the perpetual favors of Fortune (so propitious at this her ancient seat), grown to such dimensions that its catalogue, drawn up by Visconti at the beginning of this century, filled two folio volumes. But over the fate of this cabinet there hangs an impenetrable mystery. It is not visible in any part of the public gallery; and when, some few years back, a learned and sagacious friend, being engaged upon the MSS. of the Vatican Library, made careful inquiry about it at my request (for this special object), none of the officials could give him any information, or were aware that any such collection had ever existed in the place! And yet this cabinet contained, amongst numerous gems of "great volume," as Visconti expresses it, the largest cameo in the world, the Carpagna, "The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne," a piece whose magnitude was surpassed by its artistic worth, and so well known by repeated publication in previous times, that wherever it went its recognition could not be avoided. It is, however, not impossible that in the troublous times speedily following Visconti's labours, the cabinet was put away so carefully that the place of deposit had been lost to the next generation of keepers, as was actually the case here for more than fifty years with the better-known Marlborough gems. But there is another solution of the difficulty, and, I fear, the true one. When the Vatican statues were transferred to the Louvre, no notice can be found of the gems having accompanied them upon their enforced journey; they, therefore, may have been appropriated as perquisites by the French Commissaries. In those days, when the gem mania raged so furiously, the

temptation to such an exercise of the law of might was almost irresistible ; and a very unanswerable reply to papal remonstrance would be found in the repetition of the old Gallic hint,—"Væ victis." It is well known how French authorities, putting taste before religion, carefully despoiled the shrine of St. Elizabeth, Marburgh, of every antique gem with which it was studded, but honestly left untouched all its gold and precious stones. These remarks upon the disappearance of the Vatican Cabinet are appended here in the hope of eliciting, from any parties better informed about its fate, that explanation which I have long laboured ineffectually to obtain. But to return to the Douglas Vernicle : its existence in Man has been plausibly accounted for by supposing it brought thither by T. Stanley, the last Catholic occupant of the see. During his sequestration and detention in London under Edward VI., he was on intimate terms with the Norfolk family, then in close relation with the Court of Spain, and therefore in the way of obtaining similar relics. A second example, bearing the same inscription, but slightly varied and modernised, which now hangs in the sub-librarian's room in the Bodleian Library, was presented by Mrs. Mary Prince (1722), "painted by herself," a copy doubtless of some older work. The current story that a third exists in the Provost's Lodge, Trinity College, Dublin, has proved, upon inquiry, totally without foundation.