XIV. *Letter from ALBERT WAY, Esq. Director, to HUDSON GURNEY, Esq. Vice-President, descriptive of the Tabula of Gold, presented by the Emperor Henry II. to the Cathedral of Basle.*

Read April 6, 1843.

MY DEAR SIR,

131, Piccadilly, April 3, 1843.

ONE of the most remarkable existing specimens of the class of art to which, from the peculiar Oriental character which marks either the general design, or the accessory details, the distinctive name of Byzantine has been assigned, is submitted to the inspection of the Society of Antiquaries, by the obliging permission of the proprietor, Colonel Theubet, of Porrentruy, Canton of Berne. It is a golden *tabula*, which was presented at the commencement of the eleventh century to the Cathedral of Basle, as a votive offering for the decoration of the altar, by the Emperor Henry II. who had raised that structure from ruins, and bestowed upon it numerous rich ornaments, of which one, a precious crucifix, containing a fragment of the true cross, has recently been presented to the Cathedral of Cologne by his Majesty the King of Prussia. The *tabula* is formed, as it is stated, of cedar-wood, covered with a thin coating of pure gold; the design, which in some parts is in very high relief, being hammered out, or, as it is technically termed, *repoussé*, and worked up with the tool and burnisher. Its value has been rated in the old Chronicle of Basle at 7,000 gulden, "*septem aureorum millia*," called by another writer "*florenorum*," or gold crowns.

The piety of Henry II. had been displayed in the foundation of the see of Bamberg, and benefactions to many churches; the munificent gift, now exhibited to the Society, was presented by him to Basle, in consequence of the

miraculous cure of a malady, with which he had been severely afflicted. In the year 1014, the Emperor, having in vain sought relief from human aid, had recourse to the intercession of his patron, Saint Benedict, to obtain a cure, which he vowed to commemorate by a monument worthy of the occasion. Having, by the powerful aid of the saint, been relieved from his sufferings, according to the relations of ancient chroniclers, and the representation of the circumstance sculptured upon the tomb of the Emperor at Bamberg, this votive offering was placed in the Cathedral of Basle.^a It appears by an old parchment attached to it, that, by order of the chapter, the *tabula aurea* was to be used at the high altar, at the Nativity, Easter, the feast of the sainted donor, and other occasions of more than ordinary solemnity.^b

^a The detailed relation of Leo Marsicanus, in his *Chronicles of Cassino*, lib. iii. c. 43, may be cited as the most curious account of this miracle, which occurred, as it is stated, at that monastery. The Emperor, “qui patiebatur illi dolorem permaximum,” had entertained some doubts as to the actual existence of the relics of St. Benedict at Mount Cassino; between sleeping and waking the Saint appeared to him, and making inquiry as to the cause of his suffering, gave him the following token as an evidence that the venerated remains did in truth rest at that place. “Cum primum hodie surrexeris, in egestionem urinae tuae tres lapillos non parvos mingere habebis, et ex tunc dolore isto amplius non laborabis.” Murat. Script. Ital. iv. 366. The account given by Siffrid has been, however, adopted by other writers. “Facta oratione, obdormiens vidit S. Benedictum dicentem sibi, Quia sperasti in Deo et in sanctis suis, ecce missus sum a Deo, ut liberem te ab infirmitate tua. Hoc dicens cum ferro medicinali calculo molliter evulso, hiatus vulneris sanavit, et calculum in manum Caesaris posuit, qui evigilans, calculum in manu invenit, quem suis ostendens gratias egit Deo.” Rerum Germ. Script., Ratisb. 1731. See further Mabillon’s observations on the account first cited, Ann. Ord. S. Bened., under the year 1022; the *Acta Sanctorum Julii*, T. iii., Martii, T. ii.; *Vita S. Meinverki*, Acta SS. Junii, T. i.; N. Serarius, as cited by Muratori; and the *Basilea Sacra*, Bruntruti, 1658, p. 143.

^b This writing does not appear to be of earlier date than the fifteenth century. It is as follows:—“Ordinatum est per Capitulum quod aurea tabula in subsequentibus festis ad summum altare, et non aliter. ¶ Item in festo Natalis. ¶ Pasce. ¶ Pentecostes. ¶ Corporis Christi. ¶ Heinrici Imperatoris. ¶ Assumptionis Marie. ¶ In dedicacione. ¶ Omnium Sanctorum.” The feast of St. Henry, who was canonized by Pope Eugenius III. in 1152, was kept on July 13, as appears by the *Proprium Sanctorum Diocesis Basiliensis*, Bruntruti, 1623; a compilation in which may be seen the *lectiones* appointed for the occasion, which make special mention of the *altare aureum*, and other precious gifts bestowed by the Emperor.

The principal features of the design are figures of the Saviour, at whose feet the Emperor and Cunegonda his wife are seen prostrate; the Archangel Michael, holding the lance and gonfanon, in allusion to his triumph over the dragon, is represented on one side, and on the other Gabriel and Raphael, each holding, in token of dignity, a plain staff surmounted by a globular head. The remaining compartment is occupied by St. Benedict, clad in the monastic habit, and holding the simple pastoral staff, or *cambuca*. The heads of all these figures are encircled by richly jewelled nimbs, and the rest of the work is almost wholly covered with twining branched ornament, in which birds and animals are introduced; the character of this, partaking of the style of oriental decoration, bears close analogy to the Romanesque design which marks the illuminated or sculptured ornament of the period to which the term Norman has been applied in the architecture. At intervals are introduced, above the figures, four small medallions, containing busts which represent Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude, crowned, and the heads surrounded by nimbs.

