

DISCOVERY OF A

Mural Painting in the Church at Sporle,

NORFOLK.

COMMUNICATED BY

MR. C. J. W. WINTER.

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IN 1866 the attention of the Society was called to the discovery by the Rector of Sporle of a Mural Painting in his parish church of St. Mary, and a visit to the place by myself was the immediate result. My pencil was set to work, and with no little difficulty I succeeded in making accurate drawings of the various compartments into which the subject was divided. These were afterwards shown to our learned member, Dr. Husenbeth, who kindly sent me explanations of the incidents represented in each panel; and subsequently G. A. Carthew, Esq., the local secretary to the Society of Antiquaries in London, requested me to make for them a set of drawings in detail. An able paper of description and a short notice of the church, written by him, were printed in the Society's *Transactions* of Dec. 6, 1866.

I have now the pleasure of sending to the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Society, as a small contribution to its Journal, a sufficient number of lithographic impressions, with Dr. Husenbeth's observations, for the forthcoming issue of its Journal to the members.

Although the limits of the lithograph do not allow that

minuteness of detail that I might wish, still they enable me to give a correct notion of the arrangement and treatment of the subjects. The painting is executed in distemper-colours, and the legend of St. Catherine is represented in twenty-five panels, each panel bounded by a red line, and the whole surrounded with a border of a zigzag pattern of red and white on a black ground. It occupies a space on the south wall of the south aisle, measuring about eleven feet five inches in length, by seven feet eight inches in height. The subjects in the panels, from one to eleven, beginning on the left hand, are drawn with great freedom and boldness of outline; but great delicacy is portrayed in the virgin saint; the colouring too is feminine and subdued. From the twelfth panel to the twenty-fifth, the conclusion of the subject, is seen a most singular contrast in the design, the latter fourteen apparently by another artist of less skill;—bad and coarse drawing; grotesque and ludicrous forms, and harsh colouring, in which red predominates. It is conjectured that these last panels were painted over the finished subjects of the former artist, but in no instance was I able to discover any under-painting beyond the division lines of the twelfth panel, so it may be concluded that the first artist was by some cause or other prevented from proceeding to the end of his undertaking. The date of the painting is indicated by the costumes, the ornaments of which in some instances are curious, viz., the chaplets of flowers or jewels, of rare occurrence in representations of mediæval decorations; but the curling hair, forked beards, short-cut tunics, worn close to the chin and scalloped round the bottom; the party-coloured and motley dresses; the long toes to the boots, termed “crockowes;”<sup>1</sup> the pointed basinet, &c., all belong to the early part of the reign of Richard the Second.

<sup>1</sup> Being so named from the city of Cracow: Poland and Bohemia having been incorporated by John, the grandfather of Richard's Queen, the fashion probably was derived from thence.”—*Planché*.



Drawn litho & pub<sup>d</sup> by E. J. Walker.

PAGANISM DISCOVERED OR SOUTH WIND OF THE CHURCH AS SPEAKING PERSON. (1855, 1865.)

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SUBJECTS

AS REPRESENTED ON EACH PANEL.

THE panels are numbered from left to right, and follow downwards as you would read an English book.

## FIRST ROW OF PANELS.

1. The Emperor Maximinus II. having heard of the learning and high reputation of St. Catherine, said to have been the daughter of Costus, King of Cyprus, sent for her to Alexandria. She was accompanied thither by her parents; and is here represented as received at the palace by the empress, to whom she is commended by the emperor. Her father and an attendant are seen behind.

2. The emperor had ordered all to offer sacrifices to his gods. In this painting the people are kneeling and sacrificing at an altar in the temple, and the emperor is assisting. St. Catherine coming into the temple remonstrates with the emperor, showing that they are worshipping the devil, who appears over the altar.

3. When the sacrifices were over, the emperor ordered St. Catherine to be brought before him, and being confounded by her wisdom and arguments, determined to send for wise men to dispute with her. She is here represented discoursing with the emperor.

4. Here are three learned men, representing the whole number of fifty, haranguing before the emperor, and St. Catherine behind them answering their arguments.

5. A great number of persons of all ranks were present at the disputation, and they are here represented by a number of secular and religious persons. Behind these the saint is seen discoursing. The emperor, enraged at the defeat of his learned philosophers, commanded St. Catherine to be taken to prison.

