

A Medieval Inscription in Acle Church.

COMMUNICATED BY

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This inscription¹ is in some ways unique so far as my experience goes, and it will be interesting if analogues can be supplied by other correspondents. It is long and elaborate, on the original plaster of the north chancel wall. From the photograph, I had imagined it to be freely washed in in tempera; but inspection on the spot, when I luckily had direct sunshine, and was able to use a magnifying glass, brought me to the conviction that it was drawn in charcoal. It is almost miraculous that such an inscription should remain still legible (for the most part), after so many centuries.

Mr. Rogers, of Cambridge University Library, whose knowledge of later medieval hands is of the utmost value to students, judges this to be of the early fifteenth century.

¹ This was noticed by the Rev. R. R. Young, the Rector, when the church was recently restored and he very promptly properly had it covered with a glass frame, and Mr. Alfred Back, of Acle, one of our oldest members, realising its great importance, brought down the late Mr. Richard Howlett, F.S.A., and Mr. Walter Rye to inspect it, and the former had drafted a paper on it before he died, but as such paper was incomplete, Mr. G. G. Coulton has kindly contributed the matter now printed.

It will be seen, I think, that there is nothing in the inscription itself to contradict this. It was tempting at first to refer it directly to the Black Death or some succeeding plague (*e.g.*, that of 1361); but, after all, the reflections on mortality are applicable, to every year—even of modern times, when epidemics are less frequent than they were in all generations of the Middle Ages.

The inscription originally consisted of three couplets at least, though the third is now quite illegible. Each couplet is introduced by a key-word. I read the first two as follows; the words or letters unbracketed are quite certain, with small exceptions to be noted hereafter; those in round brackets () are probable; those in square brackets [] are purely conjectural. The metre and leonine rhyme, however, make it possible to supply the missing letters with far more probability than in a prose inscription.

Nota { O mors mesta [nimi]s, quamplures mergis in imis!
Nunc hos, nunc illos, nunc rapis undique, mors!
Marcit infantes [miserosque]senes perimit mors;
Cornua portantes vel skleras non redimit sors.

Ergo { M[o]ndo [te dura,] ve[n]iam p[ete menteque] p[u]ra,
Ora, commemora, mora non est mor[tis, ado]ra!

O[stende]? { [after which followed, apparently, two lines at
least, now totally illegible. I am very doubtful
even about the *Ostende*, which is very much
hidden behind the frame.]

I may add that, when Dr. M. R. James first showed me the photographs, he showed also a tentative reading by the late Mr. R. Howlett, F.S.A., which he had already corrected in some important details. My conjectures are offered to your readers, of course, for what they are worth, and it is hoped that they may stimulate more certain emendations.

Nā O mozo mesta i s q̄aplyeo meysis in imis. Nāc hos nūc illos nūc rapis (vndiq̄ meos **Q**ndo i **Q**ya tōmemora moza nō est ma **O**
Mayat infantes m e p̄ senes p̄mit meos **C**arnia porcantes vel offeas nō p̄dimit sozs **A**ys **O**

A MEDIEVAL INSCRIPTION IN ACLE CHURCH.

NOTES ON THE ABOVE.

The photograph from which I have mainly worked is far too vague to be reproduced to any practical purpose as it stands; I have therefore gone over, in ink, every letter or part of a letter about which I had no doubt, making use of full notes and sketches which I had made on the spot. In many places the original is quite clear, after a little patient study, where the photograph leaves the matter doubtful, even under a strong glass. If any reader, on comparing the accompanying reproduction with the original, can note any discrepancy, I shall be very grateful for the correction.

I should translate as follows, not attempting to correct the author's Latinity, but trying to keep as literally to his sense as modern English permits. The words in italics stand for uncertain or conjectural readings:—

“TAKE NOTICE! O death, *too* sad [for words], thou dost plunge very many into the lowest [pit]! Now thou snatchest these, O death, now those, now [again] thou snatchest everywhere [at random]! Death withereth children and destroyeth *wretched* old men; those who wear horns or [silken] veils are not redeemed by their fortune. THEREFORE, *harden thyself* to the world, and seek pardon *with* pure *mind*; pray, call to mind [thy sins], *death* hath no delay, worship! SHOW . . .”

COMMENTARY.

LINE 1. *nimis* seems a certain conjecture here, since we need something to rhyme with *imis*. In fact, the ungrammatical ablative *imis* for *ima* points clearly to the author's need of such a rhyme.

