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SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST IN ART, LEGEND, AND RITUAL.¹

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Many circumstances have contributed to make S. John the Baptist one of the most prominent saints honoured in the early and mediæval periods of Christianity. The marvellous incidents attending his birth, his life as one of the three perpetual Nazarites mentioned in scripture, the dignity conferred upon him as the baptizer of his Lord, and his courageous martyrdom, would have served to render him exceptionally conspicuous among the early saints, even if Christ had not himself declared that of all born of women there had arisen no greater than his precursor, John.² Corresponding with the greatness of the saint was the honour paid to his memory and his remains, and probably in no country was he more venerated than in England, where nearly four hundred parish churches bear his name, and many religious houses and hospitals, guilds and fraternities took him for their patron, especially the civic companies of tailors and barbers,³ and in English art the numerous little alabaster tablets and seals bearing the head of S. John testify to the honour in which he was

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, Feb. 1st, 1893.

² He is held in much esteem by the Mohammedans, and his miraculous birth is alluded to in the Koran, which states that the angels said to Zacharias: "Verily God promiseth thee a son named John, who shall bear witness to the Word which cometh from God; an honourable person, chaste, and one of the righteous prophets," Koran, Sale's translation, ch. iii, p. 36. Cornelius a Lapide says that "the Fathers constantly call John the Prince of Monks and Anchorites, as S. Jerome, S. Chrysostom, Theophylact,

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Cassian," Com. on Gospels, vol. i, p. 99. Mossman's translation.

³ Besides being the patron of the "Confraternity of St. John Baptist of Merchant Taylors," of London, as it is yet called, S. John was honoured by the tailors of Bristol, whose guild was established by Royal Charter, dated 22 Richard II. They had an altar at S. Owen's Church, where mass was daily said by their chaplain. See *Arch. Jour.* vol. xxxviii, p. 113. The fraternity of the same craft at Exeter bore the image of S. John upon their seal. See *Ibid.*, vol. xi, p. 182.

held, as do the numerous paintings of his effigy or the events of his life which formerly adorned our churches, and of which over fifty examples are given in the South Kensington List.¹

In ecclesiastical art we often find examples of saints especially associated together, as is the case with the two deacons, SS. Laurence and Stephen, the kings, Edmund and Edward, the martyrs, Christopher and George, the virgins, Catherine and Margaret.² In like manner John the Baptist and John the Evangelist are often portrayed together in Christian iconography, as in paintings at Canterbury Cathedral, and in several churches; and they are so shown on a bronze panel of the tomb of Henry VII. at Westminster. Their emblems, the eagle and the lamb, form the spandrels of the west doorway at Cottishall S. John's, Norfolk, and occasionally there is a series of representations of the events in the lives of the precursor and evangelist, as at Guildford S. Mary, and in an altar-piece of the fifteenth century at the Louvre, Paris. When a person bore the name of John, sometimes there will be found figures of two or more saints similarly named; thus John of Waltham, who died in 1395, had on his brass at Westminster Abbey, the effigies of SS. John the Evangelist, John of Beverley, and John the Almoner; in like manner the brass of John Byrkhed, 1418, at Harrow, Middlesex, shows the Baptist and the Evangelist upon the orphrey of his cope.³ S. John, as the preacher of repentance, is sometimes joined with S. Mary Magdalen the great example of it, as at Wiggenhall S. Mary, Norfolk; but the reasons for the presence of certain saints round the head of S. John on the English alabaster tablets has not been satisfactorily explained.⁴ So popular was the precursor saint that his effigy may be seen repeated two or three times in the same

¹ To these may be added traces of a figure of the Baptist on the south-east respond of the south arcade at Heacham, Norfolk.

² This association is sometimes seen in ritual as well as art. A conspicuous example is furnished by the two leading Apostles, SS. Peter and Paul. It appears also occasionally in the dedications of churches, as in the last cited instance. Caldwell Priory, Beds, was dedicated to the two Saint Johns.

³ Occasionally the two Saints are met

with where the persons commemorated did not bear their name, as on the brasses of Laurence de St. Maur, 1337, at Higham Ferrars, and on that of Henry Sever, 1471, at Merton College Chapel, Oxford.

⁴ At Norwich the Prior's doorway has a central figure of our Lord, and on one side S. John Baptist and a Bishop, on the other, a King and Moses with the tables of the law. See Goulburn on the nave roof bosses of Norwich Cathedral, p. 418.

building, as at Westminster, where the chapels of Henry VII. have three images of S. John Baptist, and he is painted twice at Randworth, Norfolk, and Plymptree, Devon.¹

The earliest representations of the Baptist show him scantily clad in the skin of a camel, with occasionally the head of the animal hanging down; but in later works he frequently appears vested in a linen or stuff tunic and mantle, now and then the tunic is of camel hair under a vesture of linen. The hair and beard of the saint are usually long and unkempt, his countenance stern and thoughtful, and his feet are bare. In a Greco-Italian picture of thirteenth or fourteenth century date the nimbus round the head of S. John is composed of stars. The Greek Church translates literally the words of S. Mark, "Behold I send my angel (messenger) before my face," and its artists constantly attach wings to the shoulders of the Baptist.²

