NOTES ON THE DEATH OF KING JOHN.[1]

By the Rev. F. SPURRELL, M.A.

The question which I propose to consider is this—What was a certain part of the direct cause of the death of King John? I propose, after reading the description of his death as given ordinarily by later writers of the history of England—and which is the commonly received account—to quote extracts from older English historians, some of whom vary as to the particulars of the incidents of his last fatal illness. It will be seen from these, that the real cause of King John's death is assigned to one of these two agencies—poison, or to a fatal draught of some intoxicating drink; and, as several historians differ as to what that drink was, the question shall be pursued by a comparison of the use of a particular Latin word, variously translated, apparently, in those mediæval times.

The ordinary account of the death of King John, as given in modern histories of England, is substantially quoted from the "History of England" by T. Smollett, M.D., 11 vols., 8vo., 1758, which states, "That unfortunate monarch (King John), after having ravaged the lands of the revolted barons in Norfolk, retired to Lynne, which was the rendezvous of all his forces; and, assembling a numerous army, resolved to penetrate into the heart of the kingdom, and hazard a decisive battle, hoping to be joined in his march by those who were discontented with Lewis" (this was Louis son of Philip king of France, to whom the rebellious nobles had offered the kingdom of England). "Thus determined, he (King John) departed from Lynne, which for its fidelity he had distinguished with many marks of his favour: his route lying over the washes between Lincolnshire and Norfolk, which are overflowed at high water, he judged his time so imprudently that the tide rushed in upon him, and he lost the greatest part of his forces, together with all his treasure, baggage and regalia. He himself hardly escaped with life, and arrived at the Abbey of Swinestead, where he was so deeply affected with his irreparable loss, that his grief produced a violent fever. Next day, being unable to ride on horseback, he was carried in a litter to the castle of Sleaford, and from thence removed to Newark, where, after having made his will, he died on the 19th day of October (1216), in the 51st year of his age, and the 18th of his reign. His bowels were buried in the Abbey of Croxton, and his body in the Cathedral of Worcester."

It will be inevitable that some of these facts as to King John's death must be again and again mentioned in the subsequent extracts from other historians, but care will be taken not to repeat more than possible, the

[1] Read in the Historical Section at the Annual Meeting at Lincoln, July 31, 1880.

especial point being, as will be shewn presently, to trace the different use made by the different writers of the incidental circumstances which led to his death.

My subject incorporates a digression, which I must now make, in order to introduce the word upon which the point of the question turns, its bearing upon English history will be seen as we proceed. My digression from King John is this :—

At the meeting of the Institute at Hereford in 1877, my attention was drawn to the copy of the Bible, preserved in the cathedral, of Wickliffe's translation, in which, at St. Luke, i, 15, where our authorised version in giving the words of the angel speaking to Zacharias respecting the birth of his son John the Baptist, says, "He shall drink neither wine nor strong drink," Wickliffe uses the word "sider" (cider) for the expression "strong drink." I heard an opinion expressed that possibly the letter "d" might be mistaken for "ch" in the MS., and that "sider" might more probably be "sicher," owing to Wickliffe's unwillingness to translate, and wishing simply to Anglicize the Greek word, in the original σἰκερα, and make it sicher or sicer. It is true, that word means, as Parkhurst's Greek Lexicon explains, "any inebriating liquor," whether made of corn, the juice of apples, honey, dates, or any other fruit. And it is clear from Liddell and Scott's Lexicon, that the Greek σἰκερα is derived from the Hebrew שבר (shakar) to inebriate, and denotes generally any intoxicating drink, but it was chiefly applied to what we call *made* wines, from dates, figs, or palms (says Bloomfield, Gr. Test.), or to fermented drink generally.

On a careful examination, however, of the Hereford MS., the notion of "sicher" must be discarded, for nothing can be clearer than that the written word is "sider," and the expression of Wickcliffe is, "he (John the Baptist) shall not drinke wyn ne sider."

I need not here repeat what I wrote at full length in the *Guardian* of August 29th, 1877 ; how I visited subsequently the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the Caxton Exhibition then open at South Kensington, and the British Museum Library, and after examination of numberless MSS. and printed books, ascertained that Wickliffe always translated σἰκερα by "sider," and the later writers by its equivalent, "strong drink." I, however, raised the archæological question why Wickliffe should have translated sicera by "sider," since cider is so peculiarly the produce of apple-bearing counties in the West and South-west of England. John Wickliffe was born at Richmond in Yorkshire, about 1324, and died at Lutterworth in Leicestershire in 1384, neither of which counties are famous for cyder. I asked for further information, and I received in reply a considerable quantity of letters and references.

