

ON THE TRUE NATURE OF THE CONTORNIATE MEDALS.

By C. W. KING, M.A.

"Hos porro dignos arbitror quorum describendis elegantiss, et enodandis ænigmatibus curiosæ mentes suam impendant curam, nondum enim licuit eorum originem assequi."¹ So spoke the father of numismatics, Charles Patin, two centuries ago, in allusion to that very singular class of medals, the *Contorniati*; and the "enigmas" proposed to archæologists by the existence of these curious pieces remain, in spite of all subsequent attempts, as far from any satisfactory solution as in his day. All who have treated of the subject, beginning with Du Cange, followed by Patin himself, Havercamp, Morel, and lastly, Sabatier, agree in considering the *Contorniati* as *medals* in the modern sense of the word; that is, not current coins, but pieces issued expressly to perpetuate the memory of illustrious men and celebrities of every grade—philosophers, poets, historians, equally with stage players, circus-racers, and organists.

But this explanation is open to many insuperable objections. If issued by imperial command for so important a purpose, one would naturally expect to find in them the best specimens of the medallic art of their own times, as in the parallel case of modern medals, which always display higher style and execution than does the contemporary coinage, though the same engraver may have cut the dies for both. But it is quite the reverse with the pieces under consideration; their *fabrique* is infinitely more careless than that of the current mintage of their own period, even adopting Du Cange's limitation of their issue to the interval of decadence between Constantine and Honorius,²—much more so, if we assume any to be coæval with those early Cæsars whose portraits many of them present. The strongest evidence of this carelessness in their creation lies in the fact of

¹ Hist. Num. Introd. c. xviii.

² De Inf. Ævi Num. p. 43.

the whole class being invariably made by *casting*, not by striking from dies—an economy in production that bespeaks the work of a wholesale manufacturer, not the issue from an imperial mint, where no trouble or expense would be spared when the object was to do honour to the individual so commemorated. The true medallions throughout the series are a case in point, the carefulness of their execution being proportionate to their superiority in volume. Furthermore, if the Contorniati were *honorific* memorials, why is their material always the basest of the three metals? why do they never occur in silver, much less in gold, like the medallions which were devised for precisely the same object, although restricting their honours to the members of the reigning family?—and this poverty of material is a consideration of some weight in this inquiry, inasmuch as the only ancient reference anywhere found to the striking a *medal*, in its modern acceptation, proves that the most precious was in such a case preferred. This was done in honour of Alexander by his namesake Severus: “Alexandri habitu nummos *plurimos* figuravit, et quidem electrinos aliquantos, sed plurimos tamen *aureos*.” But as nothing bearing the image of Alexander, executed in the peculiar style of the virtuous Syrian’s age (excepting Colonel Leake’s problematical piece), has come down to us, notwithstanding the *very large quantity* thus related to have been struck (some of which would certainly have survived, owing to the superstitious veneration in which the portrait was held under the Lower Empire), it necessarily follows that the emperor only *restored* the Macedonian’s *staters* in exact facsimile, in the same manner as Trajan had done before him with the consular and imperial *denarii* of his predecessors. Such *restored* pieces were put again into circulation, for the medallions themselves were intended for public use, being merely multiples of the ordinary gold, silver, and bronze coins. For instance, Lampridius terms the huge medallions of the extravagant Heliogabalus “Formas binarias, ternarias, quaternarias, et denarias etiam atque amplius usque ad *bilibres* aut centenarias,”³ all of which his successor called in and recoinced into subdivisions of the regular *aureus*. And Capitolinus mentions, amongst the other frolics of L. Verus, his tossing bronze medallions

³ Alex. Sev. c. xxxix.

upon the counter in the wineshops, for the purpose of breaking the glasses : "Jactabat et nummos in popinis *maximos*, quibus calices frangeret." ⁴

