

XXV. *Observations on the Round Towers in Ireland,*
by the Rev. Thomas Harmer of Watesfield, Suffolk,
in a Letter to the Rev. George Ashby, B. D. F. A. S.

Read March 5, 1789.

REV. SIR,

YOU doubtless remember the papers in the first volume of the *Archæologia* relating to those antique slender towers which are found belonging to some old churches in Scotland and Ireland, but generally at some distance from them, and which, though lofty, were not capable of holding bells of any size. Very different sentiments were entertained of the uses they were designed for: some supposing they were intended for watch-towers: some, for places of refuge to which the people might repair on any sudden alarm; some, as places of penance. The conjectures of others differed from all these. The enquiries of the learned, after all, terminated in uncertainty; and I found the uneasiness of such a state, without expecting ever to meet with any thing satisfactory upon the point.

The only *sure* way of determining the matter seemed to be,
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either some authentic account of the uses *now* made of such buildings, by such as entertain the same, or nearly the same, apprehensions of religion, which the Scotch and Irish did, when these towers were built; or a clear description of the use formerly made of them, by the ancient historians of established reputation of those times, and those countries. I did not expect to meet with *either* of these; but lately running over two volumes of letters, giving an account of several foreign parts, published this year by *Signior Lefignan*, a Greek, (who after the affair of *Ali Bey* took refuge in England, and published an account of Ali's revolt some time since), I there found a passage, in an Appendix to those letters, giving a description of the Holy-land, which afforded me more satisfaction concerning these Towers than, I confess, I ever expected to find.

In that Appendix he tells us, that the brook Cedron runs along a valley S. E. from Jerusalem; and winding with a serpentine course, between many rocky hills, ends in the Dead sea. That about six miles distance from Jerusalem, on each side of the brook, are large caves, either formed by nature, or *hewed* out of the solid rock, formerly inhabited by hermits, which grottoes continue to the end of it, about 12 or 14 miles from Jerusalem. That among these is a grotto (in which the three wise men are said to have taken up a temporary abode in their return from Bethlehem), which, in the latter end of the 4th century, was inhabited by Theodosius, chief of the hermits, and at length became a convent, which is now in ruins. That to the S. E. of this place, about a mile distant, is the present monastery of *St. Sabba*, built on the cliff of a hill close to the brook, surrounded with a stone-wall, 8 feet-thick, and 26 high,

high, in circumference above a mile. “ On the outside of the
 “ walls, and on the west, is a square tower of three stories,
 “ and twelve yards in diameter, in which two or three hermits
 “ shut themselves, who live in a very austere manner. On the
 “ upper story is a bell, which, whenever any visitors come
 “ from Jerusalem, is rung to give notice to the door-keeper of the
 “ convent for their reception. On the same quarter is the gate
 “ of the monastery, which is kept always locked, on account
 “ of the Arabs, who are very troublesome to the society of
 “ this convent [a].”

Now by this account it appears, that the great design of this *detached tower* was to give timely notice of the approach of strangers, in a country very much harraffed by the Arabs that live in it under tents, and who are very troublesome to the more settled inhabitants; which is done by a *bell* from the upper story, from whence was the most *extensive prospect*. But along with this it seems to be put to another use, being inhabited by persons who live in a very austere manner, in other words doing penance. But it appears not to be used as a place of refuge, for people to retire to in times of danger; nor could it be wanted for that purpose, the monastery, which is near it, being so strong, and at the same time so capacious; nor could it be wanted to call people to their devotions, there being no other persons, it seems, to be summoned, but those inclosed within the walls of the convent, in this retired place.

Satisfactory, however, as this account appears to be in general, a more distinct and particular one as to some circum-

[a] Vol. II. p. 160—163.

stances being wanted, I thought it might be right, as I had some little knowledge of the author of this account, to consult him as to some circumstances; and he very obligingly communicated to me the following eclairsissements, in two letters which I received from him.

He tells me that the mode of living of the Hermits, as he calls them, in the tower, is more severe, *as to diet*, than of those in the convent, though that, I believe, you will think, sufficiently austere. He had informed the world, in his printed account, that those who live in the monastery are in number from 20 to 30. These, he said, “ taste victuals once a day, “ which, in general, is bread and pulse, or greens boiled, without any oil or butter, except on Saturdays and Sundays: on “ these two days they are indulged with rice and butter, and “ sometimes with salt-fish, as they never eat any kind of flesh. “ Their drink also is water, except on the aforeaid days, in which “ every one has half a pint of wine [b].” But as to those in the tower, the first letter I received from him on this subject, dated Sept. 11, 1788, assures me, that *they*, “ who seldom exceed the “ number of *three*, abide there willingly, and for their provision “ have biscuit and pulse, which is made use of *every other* “ *day*. Their drink is water from the cistern, *which is in the tower*. “ Their diet and life is rather more austere than that of those “ in the monastery, as *they* eat once a day, while these every “ other other day: their work is prayers and meditation on sacred books, as likewise is that of those of the monastery, “ except a few, who employ themselves at leisure-hours in

[b] P. 164.