LINE 3. *Marcit*, however ungrammatical, is unfortunately too clearly written to leave any room for doubt. Let us hope that the cleric who composed the verses

was not he whose hand traced them on the wall, and that the artist mistook the author's *marcēt* [*marcent*] when he wrote *marcit*. It is, however, only too probable that the cleric himself blundered. In plate x. of my little pamphlet on *Medieval Graffiti* (Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1s. net), I give an inscription of about this date from Duxford St. John's, Cambs. The parson, *dominus Johannes Ranaldson*, has scrawled on the wall an invocation to the Virgin: *Mundi salvatrix sis michi A propiciatrix!* It is evident that he had picked up, and mutilated by transposition, a verse which would scan quite correctly if we read *Mundi salvatrix, Ah sis mihi propitiatrix!* and I could quote several similar examples. Indeed, one need go no further than the font of Acle Church itself, where the mason has evidently misread his copy in chiselling the inscription round the steps. In the *Chronicon de Melsa* (Rolls series, 1866-8, vol. iii., p. 151) there is an interesting example of this. Abbot Thomas de Burton tells how one of his predecessors died in the year 1367, "although the epitaph on his tombstone records him to have died on the Feast of St. John Baptist, A.D. 1369. The cause of this error is, that the carver of the tomb had lost the scroll recording the exact day and year of the Abbot's death; and so, in his ignorance, he carved thereon at his own fancy, for all time, a false and uncertain year and day."

IBID. *miseros*. Either Mr. Howlett or Dr. M. R. James conjectured *nunc, atque*, for this almost illegible hiatus. But the letters, so far as they survive, seem to point rather to *miseros*.

IBID. *perimit*. The decay of the plaster has destroyed the tail of the p; but there seems no doubt about this word.

LINE 4. *Cornua*. Horned head-dresses for women were certainly not *first* introduced into England by Anne of Bohemia at the end of the fourteenth century,

as is sometimes asserted. The quotations in Fairholt's *Glossary to Costume in England*, s.v., Head-dress, make this plain enough; to these may be added another from Richard Rolle, of Hampole, who died in 1349. Rolle had preached against the luxury and superfluity of women's dress; and one of them retorted that he, being a hermit, "had no right to look closely enough at women to know whether they had horns or not; and meseemeth that she rebuked me rightly, and she put me to the blush" (*The Incendium Amoris of R. Rolle*, ed. M. Deanesly, 1915, p. 178; c.f., p. 42). But the double-horned women's head-dress did come in about 1400; this it was which excited Lydgate to write a whole satire against the fashion (Wright and Halliwell, *Reliquiae Antiquae*, I., 79); and this adds slightly to the probability that the inscription is later than the Black Death.

IBID. *skleras*. This, again, seems to point to a slightly later date. To the author of *Piers Plowman*, an aristocratic dame is "a lady in a skleir" (A. vii., 7); this earliest version of the poem dates probably from 1362. The word is still used for a veil in German, *Schleier*. Dr. M. R. James points out that it occurs also in the earliest inventory of Corpus College, Cambridge, where there were a set of silver spoons engraved with "a virgin's head wearing a chaplet and veil (*scleyre*)" *Cambridge Antiquarian Society's Proceedings*, vol. xvi., 1911-12, p. 111). For an elaborate specimen of horns and veil in combination, two of which are dated 1439, see Dillon's edition of Fairholt's *Costume in England* (Bell & Sons, 1896), vol. i., pp. 168-9.

LINE 5. *mondo*. This is a common medieval spelling of *mun-do*; e.g., on a pier of the tower-arch at St. Gregory's, Sudbury, a fourteenth-century hand has scratched the well-known Latin tag "non est in mondo dives qui dicit

habondo"—"there is no rich man in the world who says 'I have enough and to spare.'"

For the rest of my reconstitution of the line I can only plead that the last word seems pretty certainly *pura*; that *veniam* is even more distinct; that the second word certainly begins either with *c* or with *t* (which are very often indistinguishable even in the best-preserved MSS.); that this was closely followed by a *d*, whose tag is unmistakable; and that the letter after *veniam* seems a plain *p*. As the line must rhyme in the middle, we have thus a considerable number of scattered clues for reconstitution. It will be noted that my conjecture postulates the ungrammatical transposition of *que* from *veniam* to *mente*; but this is one of the most frequent licences which medieval versifiers permitted themselves.

In the sixth line, again, we have the clue that the rhyme requires the last word to end in *ora*; and the *o*, though mutilated, seems clear enough even without this.

