

NOTES ON SPECIMENS OF WROUGHT GOLD, FORMING A  
PORTION OF THE ASHANTI INDEMNITY.

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THE interest excited by the mass of treasure forming part of the indemnity paid by the King of Ashanti, is not only due to the circumstances of its acquisition, but in some degree also to its intrinsic importance, as being the most striking illustration which has yet reached this country of the art of an ancient race hitherto imperfectly known to us.

I propose, therefore, to offer to the members of the Institute such notes<sup>1</sup> as I have been able to make respecting the workmanship and peculiarities of these objects. This I am enabled to do through the courtesy of Messrs. Garrard, the present possessors of the collection, who have enabled the members of the Institute to inspect the valuable specimens, which, in great measure, will serve for a text to my remarks. On my own part also, I wish to acknowledge the aid I have received in my examination of these objects, especially from Mr. Warrington, a member of our Institute, and partner with Messrs. Garrard, and the facilities which have been given me through his courtesy to examine with care the whole of this most interesting and important collection.

I propose briefly to note, first, the quality of the gold and the general character of the objects manufactured in precious metals by the Ashantis; second, the processes employed in working the gold; and lastly, to point out the relation which their art bears to that of some other workers in gold, and to indicate the influence among them of ancient traditional processes.

<sup>1</sup> Since writing these notes, I have been supplied, through the courtesy of Mrs. Everett Green, with some curious facts obtained from Prince Ansah of Ashanti

during his visit to her house in London. These facts have, I hope, enabled me to render my remarks more correct.

First, respecting the gold in use among the Ashantis.

By the kindness of my friend Professor Church, of Cirencester, I am enabled to give the analysis, with which he has furnished me of both the nuggets and the manufactured gold. The average nugget yields, gold 90·055; silver, 9·940; there is a minute trace of iron and a very minute trace of copper; the specific gravity of the gold at 16° is 17·55. There are two varieties of nugget, one found in a black peaty combustible soil, the other in the red hæmatitic earth, which being used in the moulds to prevent adhesion gives the rich red appearance still preserved on many of the cast objects.

The great majority of the objects composing the collection are intended for personal use, or rather, I should say, for personal decoration. A people so little advanced in the scale of civilization cannot be compared in their employment of the precious metals, however lavish, with the ancient Assyrians, whose gold was wrought into objects of daily use; or even with the Mexicans, as Cortés found them in the sixteenth century. Among the Ashantis it is evident that personal adornment is the main stimulus to the manufacture of objects of gold; they use knife and dagger handles of gold, and to give splendour to their King's audiences and to his abode, gold seems to be employed with no sparing hand. The ornaments of his state umbrella, for example, are overlaid with gold; but on the whole, the collection now brought to this country is mainly composed of barbaric adornments.

These may be conveniently divided into ornaments made in direct imitation of natural objects, and those copied from artificial, generally European productions.

Among the former, the most remarkable are the representations of human heads, of various sizes, rudely modelled but with much character. One of these heads, little short of life-size, weighs nearly five pounds, and is altogether a very remarkable work. The character of the physiognomy, especially the lines of the mouth and the conventional treatment of the beard, bear a certain resemblance to ancient Egyptian work. This head has been at various times injured and repaired, and from the marks of wear on several parts of it, and the condition of the hook by which it has been suspended, is apparently of some antiquity; massive and cumbersome as it is, it was described as having been worn



Head, sent as a symbol with "Messenger" Sword.

Height of original,  $8\frac{1}{2}$  inches.



Griffin-like Bird, part of the decorations of the throne of the King of Ashanti.

Entire height  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

as an ornament or trophy, Ashanti Chiefs having the custom on important occasions of wearing, according to the account of Bowdich,—who visited the country in the beginning of the present century,—ornaments of such weight that to support them they rested their arm on the head of a boy; but I am now informed that these heads are symbols which accompany the messenger swords subsequently alluded to, and that when sent they signify “I mean to have your head.” The smaller heads are more naturalistic in their design and are also very remarkable objects, the hair is represented by rude spirals of gold erect on the head, the face is scored with gashes, and the method with which prisoners or victims are gagged is represented. Bowdich states that knives were thrust through the jaws and tongues of victims about to be sacrificed, and the gags here represented (see woodcut) seem applied in the same barbarous manner.