Another striking peculiarity in their make is left unaccounted for by the current acceptation of their object, and this is the evident care taken to render the edge perfectly circular, which may indeed have occasioned the preference for casting to striking in their manufacture, it being a matter of impossibility to produce a perfectly round piece with the simple die and hammer, the only coining implements then known. Still less does the same theory explain the object of the raised rim, *contorno*, that most conspicuous characteristic of their appearance, and which has given its appellation to the whole class. These two striking peculiarities are indeed what supplied me with the long-sought clue for unravelling the whole mystery, and suggested a theory as to the real destination of the pieces so distinguished, which, to myself at least, answers all the requirements of the problem in a more plausible manner than anything that has hitherto been advanced. Another marked feature in the class for which no reasonable explanation has yet been proposed is the *nature of the reverses* to these medals: what so powerful reason occasioned their being invariably drawn from the theatre or the circus; and the very restricted number of types so selected—for the most part the successful *auriga*, with his name attached, either depicted in all his glory, moving triumphantly along in his car, or else as leading before the applauding spectators his favourite horse, the *Scorpus* or *Volucer* ⁵ of the day? Though such reverses might be appropriate enough for medals bearing on the other side the portrait of that grand *turfite*, Nero, yet it is impossible to discover their connection with the frugal Vespasian or the virtuous Trajan. Still more out of character do such figures appear on the medals commemorating Homer, or Terence, or Sallust, or Horace; but when they accompany a philosopher's head, as in the case of Socrates, poor Havercamp is driven to the ludicrous expedient of interpreting the design as reading a lesson to athletes of the wondrous power of philosophy in reclaim-

⁴ Verus, c. iv.

⁵ So great a favourite with the Green faction that a peck (*modius*) of gold-pieces

was often collected for him after a race.
Verus, c. vi.

ing and bringing to perfect virtue a naturally bad disposition !⁶

But to come to another point : the similarity in the style and execution of the reverses, however widely the imperial portraits or the obverse may seem to be separated in date ; the almost exact correspondence of the pieces themselves, in size, pattern, and finish of the field, strongly support Du Cange's opinion of their being altogether the production of a not very extensive series of years ; otherwise changes of taste and fashion had inevitably brought about easily discernible alterations in some one or other of these particulars.

The same conclusion is fairly to be drawn from the circumstance that one and the same *auriga*, Eutimius, is commemorated equally on Contorniati bearing the head of Nero and of Honorius ; for it is preposterous pedantry to suppose with Havercamp that this personage is the deified *hieronica*, Euthymius the Locrian, who flourished in the times of Xerxes ! It is quite enough to observe that the superior popularity of a charioteer chancing to bear this name will amply account for his appearing more frequently upon works of one period than those minor stars of the circus, his brethren Alsan, Pannonius, Philocomus, Stefanus, Ursus, &c., whose fame has been transmitted to all future time through the same medium.

The only objection that can be brought against Du Cange's settlement of their date lies in the evident superiority of style in the *obverses* with the heads of Nero and the early Cæsars, a circumstance which has induced many to attribute the making of these particular pieces to the reigns to which they pretend to belong. But the true answer is, that for all such pieces the obverse-matrix was taken from an old medallion of the emperor in requisition, for all these portraits betray easily recognisable marks of sand-casting, afterwards tooled up ; whilst the reverses of the self-same medals exhibit as debased a style as those bearing the image and superscription of Honorius himself. All these considerations tend to one conclusion, that the Contorniati were no more than trade-articles, made by the braziers of the Lower Empire, and sold for some purpose

⁶ Dissert. de Num. Contorn. p. 149.

of amusement, (as the trivial character of their reverses demonstrates) but for what special object they were intended is the knotty point that now remains to be discussed.

The surest way of approaching this question, upon which no light whatever is shed by even incidental notices to be extracted from ancient writers, is to search amongst relics of antiquity whose use is clearly ascertained, for anything analogous in form or decoration to the objects now under investigation. And here the first glimpse of the truth dawned upon me from a very unpromising quarter, a large collection of antique pastes belonging to our Disney Professor :

“ Via prima salutis,
Quod minime reris, Graia pandetur ab urbe.”

Amongst these my attention was caught by several glass disks of uniform size and pattern, which on very sufficient grounds are identified by antiquaries with the glass *latrun-culi* or draughtsmen, mentioned by Ovid, Martial, and Pliny.⁷ They are the size of a penny piece, round, flat and thin, finished off with a moulded border, and bear in relief a head applied in paste of a different colour. Again, in draughtsmen of Indian make the raised rim is a very conspicuous feature ; in this point and in general figure they bear a wonderful resemblance to the Contorniati, and such is the unchangeableness of Hindoo fashions, that they may safely be assumed as identical in form with their prototypes of twenty centuries ago. The primitive draughtsmen were indeed, as their names *πεσσοι*, *ψηφοι*, *calculi*, denote, merely pebbles of two different colours, and these continued in use to the last amongst people unable to afford their more artificial substitutes. An interesting exemplification of this was lately brought to light at that English Pompeii, Chesterford, where, in company with a wooden bronze-hooped *situla*, was found a set of pebbles the size of eggs, highly polished, and evidently brought from a distant coast, their material being granite and serpentine. But the shape to which the *πεσσοι* were reduced by art is significantly preserved by the transference of the name *pessus* to the surgical appliance *a suppository*, or flat perforated disk of wood of the same thickness and

