



Antique Cameo, found at South: Shield.

The Archaeological Journal.

JUNE, 1878.

ANTIQUE CAMEO, FOUND AT SOUTH SHIELDS, DURHAM.

By C. W. KING, M.A.

The discovery of an antique cameo in this island is so uncommon an event that every well-authenticated instance of the kind deserves to be brought under the notice of the Institute, and therefore I have much pleasure in communicating the following particulars respecting the most important one that has ever come to my knowledge.

In March last, a poor man, whilst engaged in "prospecting" upon the site of the Roman amphitheatre at South Shields, picked up a large gem, which shortly afterwards came into the possession of Robert Blair, Esq., of that town, who kindly forwarded it to me for examination.

It is an elliptical Indian sardonyx, 2 by 1½ in. in its greatest and least diameters, of two layers; the upper, opaque white; the lower, a rich translucent brown.

In the white stratum is cut, in rather high relief, the figure of a Bear, advancing to the right, with head somewhat lifted as in the act of growling. At his fore paw lies the skull of some animal, his recent prey; whether calf or goat cannot now be distinguished, the relief being slightly damaged in that part. Although the execution is somewhat rough, in the usual style of the early part of the third century (to which date there is good reason to assign the work), yet the drawing is full of movement and of that fidelity to nature which is one of the surest tests for discriminating the antique from the modern in sculpture. The head of the animal preyed upon is added to give more character to the *tableau*; for the same reason

that the figure of the Lion in gems is often accompanied with the skull of an ox in the same position.

Our bear would at first sight be taken for the polar kind, but this is mere accident, due to the *colour* of the material; for which the artist, had it been at his choice, would have used the opposite hue. For it cannot be supposed that the Romans had ever ventured far enough northwards to make acquaintance with the great *white* bear, which is limited to the Arctic circle; whereas his *black* brother was well known to them from his frequent appearance in the arena. This last circumstance throws light upon the species of the Bear that then inhabited North Britain, for the *black* is carnivorous and savage; and this character explains why the Romans took the trouble to carry him all the way from Caledonia to Rome to make sport in the amphitheatre, when they had such plenty of the *brown* kind (a vegetarian and timid) close at hand in the Alps. For it must be borne in mind that all the transit hence to Italy was by land, across Gaul, from Gessoriacum to Massilia; no ships of burden daring to brave the terrors of the Bay of Biscay.

This export of bears to Rome commenced as soon as the Romans gained a footing in the north of this island. Under Domitian, Martial alludes to their employment in the execution of some particularly atrocious criminal:

“Nuda Caledonio sic pectora prebuit urso,
Non falsa pendens in cruce Laureolus.”

This unusually ferocious beast was probably one of the trophies of Agricola's northern campaign. The species must have been very abundant here, for two centuries later Claudian alludes to its fur as distinguishing the national costume: “Caledonio velata Britannia monstro.” The Emperor Valentinian, who, though claimed by ecclesiastical writers as a confessor of the faith during Julian's gentle persecution, was yet of a “rather cruel disposition” (as his friend Ammian is forced to allow), used to feed his pet bears “Innocentia” and “Mica aurea” with human flesh—let us hope with that of contumacious Pagans only.

Animals were never represented on gems, but for some mystic reason—usually having reference to the worship

of some deity of whom each was the attribute, hence the frequency of the Lion, Bull, Goat, Pig, Wolf, &c. Of the *bear* no other engraving has previously fallen under my notice; there must consequently have been some weighty motive that led to the brute's being honoured with so costly a portrait as the one before us. But the Romans were as fond of the rebus on proper names, and of "armes parlantes," as were our own mediæval forefathers. Cicero puts a *vetch* in place of his own cognomen, on the silver bowl he dedicates at a Sicilian temple; Voconius Vitulus takes for the type of his coins a *calf*; Thorius a *bull*; and Vibius Pans a *Pan's* head. As soon as the Germans began to enlist in the Roman army, names derived from the *bear* (the Teutonic equivalent to the *lion* of southern fauna and poetry) grow common in Latin. As early as Domitian's times we meet with an "Ursus" in high station and a patron of the poet Statius; under Constantius II we have "Ursulus" treasurer of the forces, who so greatly befriended the Caesar Julian when governor of Gaul; and again, "Ursicinus," commander of the army in the East. Hence it is not too great a stretch of probabilities, to suppose that some Gothic or Frankish tribune, serving under Commodus or Severus, and rejoicing in some such bearish appellation as those just quoted, had caused this cameo to be engraved to the glory of his name.

The destination of these large camei is made certain by allusions in ancient authors, as well as by sculptured remains. They were mounted in gold or silver, and served for fastening the great military cloak upon the shoulder, in the manner of the modern *solitaire*. Thus the romance-writer Heliodorus makes his hero Theagenes fasten his *chlamys* with a bust of Pallas carved out of amber; Sidonius Apollinaris depicts Dea Roma as using a great gem for the same purpose; in imperial statues, like the Spada Pompey, this same gem is seen carved into the Gorgon's head; and lastly in the magnificent cameo of the Family of Severus (Paris), the ægis on the breast of Caracalla is secured by a large oval gem, exactly coinciding in relative proportions with the cameo itself, and indicating beyond all doubt the

purpose for which *that* was intended. Our cameo, therefore, of "Ursus," was a decoration of the same nature as the larger one in blue paste with the bust of Antonia Augusta, found some years ago at Stanwix, and fully described in this *Journal* (vol. xxix, p. 26).

Although its subject is so analogous to the site where it was discovered, the fact must not be taken for more than it is worth, for it does not in reality prove any original connection between the two. The Pict, Scot, or Saxon, who despoiled the slaughtered proprietor of cloak and fibula, after breaking it out of the precious metal of the setting, tossed away the really more precious carving as a thing utterly valueless, upon the scene of plunder.

We cannot, I fear, claim for British talent the authorship of this cameo; the work though wanting finish is fully equal to that of the portraits of the period suggested, which are unquestionably of strictly Roman origin. But there can be no doubt that many of the intagli in jasper and cornelian found in similar localities (of which Mr. Blair has acquired some very instructive specimens) agree so closely in the strange peculiarities of their workmanship with the human and animal figures on the reverses of coins, of which the dies (as in the case of Carausius) must necessarily have been cut by Roman-British engravers, that no one experienced in such matters can doubt that both proceeded from the same hand. It is an acknowledged fact that die-sinking and gem-engraving formed the same profession in antiquity; and the minute examination of the types on the reverses of the barbarous pieces of the Gallic tyrants, Victorinus and Tetricus, has convinced me from their singular scratchiness that they were incised upon the iron by means of the same instrument as was used for the gem. They reverse Pistrucci's procedure, who cut the steel puncheons for his coins upon a lapidary's wheel, as though cameos in hard stone. In those gloomy days of the Decline, the arts appear to have found an asylum in Britain, less exposed to the ravages of the barbarians than her sister Gaul. Eumenius, at least, in congratulating Constantius upon the recovery of the wealthy island, speaks of the "artisans of all kinds with whom the country abounded," and of

whom the conqueror had brought back with him a very large number to be employed in rebuilding and embellishing the ruined cities under his dominion. As the author of *Ecclesiasticus* reckons amongst the trades, without which a city cannot be inhabited, "those who cut and engrave seals," it may safely be assumed that degenerate practitioners of that once elegant art had also established themselves, and found patronage in Roman Britain.