The oldest emblem of the saint is the lamb, the symbol of our Lord, and to which he generally points with the first finger of his right hand; sometimes the lamb reposes upon a closed book, as at Easton Church, Hants; the martyr's palm is seen in his left hand on the seal of S. John's Priory, Clerkenwell, whilst occasionally a sword is placed above his head, and this being the instrument of his martyrdom forms his emblem in the Clog Almanacks. The emblem most frequently used in more modern art is a cross-headed staff formed of two sticks tied together, it appears in the pictures of the early Italian painters, Giotto, Raphael, and Carraci; round this symbol is generally twined a scroll with the words. "*Ecce Agnus dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,*" or the first clause only of the sentence, and at Brown's Bede House, Stamford, many scrolls with this verse upon them are placed about the stained glass effigy of S. John. The crescent and star are often seen in connection with the precursor's image, as on a seal of S. John's, Clerkenwell, temp. Richard II. These figures are of Byzantine origin and were assumed by the Turks on the

¹ John Nottingham, of Bury St. Edmunds, grocer, by will, dated 1437, left the sum of five marks for the "acquisition of an image of S. John

Baptist for the high altar S. Mary's, Bury." Bury Wills, p. 7.

² *Lives of the Saints*, vol. vi, p. 334.

taking of Constantinople, when they placed them upon their flag, as is the case to the present day.

Occasionally the Baptist is seen enthroned, as upon a coin struck at Florence in 1252; his image formed part of a pastoral staff at Salisbury Cathedral, and is still to be seen crowning the silver mace of the beadle at S. John's, Clerkenwell, a noteworthy example, as it is dated 1685. His effigy was a favourite for the handles of spoons in the middle ages, and the Merchant Tailors' Company of London possessed many such with their patron saint.

The history of our saint was painted in the Chapter House at Westminster, at Catfield and Elsing in Norfolk, and Wiston, Suffolk; it appeared also in stained glass at Battlefield, Shropshire, S. Mary's, Newington, Middlesex, and Watlington, Kent.

The birth of S. John is beautifully represented in a Greek MS. of twelfth century date. It exhibits S. Elizabeth reclining cross-legged upon a couch whilst a female hands her a vessel of food; to the left of the bed is Zacharias seated and writing upon a tablet, he is nimbed and before him are other personages, one of whom, a beautiful girlish figure, has her hands upraised in great astonishment. In the foreground are small effigies of women, one of whom is seated before the infant S. John, who is seen in a font-shaped basin, into which another female pours water from an ewer.¹ The naming of the Baptist is the subject of a fine painting in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral, and is engraved in a work on the crypt by the Rev. Scott Robertson.

With the rise of the naturalistic and sentimental school of religious art appeared the subject of the Holy Family, as a member of which, the youthful S. John figures in late Continental paintings. A similar conception, the departure of the juvenile Baptist for the desert became frequent, and was beautifully rendered by Philippo Lippi and Murillo, but I can discover no indications of either subject in English mediæval art.²

¹ Engraving in D'Agincourt, *Hist. of Art*, pl. lix. A youthful female figure sometimes represents the Blessed Virgin, from a tradition that she was present at S. John's birth.

² "Nicephorus asserts that when John was a year and a half old he was taken

by his mother into the desert, and Cedrinus adds that he was concealed in a certain cave, and that his mother died there, and that an angel took care of the child." Cornelius a Lapide, vol. i, p. 100.

In a chantry dedicated to S. John at S. George's Chapel, Windsor, are three paintings of events in his life, one of which represents him preaching in the wilderness, and on the celebrated herse-cloth at Dunstable, Beds, he is seen as a preacher "standing behind an imaginary pulpit, made of two upright branches, in the forks of which a horizontal branch is placed the height of his waist, he stands on a green plot of grass."¹ Albert Durer carved a wooden panel with this subject, in which S. John appears in strict accordance with the early representations of him, a gaunt figure with unkempt locks and beard, and his person but partially covered by a camel's skin garment, his pulpit, exactly like the Dunstable example, is planted upon a rock, and is surrounded by an audience in sixteenth century German costume.²

S. John is occasionally very appropriately placed upon pulpits in both ancient and modern art; he is painted upon fifteenth century ones at Horsham S. Faith's and Snettisham, Norfolk; whilst at Burlingham S. Edmund in the same county, the text *Inter Natos Mulierum Non Surrexit Major Johanne Baptista* runs round the cornice of the original pulpit, prettily inscribed in black lettering with red capitals.

The Baptism of our Lord by S. John has always been a favourite subject in Christian art, and especially so in connection with fonts and baptisteries. In many representations there are one or more angels introduced as attendants on our Lord, and to hold his vesture, as may be seen in the sculptures on the west doorway of Early English date at Higham Ferrars, and on the bosses of the Perpendicular roof of the nave at Norwich Cathedral.³ In the last-named example, the Baptist kneels as he administers the baptismal rite, and at Stalham, Norfolk, he is seen genuflecting; on the Norman font at Castle Frome, Herefordshire, he wears a maniple, and at West Haddon, Northants, the saint holds a book, whilst an angel presents him with the chrism garment, and on the opposite side is

¹ Proceedings Soc. Ant., vol. viii, 2nd series, p. 434.