⁷ Mart. vii. 72, “vitreus latro.” Plin. xxxvi. 67, “calculi quos quidam abaculos appellant.”

diameter. In all probability the clay disks, variously impressed, often found amongst Roman remains in this country, popularly called *dinders*, but regarded by antiquaries as the actual *nummi fictiles* mentioned by ancient authors,⁸ were only cheap home-made substitutes for the elegant glass men. Passing to the other extreme, Martial describes the same playthings as made of a *gem*,⁹ most likely meaning agate, long used in Syria for the purpose, as the far-famed chess-board of S. Louis remains to testify. The actual devices of the Contorniati are perpetuated upon the early mediæval draughtsmen, a conclusive evidence of the common nature of both; Gothic usage being only the antique barbarised and depraved. One in bone (Londesborough Coll.) referred to the tenth century, is engraved with a mounted archer in flat relief; another in walrus-tooth, probably of the twelfth, presents a lion centaur wielding a club. Both offer other points of resemblance to their Roman predecessors in their ornamental margins, and large diameter of $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. respectively.¹ I have been unable to discover any notice in the classics of *latrunculi* purposely made in metal, although Pollux has a² long section upon the *πεσσοῖ*, the different requirements of the game, its varieties, and the names of the throws of the dice³ used therein as in our backgammon. But that actual coins came in occasionally as genteeler representatives of the glass men (*res omnium delicatissima* as Petronius calls the notion⁴) is shown by his reference to Trimalchio's terebinthine board with its gold and silver denarii instead of *calculi*. It is easy therefore to conceive how the advance of taste, refining upon this refinement, thought it more consistent with the dignity of the game to replace the vulgar current coin by pieces made expressly for the purpose, having

⁸ Suidas, "Numa." "De Rebus Bellicis," cap. "De inhibenda largitate."

⁹ xxv. 20, "genneus miles."

¹ Amongst the *debris* of mediæval London, leaden counters often turn up, rudely stamped with a king's or a bishop's head. Mr. C. Roach Smith, who has figured many specimens of them in his Catalogue, is of opinion that they were *tokens* for small change issued by taverns bearing such heads for their signs; as became the universal practice under the Commonwealth, though in another metal. But such usurpation of the royal prerogative would never have been ventured

upon under the Plantagenets and Tudors; whilst the usual device of the reverse which the learned antiquary himself explains as a *pair of tables*, proves to demonstration that these counters were the actual pieces used in playing at what made "tavern" and "chequers" equivalent terms.

² Onomasticon, vii. 205.

³ Of which two were called Midas, and Manes, after those famous Phrygian and Lydian kings: there seems a certain analogy in the notion of ornamenting the *calculi* with imperial portraits.

⁴ Satyricon, xxxiii. 2.

the appearance though not the reality of money ; exactly the same revolution that produced our card counters in silver, or gilt brass, formerly so much in fashion.

The *material* itself of the Contorniatî brings additional support to my hypothesis, some being of mixed metal remarkably gold-like in color and much resembling pinchbeck, others in pure copper, both equally distinct from the substance of the regular bronze coinage. Such differences in color were amply sufficient, so long as the pieces were bright, to distinguish the two sides—that primary necessity of the game. Or we may suppose that the male portraits discriminated one side, the female the other ; or the same object may have been attained by the one player keeping his obverses, the other his reverses turned uppermost. And in the heads commonly ornamenting the glass *latrunculi* (even disallowing the claims of the Contorniatî to that office) may lurk the reason for the change of sex in the French nomenclature which transforms our *man* into *dame*. The explanation now offered may serve, in some measure, to elucidate the use (though not the composition) of the inexplicable monogram, seemingly formed of P, L, E, so frequently stamped in the field of these medals, as well as the silver palm branch inlaid upon others. The calculi are divided by Isidorus into three classes, the *ordinarii*, that could only move one way ; the *vagi*, free from such limitation ; and the *inciti*, that could not be moved at all. May not these countermarks, which occur on only a minority of the number, have served to distinguish the more important pieces from the rest ?

The incredible mania for horse-racing that possessed Romans and Byzantines, (citizens whose sole thought was “panem et circenses,”) and which went on growing in force with the decadence of the empire, is quite sufficient, without seeking other causes, to account for the nature of the subjects on the reverse. The same passion that ornamented pavements, armour, plate, signets, with chariots and race-horses, more appropriately displayed itself upon these play-things intended to beguile the weary hours when the circus was closed.