On the corona of the cornice, and the uppermost base moulding, are the following inscriptions in red enamelled letters.

✠ QVIS SICVT HEL FORTIS MEDICVS SOTER BENEDICTUS.

which may be thus interpreted,—Who is like God, strong, a physician, a blessed Saviour? The last word is evidently allusive to the saint, who had proved so efficient an intercessor. The inscription beneath is as follows:—

✠ PROSPICE TERRIGENAS CLEMENS MEDIATOR VSIA.

The final word is a Grecism, and in the original signifies nature, but has also in medieval language the sense of pain and suffering, in which possibly it here occurs.^c

The Greek words here introduced, SOTER, VSIA, and HEL, which is, indeed, properly Hebrew, but occurs in the Gospels, are remarkable in connexion with the supposed Byzantine origin of the art here displayed. The Greek monogram on the globe, held by the the Saviour, must also be noticed; but

^c Οὐσία is rendered *essentia, substantia, natura, facultates, bona*.—See Ducange, *v. Usia*.

it should be observed that the gesture of benediction, as represented in that figure, is in accordance with the usage of the Western, and not of the Greek church.

With regard to the original application of this precious monument, it appears to have been intended as a *tabula*, or moveable decoration for the front of the altar. Many examples might be cited of this kind of ornament, formerly existing in our own country, for which the like costly materials and elaborate workmanship had been called into requisition. When the church of Ramsey was rebuilt about the year 969, at the charge of Aylwyn, Earl of the East Saxons, a costly jewelled *tabula* for the high altar formed a striking feature of his munificent donation, as described in the history of that monastery.^d Abbot Theodewyn, who died 1074, bestowed on the church of Ely such a *tabula*, formed of gold enriched with gems, and decorated with the representations of sacred personages. Its value was so great, that according to the *Historia Eliensis*, printed by Wharton, "*super divitias regionis Anglie præcipuum æstimabatur.*"^e A similar rich work was given to the church of Glastonbury by Abbot Brithwy, early in the eleventh century,^f and M. Paris, in the *Lives of the Abbots of St. Alban's*, records the fact, that Abbot Gaufrid, who succeeded 1119, bestowed "*tabulam unam, ex auro et argento et gemmis electis artificiose constructam, ad longitudinem et latitudinem altaris Sancti Albani.*"^g One other instance may be cited, the *tabula* which existed in Winchester Cathedral until the spoliation in the time of Henry VIII., and is described in a contemporary document printed by Strype, as "the nether part of the high altar, being of plate of gold garnished with stones; the front above being of broidery work and pearls, and above that a table of images of silver and gilt garnished with stones."^h

Numerous similar memorials of the pious munificence of former ages existed, doubtless, in Western Europe, but the intrinsic value of the material of which they were composed has been the cause of their destruction. At the Reformation in 1519, the church of Basle was stripped of its costly decorations, and the golden *tabula* alone was securely concealed in the crypt of the

^d Hist. Rames. Gale, Hist. Brit. Script. i. 420.

^e Anglia Sacra, i. 610.

^f Joh. Glaston. Hist. i. 151. Gul. Malmesb. de Antiqu. Glast. Eccl. ed. Hearne, i. 87.

^g Vitæ S. Albani Abbatum, 63, ed. 1640.

Mem. of Abp. Cranmer, App. 24.

cathedral ; frequent attempts were made on subsequent occasions to convert this precious deposit to some purpose of public utility, but it was only at the revolution in 1834, that, the Canton and City becoming disunited, a forced sale of the church treasure ensued, and the votive offering of Henry II. fell to the highest bidder. Scarcely any specimen of a similar kind, which from its antiquity, the costly material of which it is composed, or its importance as a work of art, can bear comparison with the Basle altar-table, has escaped the casualties of time, and rapacity of aggressors ; the golden *paliotto* in the church of Sant' Ambrogio, at Milan, may be cited as possibly the only existing work of like value and interest.ⁱ The importance, therefore, of so choice an example of the arts of the eleventh century is highly to be appreciated, and it were much to be desired that the monument exhibited to the Society could be deposited in a National Collection, illustrative of the progress of medieval art, the want of which is becoming every day more sensibly perceived by the rapidly increasing class of those, whose attention is not exclusively devoted to the works of the more pure but less congenial style of the classical period. The revived taste for works of medieval character, which first emanated from England, has now spread over nearly the whole of Europe, and the primary source to which this great change in public taste is to be traced, will be found, I think it may safely be affirmed, to have been at Abbotsford. England, however, alone of all the countries of Western Europe, possesses no National Collection, which exhibits a series of specimens illustrative of the character and progress of the arts of the middle ages, and of the taste and usages of our ancestors.

I have the honour to be, dear Sir,

Your obliged and obedient servant,

ALBERT WAY.

HUDSON GURNEY, Esq.
&c. &c. &c.

ⁱ See the elaborate plates given by Ferrario, in his work on that church ; and Cicognara, *Storia della Scultura*, iii. 115.

J. Basire, litho.

TABULA OF GOLD FROM THE CATHEDRAL OF BASLE.

Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London, April 23rd 1843.