² A picture by Giotto shows the Baptist pointing to a cross-headed staff with the usual inscribed scroll, and with figures in eastern costume seated around him.

³ These bosses are three in number, the central one shows the precursor kneeling whilst he baptizes our Lord; the smaller side bosses have each an angel, one of whom holds a tunic, the other a mantle.

a person in adoration. Where this subject forms one of a series in the life of our Lord, the Saviour sometimes wears the nimbus for the first time, and at Haddon he is standing in a font which is a miniature of that on which the carving appears.¹ A somewhat similar sculpture is on one of the bench ends at Wiggenhall S. Germans, Norfolk. In many early examples, a symbolical figure of the river Jordan is introduced in one corner of the composition, as is found in an illumination in a Greek MS. of the seventh or eighth century, where the stream is personified by a nearly nude man reclining against a water vase from which the river flows, whilst in his hand he holds rushes;² and in the Benedictional of S. Ethelwald, the symbol is an old man with horns pouring water from a vase, and with the end of an oar over his shoulder. The fish seen in many compositions are, perhaps, also emblematical, for as Bingham says, the "Early Christians were wont to please themselves with the artificial name of 'Pisciculi,' fishes, to denote as Tertullian words it, "that they were regenerate, or born again into Christ's religion by water, and could not be saved but by continuing therein."³ At Compton, Surrey, there was a baptism in the east window; it was of late date, and bore the inscribed verse, "for thus it becometh us to fulfille all rightfulness."⁴

The ancient baptisteries were, I believe, always dedicated to S. John, and at Canterbury there was a church bearing his name, and which was built before 758, by Archbishop Cuthbert, both as a baptistery and a place of sepulture for the Archbishops.⁵ S. Charles Borromeo, in his *Instructions on Ecclesiastical Buildings*, endeavoured to enforce the primitive practice of having a distinct building for baptisms, placed near every cathedral, "or which may, through some other title, be the head Church of a district," the structure was to be placed under the invocation of S. John the Baptist,⁶ and above the altar he orders a representation of the baptism of Christ. In cases where the baptistery was not separated from the church, there should

¹ Poole's Churches, p. 45.

² D'Agincourt, pl. lix.

³ Antiquities of the Christian Church, vol. i, p. 3.

⁴ Brayley and Walford, Surrey, vol. iv, p. 296.

⁵ Archæologia, vol. lii, p. 391.

⁶ The baptistery altar at Wimborne Minster is said, however, to have been dedicated to S. Nicholas, which is not unlikely, as that saint was the patron of children.

be a chapel devoted to the administration of baptism.¹ These instructions were composed towards the close of the sixteenth century.

The very early Norman font at Bridekirk, Cumberland, has the Baptism of Christ upon it; there are Perpendicular examples at the adjacent churches of Shorne and Southfleet, Kent, and at Gresham, Norfolk, it forms the eighth panel of the octagonal font-bowl, which bears the seven sacraments on the other sides, perhaps, in this case it may typify baptism as the Christian equivalent for circumcision, which took place on the eighth day after birth. A post-Reformational example is exhibited at S. James', Piccadilly, which is about 1684 in date. Borromeo states that a figure "of S. John Baptist in the act of baptizing Christ," should be placed at the top of the ciborium which covers the font.²

The martyrdom of the Baptist was a very great favourite in mediæval art, and frequently comprised three incidents in its history; the banquet of Herod, with Herodias at his side, and her daughter Salome dancing, or rather tumbling, before them, formed the first portion; the second being the beheading of the Saint; and the last the presentation of his head in a charger to Herodias by Salome. Occasionally Salome is seen at the banquet, not tumbling but dancing, as in a silver-bound book belonging to the Baptistery of S. John's, Florence, and of eleventh century date, but more frequently she is tumbling; and was probably so represented in accordance with some tradition to that effect, as such posturing is still practised in the East, and is constantly pictured in Persian works of art. Sometimes Herodias and her daughter stand and watch the beheading of their enemy, and in the pictures of the presentation of the head, Herodias is seen gloating over it and piercing the tongue with a needle, in accordance with the tradition recorded by S. Jerome. Representations of the martyrdom were on the walls of the churches of All Saints', Hastings; Idsworth Chapel, Charlton, Hants; St. George's, Windsor; and Wiston, Suffolk; and at Worstead, Norfolk, the reredos of the North Chapel has a large oblong panel, on which the death of S. John was pictured.³

¹ Instructions on Ecclesiastical Buildings. Trans. Wigley, pp. 67, 69.

² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³ Ælfric writes thus quaintly on the beheading of S. John, saying that "he had dwelt in the waste unhurt among

At the beginning of the present remarks allusion has been made to the alabaster tablets bearing the severed head of the Precursor, these having been fully investigated, described, and illustrated by Mr. St. John Hope, in the *Archæologia*, vol. LII. no further allusion will be made to them here. Some of the other representations of this object were of an elaborate character, as on the brass of John Reeding, at Biggleswade, Beds, dated 1481, and where the head is borne by angels, and a German picture of fifteenth century date—now in the National Gallery—exhibits the face surrounded by angelic spirits in adoration of it. The church of Halifax, Yorkshire, is dedicated to the Baptist, and the town seal bears his head with the words *Halez* above and *fax* below the face; the device, it is said, was assumed from the possession of certain relics of the saint.

Numerous seals exist with the head of the Baptist upon them. One with the legend *Jesus est amor meus* is affixed to a deed in the muniment room of the Hare family of Stowe Bardolph, Norfolk; another found at Godstow Nunnery is inscribed *Caput ioh. in disco*; and a third, already alluded to, belonged to the Priory of S. John's, Clerkenwell.

S. John appears in Van Eyck's famous picture of the Adoration of the Lamb, at the left hand of the Eternal Father, S. Mary being on the right, and in a Coronation of the Virgin, by Maso Finiguerra, the Baptist forms one of a crowd of saints, holding his cross-headed staff and pointing to our Lord and S. Mary. In a picture by B. Angelico and Cosimo Roselli, the Baptist appears to the left of Christ, S. Mary on the right of him; and in a painting, now in the Museum, Cologne, the Baptist kneels at the side of the seated figure of the Saviour, who is surrounded with seraphim.

all the beast kind, and among serpents and asps, and all the worm kind, and they deaded him. But the accursed Herodias slew him by beheading, and received the death of so great a man as a gift for her daughter's dancing—verily there is no worm kind, nor wild beast kind, like in evilness to an evil woman." *Homilies*, vol. i. pp. 487-8.

Maundrell in his *Travels* (1696) says that at Sebaste, in Samaria, there remained "some ruins of a great church,

said to be erected by *Helena*, over the place where John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded. In the body of the church is a staircase into the dungeon where his blood was shed. The *Turks*, of whom there are here a few poor families, hold this prison in great veneration, and have erected a little mosque over it, which, for a small piece of money, anyone is allowed to enter." *See World Displayed*, vol. xi, p. 42.

Several interesting and quaint legends cluster about the relics of S. John, and there are many passages in English writers concerning them. The Anglo-Saxon Ælfric, in his *Homilies*, discourses thus upon the Baptist's relics. "The holy head was buried at Jerusalem—some heretics said that the head blew the King's wife Herodias, for whom he had been slain, so that she went with the winds all over the world; but they erred in that saying, for she lived to the end of her life, after the slaying of John. But John's head was afterwards manifested to two eastern monks, who with prayers visited that city, and they bore the precious treasure thence to a city which is called Edessa, and the Almighty God, through that head, manifested innumerable miracles. His bones, after a long time, were brought to the great city of Alexandria, and there, with great honour, deposited."¹ Roger of Wendover speaks of the above discovery of the head, and says that in 458, S. John revealed to the two monks "the place of his head near the house where Herod formerly lived. It was straightway brought to Edessa, a city of Phœnicia, and was there buried with due honour."² Sir John Mandeville writes of Sebaste, that in a fair church, "There was wont to be the head of S. John the Baptist inclosed in the wall, but the Emperor Theodosius had it drawn out, and found it wrapped in a little cloth all bloody, and so he carried it to Constantinople, and the hinder part of the head is still at Constantinople, and the fore part of the head to under the chin is at Rome under the church of S. Sylvester." He further says, "and the jaws beneath, which hold to the chin and part of the ashes and the platter in which the head was laid when it was smitten off, are at Genoa, and the Genoese make a great feast in honour of it, and so do the Saracens also. And some men say that the head of S. John is at Amiens in Picardy, and other men say that it is the head of S. John the Bishop. I know not which is correct, but God knows; but however men worship it, the blessed S. John is satisfied."³ Maundrell, in 1696, describing Damascus, says of S. John's Church there, that it had been converted into a mosque, and in it "was

¹ Ælfric. *Homilies*, vol. i, p. 487, Trans. Thorpe.

² Roger of Wendover's *Chronicle*, vol. i, page 11.

³ *Early Travels in Palestine*, p. 182.

pretended to be kept the head of S. John, and some other relics, esteemed so holy, that it is death, even for a Turk, to enter the room where they are deposited."¹

Respecting the relics at Genoa, Misson, early in the last century, wrote that "the ashes of St. John the Baptist are supposed to be preserved in the Cathedral, in a shrine supported by four beautiful columns of porphyry brought from Smyrna in 1098."² Of the portions of the head reputed to be preserved in the church of S. Sylvester in the Campo Marzo, Rome, Alban Butler remarks that Sirmond thinks the head there to be that of S. John the Martyr of Rome. "Pope Clement VIII., to remove all reasonable doubt about the relic of this saint, procured a small part of the head that is kept at Amiens for S. Sylvester's Church."³ A somewhat remarkable statement to make, as though the small portion of the true relics could render the doubtful part authentic. Butler further adds that the head discovered in 453 at Emissa, was "kept with great honour in the church of that city till about the year 800, this precious relic was then conveyed to Constantinople, that it might not be sacrilegiously insulted by the Saracens. When that city was taken by the French in 1204, Wallo de Sarton, a Canon of Amiens, brought part of this head, that is, all the face except the lower jaw, into France, and bestowed it on his own church, where it is preserved to this day." This is Alban Butler's account, and is probably correct at the present moment, the greater part of the head being at Amiens Cathedral, where the acts and death of the precursor are sculptured in high relief on the southern screen separating the choir from its aisles.