Besides human heads, those of animals are also copied in these gold castings; one very remarkable specimen forms part of the decoration of a cap in the collection, but of its identification I am not certain; it represents a creature with long thickly toothed jaws, but otherwise with a wolf-like head.

On the same cap are the claws, also in gold, apparently of a species of monitor lizard, the cap being formed of lizard’s skin; these claws appear to have been cast in a mould made on the objects themselves.

Human and other teeth are also reproduced in gold, sometimes of natural size, while miniature representations of jaw-bones set with teeth are evidently common objects, as are also small models of thigh and other human bones, and various vertebræ.

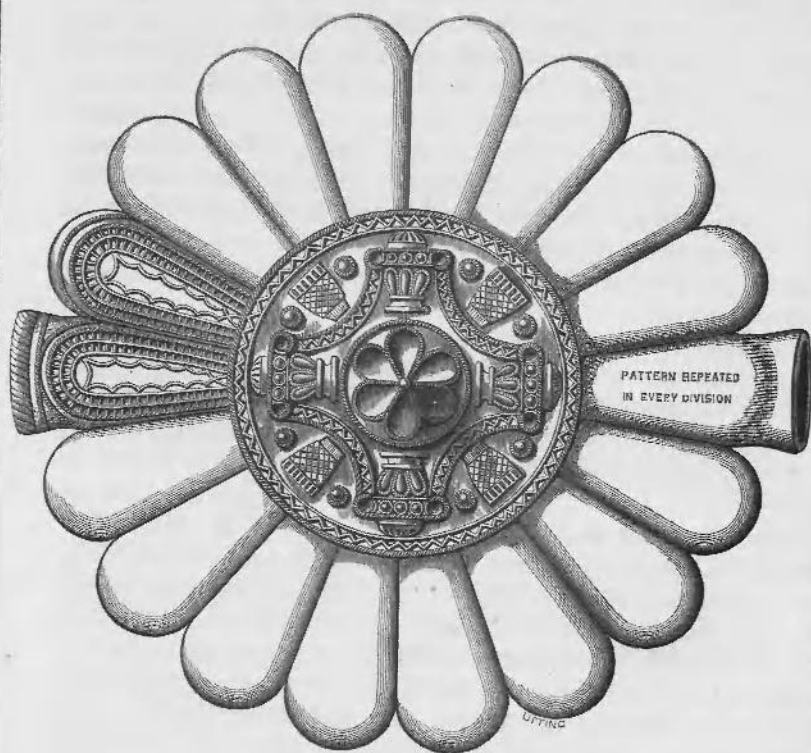
Two curious and characteristic representations of scorpions are rather more conventional in their imitation than most of the other objects; they are massive and altogether very singular productions.

Of the larger animals, lions, antelopes, and leopards are imitated, some in a rude manner on plaques of gold, partly *repoussé* or beaten up; the antelopes, however, have considerable character, and I have seen two executed in brass representing a long horned species which are interesting and curious examples of semi-barbaric art.

The two eagle-headed griffin-like monsters are objects of considerable interest, not only as being stated to have formed part of the decorations of the royal throne, but more especially from their vigorous conventional character, and the suggestion which they afford of an art aiming beyond mere imitation. It may, however, be that the idea of these certainly striking looking objects is altogether foreign, and that the present specimens are examples of the Ashanti imitativeness which so pervades their goldsmiths' work. Whatever may be the source of their design, the details of ornament on them, especially the surface enrichment of wire-work on the bases, has a completely native character. The most abundant of the objects directly imitated from nature are shells, and these chiefly of three kinds, the money cowrie and two species of *turritella*, and perhaps a *scalaria*. These have for the most part been moulded on the shells themselves, and sometimes cast with considerable skill; necklets and various ornaments seem to be composed of them, and for this purpose the *turritella* especially, an elegant spiral shell, is well adapted. It is possible that a species of *melania*, marsh-shells, abundant in various parts of the west coast of Africa, may have also furnished models for some castings.