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“ copying books.” Eating only once every other day is certainly a greater mortification than eating once every day ; and when we add to this the care of watching the approach of strangers, their situation is considerably more painful than that of those in the convent. Whether this sort of penance is voluntarily inflicted on themselves, or only voluntarily submitted to, in consequence of the chastising power of the superior of the convent, is not, I think, perfectly clear from Signior Lufignan’s account : probably their retirement to the tower might be sometimes owing to the one cause, sometimes to the other. It *must* certainly be voluntary in one sense, since they could have left the tower when they pleased.

This tower, the letter farther informed me, is built on rocky ground, and *higher* than that on which the monastery stands. Its distance *more than 50 yards* towards the W. of it [c].

The *height* of the door of the tower belonging to St. Sabba is a circumstance, in which it appears to agree with the Scotch and Irish towers : for he says, in this letter, “ the entrance to it “ is by a stone stair-case of 14 steps, and is distant from the walls “ of the tower about 12 feet. On the top of the stair-case is “ a drawbridge, which communicates with the door of the “ tower, to which are chains fixed on each side, and it is hoisted “ up from the inside of the door, and never let down except “ necessity requires.”

In his printed account he observes, that, “ in the 7th century, “ the nation called Abares, *a Saracen tribe*, massacred fourteen

[d] It is to be remembered here, his measures are given only from recollection, therefore may not be perfectly exact.

thousand hermits, who inhabited the banks of this brook [d].” He enlarges the account of this matter in this letter: “The
“ monastery was built in the beginning of the 6th century, as
“ likewise the tower, which, I think, in former times served
“ as a guard-house to this convent, as the tribe of Abares were
“ very troublesome in that time to the society. The Arabs, at
“ present, though troublesome in asking daily food from the
“ Society, which yet as they obtain their request, never at-
“ tempt to molest the walls to break in.” But though they do
not attempt to scale the walls, they may be very perplexing still,
by intercepting the caravans that bring them corn or biscuit, and
other provisions, and might seize on the religious whenever their
occasions led them beyond the walls of St. Sabba, as the Arabs
about Mount Sinai are wont to behave towards the celebrated
monastery there [e].

One would be apt to think, from what is said in the printed
account, p. 163, that there was a bell *in* the upper story of
the tower, which was rung to give notice of the approach of
strangers; but Lusignan explains the matter otherwise. In this
letter he says, that “ from one of the uppermost windows
“ of the towers is a *wire* which communicates to the mo-
“ nastery; on the end of it is a *bell*. When the hermits spy
“ any company coming from Jerusalem, they pull it to give no-
“ tice to the Society to open the gate, as it is always bolted up,
“ and they never open it except on similar occasions.”

Nor is this bell used, it seems, for any other purposes, at
least not to call people to their devotions there, as he has told

[d] Cedron, p. 170.

[e] See Dr. Shaw's Travels, p. 438, 439, 4to. Ed.

me in another letter, which I received after that of Sept. 11.
 “ The monasteries of St. Sabba are called to prayers by the clerk,
 “ not by the found of the bell, as it is not permitted in those
 “ parts of the Turkish dominions, but by knocking at [on] a
 “ long board made on purpose, in which time all are gathered
 “ in the *Cyriakon*, or great church, and not in the chapels,”
 except on the days of the different saints, to which, as he informed me in very broken English, the chapels were dedicated. The tower then is not *now* made use of for the calling a congregation to worship by the found of a *bell*, or *any other instrument of music*, or by an *human voice*, for which last purpose the Mohammedans built their minarets [*f*]. It could not have been designed for such a purpose at first (which, if it was in the beginning of the 6th century, was not only before they were over-awed by the Mohammedan power, but before Mohammed introduced his new religion), for in such a case it would have been more commodiously built in the middle of the convent, the religious there being the only people to be called, the country round about being then, as it is now, uninhabited [*g*], except by the hermits, who had chapels of their own adjoining to their cells, whose ruins may yet be seen there [*h*]. It was on account of the solitude of the place they chose to make their habitation in that part of the country.

It is fortunate that Signior Lufignan has given an account of *this tower*, having frequently visited the place when in the Holy-

[*f*] Very slender towers belonging to their Mosques.

[*g*] See p. 171, where he calls it a *Wilderness* formerly inhabited.

[*h*] P. 161.

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land, since he does not, he tells me in these letters, recollect that he ever saw any other tower of this kind *in that country*, or *any where else*, except on *Mount Athos*.

No churches, perhaps, are to be found in England, that are entire, whose erection was prior to the introduction of bells, to call people to worship; but, if there should be such found, these sacred towers, commonly called steeples, may be found adjoining to, or pretty near them, either built as watch-towers, or, if in places where no dangers were apprehended, for ornament, such watch-towers having struck them as a beauty. It is certain, in our more embellished churches, two, or three, or perhaps more of these towers have been built, and could not all be intended for the reception of bells.

I am, Sir,

Watesfield, Suffolk,

Oct. 7, 1788.

Your faithful humble servant,

THOMAS HARMER.