Next in importance to the head of S. John, the great object of veneration in former times, was his right hand, which was naturally much esteemed from having been the instrument employed in the baptism of Christ. Moreover the right hand of a saint was often considered as especially wonder-working, as being one of the noblest parts of the human body, and the vehicle for blessing and alms-giving; thus Mandeville tells us that the inhabitants of a country he calls Mabaron (Meliapor) make their judgments by the hand of S. Thomas the Apostle. "For when there is any

¹ World Displayed, vol. xi, p. 101.

² Ibid, vol. xix, p. 14.

³ Alban Butler Lives of the Saints, vol. viii, p. 635.

discussion between two parties and each of them maintains his cause, both parties write their causes in two bills, and put them in the hand of S. Thomas, and anon he casts away the bill of the wrong cause and holds still the bill with the right cause." Again it is related by Wendover that S. Oswald having done a most noble deed of charity, S. Aidan exclaimed in the King's presence "May this hand never perish," which we are told came to pass. The right hand of S. James was a highly venerated relic at Reading Abbey.¹

To return to the hand of S. John. Bouhours in his life of Pierre d'Aubusson the Cardinal Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, gives a long account of the adventures of this relic, which I will here quote as being an interesting extract from the works of an eighteenth-century author. Previous to doing so it must be stated that in 1484, Bajazet Emperor of the Turks and son of Mahomet II. wishing to do a great favour to Pierre d'Aubusson, to whom he was deeply indebted, was somewhat perplexed to know what present he could send to the General of the Christians at Rhodes, "having found," says F. Bouhours, "nothing which in his mind was sufficiently precious among all the riches of his empire, he learnt from some of his most reliable deserters, that he could not make a more acceptable present to the Grand Master than to give him the hand of S. John the Baptist, which was in the treasury of his father Mahomet. They informed him that this was the one with which he had baptized Jesus Christ, and being the hand of the patron of the order of the Knights of Rhodes, would be more esteemed by the Grand Master than the most exquisite productions of nature or of art and more than all the rarities of the world."

"The Emperor Bajazet," continues Bouhours, "charmed at this proposal, had the holy relic brought to him at once, in the reliquary wherein it was enclosed, and having caused it to be placed within a little chest of Cypress wood, lined with a rich crimson velvet, and the outside enriched with an infinity of precious stones, it was despatched to him by one of the Sultan's favourites named Cariatty Bey with a

¹ In *Six Months in the Apennines*, Miss Stokes gives a full account of the hermitage of La Spanna, near Bobio, where, on the summit of a cliff, is a handprint on the rock, said to have

been marked by the impression of the palm (Spanna) of S. Columban's hand, which is still believed to possess healing virtue for sufferers who place their palms upon it." *Antiquary*, vol. xxvi, p. 68.

very courteous letter of which the superscription ran thus, 'Bajazet Bey, King of Asia and Emperor of Emperors, to the very wise and very illustrious Grand Master of Rhodes, Pierre d'Aubusson, a very generous Prince, and Father of a truly glorious Empire.'"

"The Grand Master felt himself well recompensed for the services which he had rendered to Bajazet, but nevertheless before exposing the relic on the altar, he wished that it should be first examined, and he delegated commissioners who made a judicial examination of it. The Vice-Chancellor of the Order, a man of sound sense and of profound learning, was one of the deputies named, and he above all the rest applied himself to discover the truth. After all the examinations which it is customary to make on these occasions, and especially after having questioned many persons worthy of belief, who had been at Constantinople at the time of the taking of that city, and who still resided therein, there was not the slightest occasion to doubt that this hand was the right hand of S. John the Baptist, from all that was learnt about it, if we believe the Vice-Chancellor Caoursin, who himself wrote this history of the relic, for the process-verbal executed at this date."

"It is an ancient tradition, confirmed by the records of the Greeks, that S. Luke the Evangelist, having embraced the faith, conceived such a love for S. John the Baptist, that it inspired him with the idea of secretly carrying off his body, which was buried in the town of Sebaste, between those of Eli and Abdias. He repaired to this place one night with some of the disciples of the Precursor of Jesus Christ who were still living, but having considered that they would have much difficulty in carrying away the whole body, without being discovered and arrested, he separated from it the hand which had baptized Jesus Christ, as the most noble part of the same corpse, and carried it himself to Antioch, and religiously preserved it during the sojourn which he made there. But when he set out to preach the gospel in Bithynia, he placed the precious trust in the hands of some of his dearest friends, not wishing to expose it to the mishaps which might befall him during his travels. Thus the relic remained always at Antioch, and was there publicly honoured during a period of three hundred years, till the time when Julian the

Apostate undertook to abolish the worship and memory of the martyrs, by causing their remains to be burnt. He especially ordered that the hand of the Precursor of Jesus Christ should be cast into the flames, but the piety of the Christians saved it from the fury of the Pagans, and kept it concealed until the death of that impious Emperor."