It would be, of course, however, out of place here to enter any further into the very minute etymological history of the word Latinized into "sicera," which the accumulation of my notes would enable me to give, the present object being only to throw as much light upon the meaning of the word as will enable us to afford some introduction of it in the object before us, which is to find out if this explains in any way a reported circumstance in the death of King John, because, as eventually will be seen, the question as to the cause of his death turns very much upon the word used by the oldest historian who employs the Latin cicer, probably as derived from its equivalent Greek, σἰκερα.

After thus intimating the digressive connection which I intend to trace, I resume the point before us, from histories.

In Baker's "Chronicle of the Kings of England," p. 109,[1] we find this passage, "When Prince Lewis of France was come into England, and was received by the Lords and by the Londoners, King John with an army went into the North parts, and coming to Walpool, where he was to pass over the Washes, he sent one to search where the water was passable, and then himself with some few passeth over, but the multitude with all his Carriages and Treasure, passing without order, they cared not where, were all drowned. With the grief of which dysaster, and perhaps distempered in his body before, he fell into a Feaver, and was let blood; but keeping an ill diet (as indeed he never kept good), eating green Peaches, and drinking sweet Ale, he fell into a loosenesse and grew presently so weak, that there was much adoe to get him to *Newark*, where soon after he dyed. Though indeed it be diversely related: Caxton saith he was poisoned at Swineshead Abbey by a Monk of that Convent, the manner and cause this: the King being there, and hearing it spoken how cheap corn was, should say, he would ere long make it dearer, and make a penny loaf be sold for a shilling. At this speech the Monk took such indignation, that he went and put the poison of a Toad into a cup of wine and brought it unto the king, telling him there was such a cup of wine as he had never drunk in all his life, and therewithal took the assay of it himself, which made the king to drink the more boldly of it; but finding himself presently very ill upon it, he asked for the Monk, and when it was told him that he was faln down dead; then (saith the King) God have mercy upon me, I doubted as much. Others say the poison was given in a dish of pears. But the Physitian that dis-bowelled his body, found no sign of poison in it, and therefore not likely to be true; but, howsoever, the manner of his death be uncertain, yet this is certain, that at this time and place he dyed, on the 19th day of October, in the year 1216, when he had reigned 17 years and 6 months, lived 1 and fifty. He was buryed, his bowels at Croxton Abbey, his body at Worcester under the high altar, wrapped in a monk's cowl, which the superstition of that time accounted sacred, and a defensative against all evil spirits." Thus much Baker.

It is no part of my object to discuss the *place* of King John's death, whether at Newark or Swinsted, so I quote another historian as to the cause. M. Rapin describes the death of King John thus, see "The History of England," by Mr. Rapin de Thoyras, folio, London, 1732, vol. i, p. 279. He quotes Matthew Paris, and says, "His (John's) vexation for his loss, which was irretrievable in his present circumstances, threw him into a violent fever, which was heighten'd by inconsiderately eating peaches;" and in his foot notes adds, "Caxton is the first that mentions it in English, from whom Speed and Baker have borrowed it. He says, that the King hearing it, said how cheap corn then was, answered, he would e're long make it so dear that a penny loaf should be sold for a shilling. At which a monk there present took such indignation that he went and put the poison of a toad into a cup of wine, &c.," and he states that the monk tasted first and died, as we have been already told. "But (continues the notes in Rapin) it is a very improbable story

[1] "Chronicle of the Kings of England," by Sir R. Baker, Knight, folio, London, 1653.

for a man to poison himself to be revenged of another. But Walter Hemingford tells it in a different way; he says the abbot persuaded the Monk to poison the King, because he would have lain with his Sister, and that he did it by a dish of pears, which he poisoned all but three, and then presenting them to the king, he bid him taste them himself, which he did, eating only the three that he had marked, and so escaped whilst the King was poisoned with the rest. From Hemingford, Higden and Knighton copied this story, which is not mentioned by any historian that lived within sixty years of that time." This reference to Caxton, I have not been able to verify. We know that amongst the books written by the celebrated William Caxton, who introduced printing into England, is the "Descripcion of Britayne," 1480, but I have not seen it.

The passage referring to King John's death in Speed is this, and though very short, I know of no other. The work I quote from is a small long 8vo., entitled, "England, Wales and Scotland, and Ireland, described and abridged, &c., by John Speed, 1627," and in which, under the head of Lincolnshire, chap. xxxi, sec. 7, is stated, "This Shire triumpheth in the births of Beaucleark, King Henry I, whom Selby brought forth, and of King Henry IV, at Bullingbrooke borne; but may as justly lament for the death of King John, herein poysoned by Simon, a monke of Swynsted Abby."

Thus it is to be noted, several historians plainly assert that King John was poisoned.