Feathers are curiously copied in some of their gold work, and effective pieces of ornament are so produced; various leaves also are imitated, and lastly may be mentioned as derived, though not strictly copied from nature, a remarkable running ornament, very elegant, of leaves and fruit or seeds. This may, indeed, be an imported decoration, and it certainly has no small resemblance to a running vine-leaf and grape ornament, frequent in Italian renaissance. Among the many staff-heads in the collection, one especially, a very remarkable and interesting piece of goldsmiths' work, exhibits this graceful ornament in a well-marked manner, although the soft gold of the specimen has been somewhat crushed in hasty carriage. Besides these objects directly copied after nature, and motives of ornament obviously taken from the same source, there are various designs, no doubt, originally drawn from natural specimens, but now so conventionally treated as not to be always capable of identification with the objects which first suggested them.

Turning now to the objects imitated from artificial,



Ornamental Disk, worn by selected attendants of the King of Ashanti.

Outer diameter 6 inches.

generally European models, we find a most curious and heterogeneous collection—here the strong imitative instinct of the natives has had full scope. It will be sufficient to mention that among them are reliquaries, open-work ornaments of European eighteenth century design, filigree buttons of Spanish or Portuguese pattern, but with the wire-work imitated wholly by casting; ornaments from foreign uniforms reproduced in heavy gold; buckles, locks and keys, a padlock, a seal, but cast apparently from one that had lost its stone; bells, but without a clapper; small gorgets, as they appear to be, such as were formerly worn by our troops. Here also may be mentioned many of the finger-rings, which are directly modelled on European patterns, one a “fede” ring with the usual clasped hands; another, a ring copied as usual in tolerably massive gold from one of the coarse strong iron rings employed sometimes in adjusting old-fashioned gun-locks.

The reliquaries are of interest and are copied with considerable skill; in one instance, at least, from an original, probably Portuguese, dating from the seventeenth century. On one is an assumption of the Blessed Virgin, on another the pierced heart, on another a group of scriptural figures, and so on.

Many of these imitated European objects are not merely curiosities of barbaric imitation, but they have a further interest. They illustrate the method of ornament, instinctive or traditional, among the Ashanti goldsmiths; for example, one of the splendid circular ornaments, worn, I am informed, by the Ocras—selected attendants of the King—is decorated with relief pattern in massive gold, composed strangely enough, but with great skill, of keys and padlocks, the keys arranged in a radiating circle, the padlocks and some other objects symmetrically distributed over the remaining surface of the disk; it has been stated that this ornament was the appropriate emblem of the royal gaoler; all these disks resembling large circular *fibulae* are very remarkable objects, (of one of which a representation is here given,) and the ornament on several of them is extremely effective and admirably executed. Another example of a common European object, ornamented in native taste, is a large gold padlock, probably the surface of the model was almost, if not quite, plain, but the Ashanti workman has enriched his

copy with a very effective pattern, in relief, apparently *repoussé*, of curved lines arranged with much variety and skill, while portions of symmetrical ornament balance each other with excellent judgment.

The second point to be noted is that of the processes in use amongst the native goldsmiths; respecting the details of these processes—the actual *modus operandi*—we cannot always pretend to speak, but such a collection as the present enables me to say what processes they must certainly possess.