"Justinian, one of the most religious princes in the world, having attained the empire in due course of time, and having both caused the erection of the splendid temple S. Sophia, and another magnificent church for the monastery of S. Basil, usually called that of S. John of the Stone, wished to render the dedication of these two churches to be celebrated before the most precious relics which were in the East, and for this reason, he caused the head and the hand of S. John the Baptist to be brought to Constantinople, the one from the city of Edessa, and the other from the city of Antioch, and after the consecration of the churches he sent back the relics, as he had promised when asking for them."

"The hand of S. John Baptist was honoured more and more after the translation; but when the Greek Empire began to fall into decay, and the inhabitants of Barbary entered Syria, it worked great miracles, which contributed not a little to strengthen the faithful and to convert heretics. Caoursin relates these wonders at length on the evidence of Simon Metaphrastes, who was, to a certain extent, a witness of them. One of the best authenticated and illustrious of them, was that the relic during a period of many years, was a certain testimony of sterility or abundance as regards the productions of the earth, for the Christians at Antioch had the practice of every year making a solemn procession outside the city on the day of the Exaltation of the Cross when the Patriarch himself bore the shrine which enclosed the hand of the Precursor, and when he had arrived at a small eminence from whence the whole country was exposed to view, he drew the relic from its reliquary, and elevated it in sight of all the people. If the year would be good, the holy hand remained extended and immovable, but if the year would be a bad one and barren, the hand closed of its own accord; and by this omen, the inhabitants of Antioch failed not to provide for their needs."

"When God caused His power to shine forth in the Church by the hand of S. John Baptist, Constantine Porphyrogenita governed the Empire of the Greeks; he was a truly Catholic prince, and very devout to the happy Precursor of Jesus Christ. The miracle which took place at Antioch, and of which the report spread abroad throughout all the East, caused the Emperor to desire to have the relic which was the instrument of so many marvels. The people of Antioch, for their part, kept it with great care, and would never have let it depart from their hands, had it not happened that a deacon of the church of Antioch had stolen it away to make a present to the Emperor. Constantine received the miraculous hand from the deacon with all the sentiments which piety could inspire under the circumstances, and after having honoured it in his palace, caused it to be placed in the church of the monastery of S. John of the Stone. Here it remained until the time when Mahomet II., Emperor of the Turks, took Constantinople, for they put it, by his orders, into the Imperial Treasury with other relics, whose shrines were of value, and this was the treasure that Bajazet brought forth to give the Grand Master."¹

"When they were assured at Rhodes, by the testimony of the commissioners, that the relic was a true one, the Grand Master took great pains to have it carried with solemnity to the church of S. John. It was resolved in full council that the ceremony should take place on the twenty-third of May, on which day, four years previously, the town had been besieged by the Turks, and it was thus decreed, in order that the Rhodians might begin to honour the hand of their patron, and of the defender of Rhodes on the same day that the Infidels laid siege to it."²

¹ The index finger of the saint's right hand was especially honoured, and many legends are related of it. Allusion to it is made in the sequence for S. John's Day, in the Sarum Missal where S. John's intercession is implored, that God may abide in his faithful people, and

"That He whom thou didst point out with thy finger

The Lamb that the world's sins doth take away.

With his pure fleece may mercifully clothe us."

Sarum Missal. Eng. trans. p. 382. Sir John Mandeville says that at Sebaste "S.

John Baptist was buried between the prophets Elisha and Abdias," and after describing the burning of his remains, adds, "But the finger that showed our Lord, saying 'Behold the Lamb of God,' is all whole. St. Tecla, the holy virgin, caused that finger to be carried to the hill of Sebaste, and there men make great feast for it." Early Travels in Palestine, p. 182.

² Bouhours relates the following, which is quoted here as probably explaining some of the miraculous events which are so frequently met with in mediæval chronicles. At the siege of Rhodes, in

"The day of the ceremony having arrived, the Prior of the church of S. John went forth with the clergy, carrying his pastoral staff in hand and mitre on head, according to the custom of the Priors of S. John, who wear the vestments, and have the rights of bishops. He proceeded to take the relic from the castle, and having received it from the Grand Master, he went with all the Knights towards the Grand Square, where there was set up a superb throne, above which was raised a brocaded canopy, and of which the steps were covered with cloth of gold. The Prior having mounted this platform, disclosed the hand of the admirable Precursor, which was enveloped in a cloth of silver tissue. He showed it uncovered to the people, and exhorting them in a few words to render themselves worthy of so sacred a deposit, by an equally holy life, he thrice blessed them with this holy hand. They then all betook themselves to the church of S. John, where the Prior, having celebrated the divine mysteries, gave the relic to be kissed by the Grand Master and his knights. Afterwards, he placed it in a tabernacle of fine gold, delicately worked and ornamented all over with precious stones, such as is seen this day at Malta."¹