I quote now from Fox's Martyrs. The title of his book is "Acts and Monuments of Matters most special and memorable happening in the Church," &c., by Mr. John Fox, a large folio, tenth edition, London, 1684. In vol. i, p. 289 & 290, is said, "and in the self-same year, as King John was come to Swinstead Abbey, not far from Lincoln, he rested there two days; where (as most writers testifie) he was most Traiterously poisoned by a monk of that Abbey of the Sect of the Cistercians or St. Bernard's Brethren, called Simon of Swinstead." . . . "the monk then being absolved of his Abbot for doing this act (aforehand) went secretly into a Garden upon the backside, and finding there a most venemous Toad, he so pricked him and pressed him with his penknife, that he made him vomit all the poison that was within him. This done, he conveyed it into a cup of Wine, and with a smiling and flattering countenance he said thus to the King, If it shall like your Princely Majesty, here is such a cup of wine as ye never drank better before in all your lifetime; I trust this wassail shall make all England glad; and with that he drank a great draught thereof, the king pledging him. The monk, after went to the Farmary and there died." . . . "The king within a short space (feeling great grief in his body) asked for Simon the Monk and answer was made that he had departed this life," and thus Fox, too, makes out the king was poisoned.

Opposite page 290 is a page of copper-plate engravings, giving six scenes, called "the description of ye poysoning of King John by a Monke of Swinsted Abby in Lincolnshire."

1. A monk kneeling before the abbot, and on a label is the inscription, "the monk absolved to poyson King John 'Ego absolvo te.'"

2. A monk pricking a toad in a dish, and on the label, "the Monk empereth his poyson into a cup to give ye king."

3. Shows two monks, one bringing a cup and taking off the cover,

gives it to the king, who is at the table with a courtier at his side, a label out of the monk's mouth, saying, "Wassell, my liege." At the bottom the inscription states, "the monk presenteth King John with his cup of poyson, beginning himself to ye king."

4. A courtier kissing the hand of the king, lying dead, and on the label, "King John lieth here dead of poyson."

5. Two monks are lamenting the dead monk, and on the label is "the monke lieth here dead of ye poyson that he drank to ye king."

6. A monk elevating the host at an Altar, on which two lights are burning, attended by four laity; and on the label, "a perpetual masse sung daily in Swinsted for ye monk that poysoned King John."

And perhaps here may be the place to stop and enquire, if this assertion of poisoning by means of the venom from a toad can be verified by facts. Notwithstanding this charge brought by these writers against the abbot and monks of Swinsted Abbey, and these interesting engravings of Fox, there is room for doubting the truth of the statement, not only as to the fact but as to the possibility. No doubt there would be a prejudice in the minds of post-Reformation writers against the Roman Catholic monks, and especially the mind of John Fox would be particularly biassed against them, and he would gladly make out that King John thus fell a martyr to the errors of popery as an anti-Christian system, which would not hesitate at the murder of a king by poison, if it would serve the monk's purpose. Possibly his plates and his story are not too veracious, and are altogether fabulous, and without any foundation in fact or history, and probably the older historians from whom he copied, had not ascertained the story as given by the earliest writers, and those nearest the days of King John, and so the notion of poison arose altogether from a mistake in the translation of the words which give the account of his death.

Let me however add a word with regard to the possibility of death by the poison of a toad. No doubt the common notion is, that the toad is a venemous creature and can exude or vomit poison, and generally popular notions have some foundation in fact. I cannot ascertain however from medical men and natural physiologists that the toad is venemous, or that it has ever been proved that the toad contains or secretes venom, either alive or dead; certainly it is not so in the sense of the viper. In this country toads are handled with impunity, and I am informed that no pricking or squeezing would extract poison from a toad. There seems therefore no ground for the possibility of the alleged story of poisoning King John by venom from a toad being true, so we may dismiss the probability of the fact and conclude that his fatal fever was increased by other causes. Nevertheless, though we dismiss the notion, from its improbability as well as from the impossibility of fact, it may be well to add that there is said to be an acrid fluid secreted from the glands of the skin of a toad, which, under circumstances, might produce irritation of the skin of a person handling one; but I am assured by an authority at the College of Surgeons that he knows of no evidence of such acrid fluid producing injury or death if swallowed.

In the "History of England" written by Mathew Paris, a folio, London, 1640, at page 287 at the end of the reign of King John, passing much that has been already quoted or referred to in translation, I find thus—"Rex tamen cum exercitu suo vix elapsus nocte sequente apud

Abbatiam quæ Sueneshead dicitur, pernoctavit. Ubi, ut putabatur de rebus a fluctibus devoratis tantam mentis incurrit tristitiam, quod acutis correptus febribus, cœpit graviter infirmari. Auxit autem ægritudinis molestiam perniciosa ejus ingluvies qui nocte illa de fructu Persicorum et *novi ciceris potatione* nimis repletus, febrilem in se calorem acuit fortiter et incendit." Which may be translated into English thus—"Nevertheless the king having escaped with difficulty together with his army, on the following night travelled the whole night through to an abbey which is called Swineshead. There, as it is thought, he was seized with so much sorrow of mind at his baggage being destroyed by the waves, that being attacked by acute feverish symptoms he began to be very ill. But his very hurtful gluttony increased the troublesome nature of his illness, who, on that night, having indulged too much in eating peaches and by drinking new "cicer," strongly intensified and inflamed the fevered heat within him."