6. The chief and most learned of the philosophers undertook to refute St. Catherine. He is here haranguing at the side of the emperor. The figure behind the saint, crowned, is probably intended for her father, the King of Cyprus.

7. The chief philosopher owned himself vanquished by St. Catherine's discourses, and he and all the others became Christians. The emperor tried again to gain the saint by great offers and promises; but, finding all ineffectual, he began to treat her with great severity, and ordered her to be stripped and scourged. She is here standing before him receiving her sentence.

#### SECOND ROW.

8. The saint appears here at the window of her prison, in which she remained twelve days under the custody of Porphyrius, who is addressing her from the outside.

9. By means of Porphyrius, the empress Faustina visited the saint in her prison; and they were both converted to the faith of Christ by her discourses, as were also two hundred soldiers of the emperor's guard. The kneeling figure in this painting, on the left side, is probably Porphyrius. St. Catherine appears before him holding what appears to be a lamp—perhaps emblematical of the light of true faith. Behind is the empress listening to her, and before her stand the soldiers of the guard. The Almighty appears above protecting her. On the right are a female and a crowned figure, probably meant for the saint's parents, and the head of another is seen wearing a kind of mitre or tiara. Between these and the soldiers appears some drapery in graceful folds, but so imperfect as to be inexplicable; it may however have been used to convey the empress secretly into the prison.

10. After twelve days St. Catherine was again brought before the emperor. She appears with the marks of scourging. Porphyrius holds her left arm, and an executioner, with a three-lashed whip knotted with bullets, stands behind. She

still courageously holds out against all the offers and threats of the emperor.

11. Porphyrius, the keeper of the prison, the keys of which are hanging at his side, is here seen with the saint before the emperor, who sentences St. Catherine to be tied to a dreadful engine with four wheels, set with saws, nails, and knives, which when set in motion would tear her to pieces.

12. When the saint was tied to the wheels, there came lightning and thunder; and angels cut the cords, and broke and set fire to the wheels. The saint fell to the ground unhurt, but many of the pagan spectators were killed by the broken pieces of the wheels. All this is represented in this painting of double size. St. Catherine is seen above as fastened to the wheels. Two angels with swords are cutting the cords, and are holding golden vials pouring out the divine wrath. The saint is seen below after the explosion of the engine, and the bodies of the pagans slain lie around her, under drapery. The wheels are partly visible. The emperor also is struck by the explosion, as he is falling back terrified, blood is gushing from his mouth, and the sword falling from his hand, on the left of the painting; while the empress appears on the opposite side rebuking him for his cruelty, and openly declaring that she also is a Christian.

13. The emperor was greatly enraged at this, and summoning the empress, commanded her to be beheaded. The officers are here leading her off to execution.

#### THIRD ROW.

14. The empress beheaded.

15. Porphyrius is here represented burying the body of the empress by moonlight.

16. The emperor sent for the two hundred soldiers of his guard who had become Christians, and sentenced them to death, which is represented in this painting.

17. The emperor enquired who had buried his empress. Porphyrius acknowledged that he had; and that he was also a Christian. In this painting the emperor appears attended by his sword-bearer, and sentences Porphyrius to death. The figure bending before the emperor is probably the executioner, and Porphyrius stands at his side.

18. This represents the massacre of the soldiers of the guard and of Porphyrius, who is seen slain on the left hand, denoted by his keys, as keeper of the prison.

#### FOURTH ROW.

19. The emperor once more sent for St Catherine. He said it was through her that he had lost his empress and his soldiers. He asked her if she would now worship his gods, threatening that if she refused he would order her to be flayed alive. The saint lifting up her hands, indignantly refuses to sacrifice.

20. The executioners are here seizing upon the saint, and preparing to execute the sentence.

21. Devils are here represented contending for the soul of St. Catherine.

22. The saint is here led to execution.

23. St. Catherine is beheaded, and her soul received into heaven by an angel.

24. Angels are carrying the body of the saint in a marble tomb to the top of Mount Sina, and two angels below are incensing it.

25. Pilgrims paying their devotions at the tomb of St. Catherine on Mount Sina, where the emperor Justinian afterwards built a magnificent church and monastery.