Such is the description of the adventures of this renowned relic, as given in the most interesting work by F. Bouhours, the *Life of Pierre d'Aubusson*, the valiant General under whom the Knights of Rhodes repulsed the Turks in 1480. The relic was removed from Rhodes to Malta, after the loss of the former island by the Knights, and is mentioned by Thevenet in his travels in 1655 as

1480, the Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson was severely wounded, but, says his biographer, "The violence of his hurt nevertheless did not hinder him from thanking God for the advantage gained by the Christians over the Infidels, and these pious sentiments redoubled when he knew that Heaven had visibly fought in the defence of Rhodes; for several deserters who came to surrender themselves to the Knights at the moment when the victorious troops returned, related that, in the heat of the fight, the Turks had perceived in the air a cross all crowned with light, and that they had seen a very beautiful lady, clad in a white robe and with lance in hand and shield on arm, accompanied by a stern-looking man, in a vesture of camel's hair,

and followed by a band of young warriors all armed with flaming swords. They added that the vision had much affrighted the Infidels, and that when the standard of the Religious was elevated, on which the images of the B. Virgin and S. John Baptist were depicted, many fell dead without receiving any wound." Bouhours naively adds, that "Although the Grand Master was not ignorant that the Turks sometimes spread abroad these stories to cover their cowardice and to disparage the bravery of their enemies, he knew that the sacred Scriptures authorised such apparitions, and doubted not that God could do for the Rhodians as He had formerly at Jerusalem against Antiochus. Vie d'Aubusson, pp. 219, 220.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 319-327.

being in the church of S. John. It appears to have been kept in a glove of gold studded with gems, whilst lying by its side was a ring with a magnificent diamond. Nápoleon I. put the ring on his finger, and the Knight Commander of those days (Hompesch) carried the hand away with him and presented it to Paul I. of Russia. It is now carefully guarded and preserved in the Winter Palace at S. Petersburg.

The principal Feast of S. John Baptist—that of his nativity on June 24th—has been observed from very early times, and Baring-Gould quotes a passage from S. Augustine which says : “This day of the nativity is handed down to us and is this day celebrated. We have received this by tradition from our forefathers and we transmit it to our descendants to be celebrated with like devotion.” The vigil on the 23rd is mentioned in Bede’s “Martyrology,” and the Feast on the 24th is styled by him “the birthday of the Precursor of the Lord.” In 1518 the Council held at York decreed that “if the vigil of S. John Baptist occurs on Corpus Christi the vigil to be kept on a previous Wednesday.” In the Sarum use it had a proper Mass, and the festival itself was a minor double, it also had its proper Mass, and, like many of the principal commemorations, there was a sequence appropriate to it.¹ Baring-Gould observes that there were three Masses, and cites Alaim to the effect that the first was said on the vigil in honour of the Saint as the forerunner preparing the way of the Lord ; the second was said on the morning in honour of his ministry as Baptist ; and the third later in the day, in honour of his having been a Nazarite from his birth.² The festival had an octave in the Sarum and York uses and in the latter there were two proper Masses to be said alternately during it. The Feasts of S. John Baptist do not occur in the list of those proclaimed by Henry VIII. (An. xxxii.) to be observed. Peter Lombard and Gratian cite a canon out of the Council of Lesida (An. 524) which forbids marriages not only in Lent, but three weeks before the Festival of S. John Baptist, and at the Council of Sale-

¹ The Introit, taken from Isaiah xlix, v. 1, was singularly apt, “The Lord hath called me, from the bowels of my mother hath He made mention of my name.” The Gradual was also most

appropriately taken from Jeremiah i, v. 5, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee.”

² Lives of the Saints, vol. vi, p. 333.

gunstade (An. 1322), under Benedict VIII. and the Emperor Henry II., an order was made that no Christian should marry in the fourteen days before the Festival of S. John Baptist.¹ A constitution of William de Cantelupe, Bishop of Worcester, prohibited work on that day.

It seems probable that green tapers were used on the Feast of S. John's Nativity, as an entry in the accounts of Winchester College Hall mentions candles of this colour for this festival, perhaps for secular use, but they were undoubtedly employed for religious purposes on the 8th of December, the Conception of S. Mary. It is said that from the well-known pulpit in the entrance court at Magdalen College, Oxford, a sermon was preached on S. John's Day among other occasions, and that seats were placed for the Vice-Chancellor, Proctors, Masters, &c., and the walls adorned with green boughs and flowers, and the ground covered with green rushes and grass in allusion to S. John preaching in the wilderness.² This representation of a wilderness was a favourite with our ancestors, and we read that in 1392, when Richard II. and his Queen (Anne) went in ceremony through the City of London, the Hospitallers of S. John made a pageant, displaying a desert inhabited by all manner of wild animals, reptiles, &c., and in the background a forest, with S. John pointing to the *Agnus Dei*.³

The Confraternity of the Merchant Tailors of S. John Baptist, London, now the Merchant Tailors' Company, annually attended the Priory Church of S. John, Clerkenwell, on this day, and the members of the similar Guild of the Tailors at Salisbury were directed by their Charter, dated at Westminster, 1461, to place every year a garland of roses on the head of the image of S. John in S. Thomas Church in that city, and also offer two tapers of one pound each, and Roger de la Zouche granted certain lands in the parish of Tonge, Salop, to Henry de Hufeort, by the tenure of "rendering yearly to him and his heirs a chaplet of roses on S. John Baptist's day, in case he or they

¹ Bingham, vol. vii, pp. 307, 308.