Casting must first be mentioned, for in this they evince undoubted skill; it may be that their appliances are of the most simple and primitive character, but we know that with very rude means, as appears to us, the native Indian, instructed in ancient traditional processes, produces work the beauty of which is at length freely acknowledged in Europe; and so it doubtless is in Ashanti; the tools are rude, but the power of adaptation of the native workman must be great, to enable him to copy, as we have observed, elaborate foreign models, objects moreover wholly strange to him. Their casting is often very delicate and cleanly delivered; the filigree buttons previously mentioned are curious examples of skill, and still more perhaps are some of the flatted disks, which have all the appearance of being composed of fine wire laid together, so sharply has the mould indicated the sutures; these disks raise another curious question to be touched upon presently. Their castings of perforated work are also remarkable, among them are bead-like ornaments evincing no common skill on the part of workmen, especially when it is remembered that they make comparatively little use of soldering. In casting they employ the process known in Europe as *cire perdue*, in which a wax model is made and afterwards melted out of a mould formed upon it; the space so left being then filled with molten metal. Next to the fusible excellence of gold the Ashantis have learnt its ductility, and some of their wire-work is delicate and excellent; a small finger-ring in the collection may be quoted as an example, as well as several of the staff-heads before mentioned. This wire-working seems to me an ancient traditional process among them, and there are undoubted signs of its present decay, casting being employed, where at a former period woven wire-work would have been used; to this, however, if time permit, I may be allowed briefly to refer again.



The malleable quality of gold the Ashantis appear to understand, but not completely : beaten or *repoussé* ornament is therefore familiar to them, the more so as it gives that varied effect and richness of surface decoration in which they delight to display the gorgeous nature of the metal. But leaf-gold they have not arrived at—their substitute for it is thick plating attached to the surface by pins. This is shown in several of the examples forming part of the present collection, notably on the large wooden balls overlaid with gold, which form the supports of the “messenger” swords. These swords are the credentials of the King’s messengers, and according to the symbols which are affixed to them the message they convey is one of peace or of the reverse. This plating is effected by forcing thin plates of gold into the patterns previously carved upon the objects to be covered and then pinning them to the surface.

The ornament forming the top of the King’s state umbrella is so plated, as well as other carved decorations with which it is enriched.

The process of soldering does not seem to have been used in the specimens here shown, but I am informed that they are acquainted with the use of the blow-pipe in soldering, and that they employ borax. They have also a method of welding together portions of gold which is most ingenious and skilfully applied ; in making the analysis of pieces of metal so joined, no solder was detected.

It remains for me to point out some general conclusions to which the examination of this remarkable collection leads, in comparison with the goldsmiths’ work of other races.

It has been remarked, and with some truth, that strong resemblance can be traced between various specimens of the Ashanti gold work included in this mass of treasure, and the work of several early races, notably the Celtic, Saxon, and Scandinavian tribes ; this resemblance no doubt exists to a degree, but it is mainly superficial, and thus far common to almost all tribes who have wrought in the precious metals during their period of semi-barbarism. The same superficial resemblance, or rather analogy, exists between Abyssinian work and early Mexican, between Scandinavian gold work and that found in the Indian graves of Columbia, and instances can be multiplied. It is due to the use of certain processes which, because they are the most obvious and easy, have

been practised since gold was first wrought, and to certain simple motives of surface ornament, which have occurred to most semi-savage tribes, and have become traditional among their descendants. A resemblance of another kind can be traced between certain specimens of this Ashanti work and the ancient Egyptian gold, which has come down to us, as well as with the traditional and somewhat imperfect productions of Abyssinia.

It is not to be supposed that one discovers here the skill of the ancient Egyptians—their wonderful knowledge of metal-working processes and their admirable art in surface-chasing, which has never been surpassed, nor do we find the rich inlaid ornament of the Indians, requiring as it does, a knowledge of precious stones or glass-pastes; nor the semi-barbaric but most effective imitation of it which descended through the Gothic races. Again, the delicate granulated work of the Etruscans and Greeks is necessarily unrepresented among the Ashantis, owing to their little familiarity with soldering processes. The subtle interlaced ornament in filigree of unapproached delicacy which characterizes the best Celtic work is equally unrepresented; nor do these African specimens show beaten or *repoussé* work executed with the surprising truth of line and precision that occurs in some of the bronze ornaments of the very early Celtic period.

The large mass of these African objects has, nevertheless, putting aside the direct copies of European models, a special and tolerably distinct character, although one may look in vain for any one motive of decoration as peculiar and pronounced as the trumpet ornament in Celtic work, or even as marked a method of working gold as the four-flanged twisted torques of the same race.