We see now that there is nothing in the inscription, as it stands, to connect it necessarily with the Black Death. If any plague at all suggested it, we have an embarrassing choice of dates; the plague of 1349 was followed by others in 1361, 1369, 1375, 1382, 1391, 1406, 1449, 1471, 1476-7, 1483. If 1471 were not rather late for this handwriting, it would be tempting to connect the Acle inscription with Sir John Paston's letter of that date (*Paston Letters*, ed. Gairdner, 1900, No. 675; *c.f.*, Introduction, p. ccciv). He writes: "It is the most universal death that ever I wist in England; for by my trowth I cannot hear by pilgrims that pass the country that any borough town in England is free from that sickness. God cease when it pleaseth Him! Wherefore for God's sake let my mother take heed to my young brethren, that they be in none place where that sickness is reigning, nor that they disport not with none other young people which resorteth where any sickness is;

Ḥmīlapešis īmē ac fuit (mīn) mō

FACSIMILE OF INSCRIPTION AT ASHWELL (HERTS).

and, if there be any of that sickness dead or infect in Norwich, for God's sake let her send them to some friends of hers in the country, and do ye the same by mine advice. Let my mother rather remove her household into the country."

A little while after his mother answers (No. 681): "Your cousin Berney Witchingham is passed to God, whom God assoyle! Veyl's wife, and London's wife, and Picard the baker of Tombland be gone also. All this household and this parish is as ye left it, blessed be God! We live in fear, but we wot not whither to flee for to be better than we be here."

This, however, we can only conjecturally connect with our Acle inscription. But there is a similar inscription cut deeply into the clunch of the northern interior tower-wall at Ashwell (Herts), which, though now well-known, has never to my knowledge been fully explained; it would seem opportune, therefore, to present it here for comparison with the Acle inscription. There is a good photographic reproduction of the greater part of it on p. 189 of vol. ii. of H. D. Traill's *Social England*, (illustrated edition), and an explanation on p. xviii.

It seems quite evident, on close consideration, that here again the hand which cut the inscription is not that of the original author. It may well be one of the clergy who cut the letters, but he had evidently taken the verses from someone else, for he makes a mess of them. The inscription runs (conjectural restoration, practically certain, in square brackets) as follows. Highest of all, comes a single line of Latin which has, I believe, never yet been reproduced or deciphered; a facsimile is here subjoined (*see illustration*):—

Primula pestis in M ter CCC fuit L minus uno

i.e., "The first plague was in one thousand, three hundred and fifty minus one." To make sure, the inscriber has

superfluously cut three *C*'s, though his *ter* had already expressed this. Mr. A. Hamilton Thompson tells me that he found a very similar line in a Peterborough Abbey Cartulary, sold at Sotheby's last summer from the Milton Hall collection. Mr. Thompson judged this to be a copy, *circa* 1400, of a compilation made soon after the Black Death, *circa* 1352-5. The line is written on the inside of the cover, and runs:—

Mors Anno m c ter quinquagesimo minus uno

a verse which is decidedly inferior metrically to that of our Ashwell scribe.

At Ashwell, below this first verse, stands the great and famous inscription, in a similar hand. First come a few words in prose:—

MCCCXLIX [at]que [MCCCL] magna pestilencia fuit.

“In 1349 and 1350 was the great plague.” Then comes the portion which is fully reproduced in *Social England*:—

M C ter X penta miseranda ferox violenta

MCCCL

[Discessit pestis]; superest plebs pessima testis in fine ij^e ventus validus

MCCC

[.] hoc anno maurus in orbe tonat *℥* LXI.

Here the first two lines are regular leonine hexameters, but we then plunge straight on into the middle of a third verse—in *fine secunde* (i.e., *pestis*). This refers to the first recurrence of the Black Death, in 1361, which was accompanied by a great storm on St. Maur's day, referred to in *Piers Plowman* (C. vi., 119, see Skeat's note on the line), and by Hardyng in his Chronicle:—

In that same year was on St. Maurys day

The grete wind and earthquake mervelous.

It is evident, therefore, that the Ashwell inscriber is a copyist, who, though he omits nothing essential to the sense, has badly bungled the metre; for he has omitted not only more than half of one verse, but also the *erat* which seems evidently called for between *ventus* and *validus*, to make the beginning of the next. The sense runs:—"In one thousand, three hundred, and five tens, the lamentable fierce and violent plague departed; an iniquitous people survives to bear witness to it; at the end of the second [plague] there was a mighty wind [*words scraped away*] Maurus thunders in the world, 1361." St. Maur's day, 1361, would be, by modern reckoning, January 15th, 1362; Skeat quotes Blomefield's statement that this storm blew down the spire of Norwich Cathedral.

Before leaving the subject altogether, I may mention that there is a sadly defaced inscription on the outer jamb of the north door of Offley, Herts, on the eastern side. The hand seems roughly contemporary with the Ashwell hand, beginning "Heu! plebs conquirat per . . ." "Alas! the people are seeking through . . .," a querulous note which is suggestive of the Ashwell lamentation; but the inscription is small and very weather-worn, and I have never succeeded in reading the rest.

There must be many informal inscriptions in Norfolk churches of the kind which I have figured in my *Medieval Graffiti*; in fact, I have found a few myself, and it would be well if the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Society would institute a thorough search and draw up a hand-list for enquirers.