² In a description of the visit of the Archæological Institute to Norwich in 1889, the Builder says, "Passing from the Cathedral into the beautiful grounds of the Bishop's Palace, the party was

shown the place where a sermon was preached occasionally in the summer, and especially on S. John's day." Builder, 1889, p. 119.

³ Strickland, *Lives of the Queens*, vol. i, p. 423.

should be at Tonge, if not, then to be put upon the image of the B. Virgin in the church of Tonge for such services."¹

On the nativity of the Baptist, pilgrims resorted in great numbers to the church of Creteil, near Paris, where his mediation was implored against epilepsy—*morbis sancti Johannis*—*le mal de Saint Jean*. The festival fires formerly so universal on this day are, it is said, still kept up in Roumania on the mountains, and are supposed to protect the flock from evil spirits; according to Barnaby Googe they were credited with the power of protecting people from agues. In the life of d'Aubusson, from which so much has been already quoted, it is recorded that although dying he failed not to be present at the fire "nor to take part in the rejoicings which were made every year before the castle at Rhodes clad in a sumptuous habit to honour the patron of the Order of Knights of S. John."²

Although the Epiphany is not a Feast of S. John, it is intimately connected with him, as on that day the baptism of our Lord is commemorated. By the early Christians this festival was appointed one of the times for baptisms, and S. Chrysostom says that "in this solemnity in memory of our Lord's baptism, they were used at midnight to carry water from the church, and lay it up, where it would remain as fresh and uncorrupt for one, two, or three years, as if it were immediately drawn out of any fountain." Cave relates of the primitive Christians that "many there were in those days whom nothing would serve unless they were baptized in the Jordan out of a reverence to the place where our Saviour himself had been baptized." Pilgrimages still continue to be made to the spot where the baptism of our Lord is supposed to have occurred, and the water of the Jordan is still obtained for the Baptism of Christian princes in England and elsewhere.

Among the miracle plays acted at York on the Festival of Corpus Christi was one of the baptism of Christ, and

¹ Gentleman's Mag. Library, Manners and Customs, p. 230.

² Vie d'Aubusson, p. 464. Barnaby Googe says that on S. John's Day

"Young men round about with maides
doe daunce in every streete,

With garlands wrought of Motherwort,
or else with Veruain sweete."

Popish Kingdome, p. 54.

The S. John's Wort then in flower was supposed to drive away devils, and kept in the house would suffer no unclean spirit to come there. See note in Aubrey's Remaines ed. Folk-Lore Soc., p. 231.

represented by the Barbers. The *dramatis personæ* consisted of our Lord, S. John, and two angels, who discoursed with the Baptist, and sung *Veni Creator Spiritus* at the baptism. The same subject was played by the Barbers at Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1437.

The Feast of the Decollation of S. John was kept in the Sarum use as one of nine lessons, and with a proper mass, the sequence being the one used on his nativity.¹ It is named in the calendars in the early eighteenth-century almanacks of Coley, Partridge, Pearse, Poor Robin, and the Fly, and Swallow.

The Feast of the Finding of the Head of S. John was kept on Feb. 24th and is mentioned in Bede's Martyrology as follows, "VI. Kal. Inventio capitis Joannis precursoris." Respecting the discovery of the head, Roger of Wendover writes, "In the year of grace 458, two eastern monks having gone up to Jerusalem to worship, John the Baptist revealed to them the place of his head, near the house where Herod formerly lived. It was straightway brought to Edessa, a city of Phœnicia and there buried with due honour."

The Conception of S. John is kept, says Baring-Gould, by a commemorative memorial, in the Greek and Russian communities, on Jan. 7th.

According to Barnaby Googe (1570) the image of S. John Baptist was carried before the Host on Corpus Christi Day.

"Saint John before the bread doth go and poynting towards him,
Doth shew the same to be the Lambe that takes away our sinne."

Some beautiful hymns in honour of the Baptist will be found among the "Sequentiæ Ineditæ" collected by the late Dr. Mason Neale, and printed in the "Ecclesiologist," the series running through several volumes of that journal.

¹ Bede notices the feast in his Martyrology as follows:—Romæ. S. Sabinæ Virginis atque Martyris. Eodem die decollatio S. Johannis baptistæ qui primo in Samaria conditus, tunc in

Alexandria, porro caput de Hierosolymis ad Phœnicie urbem Emissam delatum est. Bede Martyrologium, p. 115, ed. Giles.