The character possessed by these objects, where the native ornament seems unalloyed, is mainly due to the use, as a style of surface enrichment, of certain frequently repeated curves and combinations of simple lines or cross-hatchings, not in themselves complicated, but producing a rich effect, on account of the remarkable feeling or instinct for symmetry by which they are guided. It is true that such diagonal lines and cross-hatchings are not in themselves distinctive, we find them in Gothic gold work, as in the treasure discovered at Petrossa; in Saxon work on the gold-foil placed beneath the inlay of transparent glass-pastes, as well as on the ancient

gold ornaments found in Scandinavia and in Ireland. But in all these cases and most others, the application of the motive of enrichment, however simple, is different from the Ashanti method. On the other hand, the latter resembles in many points some Abyssinian work.

Another method of enrichment which gives character to many of the native objects, is their frequent employment of the beaten up ornament already mentioned. This they use, often gracefully and always effectively, and in its ruder form at least it would seem to be an indigenous style, one which may have accompanied them in any migrations they have been compelled to make, and has gradually developed in proportion to the abundance of the supply of the precious metals.

The point, however, which seems to me most important to note in the present condition of their goldsmith's work is the evidence which I see in it of ancient traditional methods still indicated, but not fully carried out. The existence of such traditions among workers in precious metals is so wonderfully durable that they naturally carry our speculations back to a remote antiquity, but at the same time they are often so widespread that it is perhaps impossible now to discover their original home. One illustration on the present occasion will suffice. I took occasion to mention, while speaking of the gold wire-work of the Ashantis, that casting was now substituted for the earlier and more complicated process. Among their very effective ornaments are certain disks, most of which are now cast; originally such disks were formed of delicate wire equably coiled, and to give them stability, necessarily soldered. At present, and probably for a long period past, they seem unable to effect this, and therefore make a cast certainly with admirable delicacy and skill to imitate the original wire-work. The same imitation of an older and more artistic work is seen in some of the beautiful little casts of cowrie shells, and in many of the beads, these are cast copies of models originally wrought in wire-work; that must have had a complicated and most curious character; the casts are surprisingly ingenious and show the utmost dexterity.

It is therefore evident to me that the Ashantis are the inheritors of traditions, which in the lapse, perhaps of ages, have become partly obscured. Whence did these traditions

come, and from whence is the origin of this people who still retain them? These questions are ethnographical and ethnological. Their goldsmiths' art with which alone I have to do at present, would lead me to conjecture that an influence originating in the east of Africa, in Egypt, and in Abyssinia, may be recognized in their processes and in certain of their designs. Mr. Bowdich, whose name I have already mentioned, endeavoured, as I understand, on other grounds to trace a connection between the Ashantis and the people on the east of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible that some of the peculiarities of their art, to which I have adverted, may strengthen such a conjecture, but the questions that arise respecting the traditions of an art so wide-spread, so ancient and so unchangeable as that of the goldsmith, are such as require the closest and most cautious investigation.

The Hon. Wilbraham Egerton, M.P., contributes the following notes upon the "Messenger" sword:—

The sword exhibited is one of a pair brought from Coomassie, which vary a little in their dimensions, the total height of which is 4 ft. 1 inch.

The four handles already alluded to are  $9\frac{1}{4}$  in height; into them are let the two wrought iron cross pieces, which, one above the other, support the blade; they are severally 6 inches and  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in height; the width of the cross pieces is  $7\frac{3}{8}$ , and depth  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches. The blade is  $31\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length, and tapers up from  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches to  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in width. The ornament on the cross pieces is composed of a diaper pattern, rudely hammered in squares, with a geometrical or simple floral figure, generally resembling a Gothic quatrefoil. The lines are simply hatched across, and holes punched in. The narrow end or tang of the blade where it joins, what may be called the hilt, is hammered into a narrow spiral form, somewhat resembling the wrought iron work sometimes found in the grip of an Indian sword; from this springs the blade. It has three narrow channels running down it, with simple ornaments between, the chief of which is feather-shaped. As it gets wider nine rows of semicircular holes are punched out of it in several lines, gradually taper-

<sup>1</sup> He published "An Essay on the Superstitions common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians, and Ashantees." Paris, 4to.