Matthew Paris, upon whose anvil, as good old Professor Blunt used to say of Wicliffe's translation of Scripture, all later translations have been evidently hammered, was a French monk, who lived at the Benedictine Monastery of St. Albans, and he wrote his "History of England" in Latin, and died A.D. 1259. Since King John died in 1216, only forty-three years before Matthew Paris, there seems every probability that the facts of Paris' history are true; and when therefore we find no mention made of John's death being caused by poison, but that his fever was intensified to a fatal issue by his imprudence and gluttony, I think we must thoroughly discard all notion of the king having been poisoned; and, on the contrary, take it as a fact that after the fever arose, which was caused by his alarm, danger and losses, the king imprudently ate too much fruit and drank too much new "cicer," and this gluttony was the direct cause of his death.

Now then, this is the interesting point. What was this drink called "cicer," of which King John drank so gluttonously as to increase the fever which killed him? Matthew Paris wrote in the thirteenth century, and the question is, what did he mean by cicer? Clearly "cicer" is the same word as "σικερα," and I have thought that the use of the word by Wicliffe, as already referred to, might help us to form some opinion as to what was the drink which so materially contributed to the death of King John.

I am told that Swineshead is famous for its excellent pears, and possibly it was so 660 years ago, and doubtless the juice of pears was used at that time, and it is not impossible therefore that the king's fatal liquor was what we should now call *perry*, certainly one true translation of sicer, since whether cider be a French or English word, it is described, for instance, in Boyer's French Dictionary, 1751, as "a drink made of the juice of apples or of pears." It nowhere appears, however, that pears were used to any such extent as apples were to produce a drink, nor so commonly grown. Thus, though possible, it is not probable that perry was King John's fatal draught.

We have already had Baker's explanation, that the injurious drink was "sweet ale." It might have been, since ale was unquestionably an Englishman's general drink in the Middle Ages; but then, most probably the word in M. Paris' account would have been not sicer, but cerevisia; and, moreover, we can hardly imagine that a king who studied the

refinements of his table to the extent that John appears to have done could have made such an incongruous mixture for his palate, as to drink new ale at the same time as that he was eating delicate peaches. Peaches, moreover, would not be green, as Baker said, in October, and since he is clearly wrong on this head, his translation of "cicer" into ale is probably erroneous also.

We have also had the fatal drink described by Brady as "bracket." And here I must confess my entire ignorance, for I have not the slightest idea what bracket means, nor can I find any clue to its meaning anywhere, or trace its derivation. I will not, therefore, say another word about it.

There remains then the only inference by way of summing up, to consider the most probable word as the true translation of "sicer," and I think we shall find it to be something quite appropriate for King John to quaff whilst partaking of the ripe peaches in October; his mistake having been that he ate too much of the fruit and drank too much of the new made drink. Matthew Paris wrote as a learned man, and he probably used the word "sicer" in the sense that was common at that time amongst scholars. And though Wickliffe wrote many years after, his rendering of the word was, no doubt, generally recognized as giving in the word "cider" a correct form for the subsequent expression "strong drink." Wickliffe, though Yorkshire born and a Leicestershire sojourner, would doubtless be familiar with cider as an English drink. He was, therefore, not unlikely, was in fact accurately entitled to write "cider" as an equivalent for σἰκερα; and when we find in all dictionaries the English word "cider" with its similar French cidre, Italian cidro, Spanish sidra, Portugese cidra, all derived from the Latin sicera or sicer and from the Greek σἰκερα, traceable from the Hebrew, all of which words mean the same thing, "a drink made from the juice of apples and specially appropriated as now to that fruit only." The result seems to be, that *cider* corresponds both in name and nature with the "cicer" of Mat. Paris, and that the word can mean cider and nothing else. That cider is a strong drink all who have ventured to take too much of it can testify, and there is an old name for a strong kind of cider, which is very suggestive of its intoxicating power. When King John indulged so gluttonously in that fatal October, not only were the peaches ripe, but it was just the season when the cider would have been newly made from the autumnal apples; and Mat. Paris wrote with perfect accuracy in mentioning that the "cicer," *i.e.*, the cider, was new, since undoubtedly it was but recently made, and was a suitable accompaniment to the peaches. I venture to think therefore that the fact may be considered to be established that it was the drinking of new cider and not the poison of a toad, which so materially accelerated the death of the ablest of the Angevins.