Lastly, some argument as to their real character may be found in their present plentifulness when compared with the true medallions. The number of them still preserved is

absolutely large, considering that they were manufactured at the capital alone, for they only turn up in Italy itself, intercourse with the provinces being embarrassed by the distresses of those late and evil times to which their origin is due. And if a recollection of the considerable number of men required to set out one board upon the present system should occur to anyone as an objection to my estimate of the plentifulness of the Contorniati (which, so compared, *ought* to be much more abundant than they are), the reply is found in the statement of Pollux, that the ancient game was played with no more than five *παισσοι* (on each side must be meant), whence Sophocles' *pentagramma* as a synonym for the board.⁵

There remains to be considered a single, but very important exception (as it at first appears) to the rule that none of these medals have any historical value. This is the one displaying a certain BONIFATIVS in a chariot of four horses or four stags, and which ever since Du Cange lavished the stores of his erudition upon its elucidation⁶ has been implicitly received as issued to record the triumph of *Bonifacius*, the celebrated general of Valentinian III. But, in truth, the connection of the medal with the heroic betrayer of Africa rests on the coincidence of name alone (an extremely popular one in his age); the personage thus honoured being no other than a circus-driver, for he is depicted in exactly the same figure, attitude, and costume as his compeers, Eutimius or Stefanus, whose profession does not admit of doubt. But his character is declared beyond all dispute by the *whip* raised aloft in his hand, the proper badge of the *auriga*, but never carried by the triumphant general, whose steeds were *led* by attendants appropriately attired, whilst he himself bore the eagle-tipped ivory sceptre—"volucrum quæ sceptro surgit eburno," the proper concomitant of the *tunica palmata*. The nature of the four monograms in the exergue, where the too acute Havercamp, eager to outdo his great master, reads the long legend, "Domina Nostra Placidia Augusta Restituit,"⁷ may be confidently determined from the Contorniato of Honorius, which preserves at full length the name of the winner "Eugenius," equally with those of his horses, "Achilleus, Desiderius, Speciosus,

⁵ Onom. ix. 97.

⁶ De Inf. Ævi Num. p. 41.

⁷ Dissert. de Num. Contorn. p. 126.

Dignus ;”⁸ or from that other, wherein “Eutimius” presents himself with his pair, “Tyrius” and “Carthago.”

In fact, any one practised in unravelling monograms will perceive at the first glance that those underneath the car of Bonifatius cannot possibly contain more than *four* words (one for each horse manifestly), whilst the second of them will yield, after a slight analysis, the elements of RHODANVS. That the names of famous *rivers* were, from an obvious appropriateness, often bestowed upon race-horses, is well known from both classical and monumental authority, which gives us Euphrates,⁹ Orontes, Tiberis, &c., thus applied to the favourites of the course. Into what a quagmire of absurdity the archæologist may be led by once getting into the wrong track, and persistently following out the same, is amusingly exemplified by Havercamp, in the case of the lately quoted medal. He construes the names of Eugenius and his team into the acclamations addressed to Honorius by the assembled multitude in the circus (supporting his assertion by an apposite quotation from Claudian): “Qui Honorium tanquam *Achilli* parem, *desideratum* a republica, *nobiliter* natum, imperio *dignum*, et *speciosum* imperatoria forma sua, celebrant !”¹

The Leake medallion, mentioned in the text, was found in Thessaly, and is of the *module* of the largest Roman First brass ; it has the field carefully hammered to an edge all round, clearly for the purpose of entering a frame. It bears for obverse a bust of Pallas, a very weak copy from that upon the *stater* ; for reverse Alexander on horseback encountering a lion. Legend ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ. The general opinion was that this supposed unique piece was only a Cinquecento forgery, until M. Feuardent, the eminent French numismatist, on a recent visit to the Fitzwilliam Museum (where the Leake collection is deposited) discovered that it is identical in size and *fabrique*, though not in type, with three others, commemorating Alexander and his father, found at Tarsus (1863), in company with *aurei* of Severus Alexander. These medallions weigh about 2 oz. each, the equivalent to 10 aurei of that period. From M. Feuardent they were acquired by the Cabinet of the Bibliothèque Impériale. Engravings of them, with the other coins and jewels of the treasure-trove, will be found in the *Revue Numismatique* for the year 1868.

⁸ A gem (Impronte Gemmarie, v. 87) exhibits the actual *quadriga* at full speed carrying Victory *in propria persona* holding up the wreath triumphal ; and gives the names of the horses in *Greek* letters.

They are Eutyches, Torquatus, Alcimas, Aquilo.

⁹ The Barcelona mosaic, Martial, &c.

¹ l. c. p. 120.