"Messenger" Sword of the King of Ashanti.  
Entire height 4 feet  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inch

ing towards the point, and triangular towards the narrow end.

They must be of some antiquity, as some of the fractures of the cross pieces are rudely mended by riveted plates. The same thing is seen in a single-handed sword exhibited by Messrs. Garrard, which had been broken in the "fort" or cutting part of the blade.

In this sword, which only resembles the others in the shape of the "dumb-bell" handle, the lower part of the blade is serrated, and the carved end near the point slightly pierced. It is generally an imitation of an European cavalry sword. It appears only to have been used for cutting, and not for thrusting, and may have been an executioner's sword.

Having given the dimensions of the Ashanti sword, I will now make a few remarks on its peculiar shape.

It is, I believe, unlike anything that has been seen by European travellers in Africa. It is more remarkable for its size than for the richness of its ornament; the rudeness of the wrought-iron work is in strong contrast to the refined gold castings previously described. The length of the blade is not so great as in some of the Indian processional swords. What is most exceptional are the four "dumb-bell" shaped handles, which are necessary to make the sword stand up by itself. This in a hot country would be a great relief to the bearers, as it requires two persons to hold one up.

In Indian state swords it is not uncommon to have a hollow channel running down the blade, which lightens it, and into which pearls are inserted for ornament; so the piercing of the blade with a number of semicircular and triangular holes proves that it can only have been used as a state sword.

If it had been used for sacrificial or judicial purposes, the weight of metal would have been left or increased at the end of the blade, as in the Indian sacrificial axe exhibited last year, out of the Meyrick collection, whose blade is  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches in width, and has a very heavy point curved downwards.

The weapon which it most resembles is one used in the thick jungles of central India, in Mysore and Coorg, whose "bamboo<sup>2</sup> brakes are as intricate as the woolly curls of an

<sup>2</sup> Mir Husein. Life of Hyder Ali.

Abyssinian." It is essentially one which in its smaller form must have been commonly used to cut through underwood or small-sized timber.

It may therefore be a type which, without being derived from India, may have originated in circumstances common to both countries, or it may have been derived from Abyssinia. The Abyssinian mercenaries commonly employed in India would naturally bring back with them the common weapon of the country in which they had served, and so it might have been introduced into Africa as the dagger "jumbea," common among the Arabs at Aden, has been introduced into Central India. If that be so, it will be an additional proof that much of the art of Ashanti has been borrowed from other countries, and especially from the East.

I have written so far without any special knowledge of the use to which this sword might have been put, but the kindness of Mrs. Everett Green, and of the Prince of Ashanti, already referred to, enables me to add these interesting facts concerning the "Messenger" swords used by the King of Ashanti.

"In a country where signet and signature are unknown, a royal message is authenticated by the use of one of these swords. They are well known throughout the country, and the message given by its bearer is at once recognized as a royal mandate. The plain messenger sword has no special significance, but there are others which are emblematical. These are of a different form, protected by a sheath buckled over the curved blade, and on the sheath is a symbol in gold of the object of the mission. Thus, an axe covered with a tiger-skin,—the emblem of royalty,—means 'I could cut you in pieces if I chose ;' a pistol, between a tortoise and a snail, both harmless beings, means 'There is no occasion for war between us, let us be at peace.' A Kora nut, which is eaten during mourning, means 'I condole with you on the loss of your relative.' There are many of these symbols, in figures of large size wrought in gold, fixed on to the messenger swords.

"There is a regular staff of bearers of these swords, under a captain of their own. When sent on an errand the bearer is accompanied by a court crier, who wears a monkey-skin cap with a gold badge, and proclaims silence before the messenger delivers his orders."