XVII. *Account of a fresco Painting discovered at Preston, Sussex ; by the Rev. CHARLES TOWNSHEND, in a Letter to HENRY HALLAM, Esq. F.R.S., V.P.*

Read 20th May, 1830.

MY DEAR SIR,

Preston, April 24, 1830.

THE Church of Preston, near Brighton, appears from various indications to have been built towards the end of the reign of Henry III. On the east wall of the nave, on both sides of the arch opening to the Chancel, the Commandments had been painted, which, becoming greatly decayed from damp and age, I endeavoured to scrape away ; after removing many thick coats of whitewash and plaster, I gradually made out on the wall, northward of the arch, the painting of the murder of Becket, &c. (No. 1),^a and on that southward of the arch the various paintings (No. 2).^b

This picture of Becket's murder seems to conform with much exactness to the descriptions of it given in the old chronicles and biographies. The figure on our right hand, Edward Grim, is extending his right hand to ward the blow from the Archbishop's head, and is represented severely wounded : "Brachium cujusdam Clerici qui dicebatur Edwardus Grimfere abscidit, extenderat enim idem Clericus brachium suum super caput Patris ut ferientis exciperet, vel potius elideret ictum."^c The mistake in Hoveden of calling him Grimfere in this passage, which has been followed by Alban Butler, Dr. Milner, and others, arose naturally in printing from a closely written MS. and joining

^a See Plate XXVI.

^b Plate XXVII.

^c Hoveden, An. p. 299.

the adverb *ferè* with his name. The other Chronicles generally use the same or similar words in a way that satisfies us of the mistake; thus in Bromton's Chronicle, "*Brachium cujusdam clerici qui Edwardus Grym dicebatur ferè abscidit;*" and in Gervase of Canterbury, "*quo brachium Clerici, magistri scilicet Edwardi, ferè amputavit.*" He is represented with his tonsure, and hood partly covering his head, or possibly in the first drawing it was a nimbus or glory, as he appears to have been held worthy of such honour for his zeal and courage upon this occasion."^d The area of the glory was probably filled with colour on a subsequent repainting. He was a young man of high and opulent family,^e and was on a visit to the Archbishop.^f

The Altar of St. Benedict, of which Becket had ascended the fourth step,^g is designated conspicuously by the cup, probably to impress by that object the allusion continually made by the Monkish Historians, that his blood was shed where the blood of Christ was offered. Indeed it is the general style and object of all these writers, by every minute particular, to connect the passion of Becket with that of our Lord. The triangular form represents the antependium or ornamental drapey upon the cloth of the Altar.

Of the figure of the Archbishop, from obliteration and repainting, there appears some difficulty in deciding the attitude; the foot seems to have been subsequently introduced; his face is probably meant to be turned towards us, his arms spread open in submission to his fate. The divine hand in benediction is descending towards him to receive his spirit. In illuminated Psalters of this period it is so placed over the bed of the dying; and in the Bayeux Tapestry it hangs over the

^d "Qui jam rebus humanis exemptus, sicut sperandum, ab altissimo in super cœlesti Catalogo jam positus est." *Epistolæ et Vitæ divi Thomæ, &c.*

^e "Castello illo in Anglia quod dicitur Cauthebruge oriundus." *Epistol. et Vitæ, lib. iii. ch. xviii.*

^f "Casu sic ad Archi-præsulem, nuper tunc reversum ab exilio, visendum venerat." *Epist. et Vitæ in Catalogo Eruditorum.*

^g "In quatuor gradus ascenderat." *Fitzsteph.*

Church of Westminster, into which the corpse of St. Edward is being conveyed.

Of the two foremost Knights, the one in front with the long shield must be William de Tracy, from his sword cutting at the hand of the Priest, and at the same time striking the Archbishop.^h Reginald Fitzurse followed so immediately (he is here pointing to the Priest and stabbing Becket from behind with his sword) that by some the first blow, already described, was attributed to him.ⁱ In the painting this point of time is chosen, and the two knights are represented both striking together. The next murderer, "Hugo Morville," with a smaller shield, has his sword lifted (to which a new outline has been given, different from the shape of his own scabbard), and is about to let fall a third and more violent blow, the effect of which is described as quite equal to the violence of the attitude.^k We now come to the knight whose situation in the painting, and his sword still undrawn, shew that he approached last (and perhaps somewhat unwillingly) to the Archbishop's murder. Now it is mentioned by one of the historians that the murderer who came up *fourth* in order broke his sword,^l and we find in conclusion that this *fourth* or *last* was Brito, for Fitzstephen particularizes him by mentioning the breaking of his sword.^m

^h "Magister Edwardus Grim qui et primum a Willielmo de Tracy in caput ejus vibratum gladii, ictum, brachio objecto excepit, eodemque ictu et Archiepiscopus in capite inclinato, et ipse in brachio graviter est vulneratus." Fitzsteph.

ⁱ "Accelerans igitur ursides de *primo ictu* referre trophæum et de *festina proditione* suâ, lucrum prosiliit," &c. Epist. et Vitæ, lib. iii. ch. xviii.

^k "Tertius autem plurimam testæ portionem amputando vulnus precedens horribiliter ampliavit." Idem.

^l "Quartus ab uno eorum quod se (non ?) tardaret correptus, in idem vulnus, in manu gladium vibravit, gladioque in pavimento marmoreo confracto, tam cuspidem quam gladii sui capulum reliquit." Idem.

^m "Ricardus Brito percussit tanta vi ut et gladius ad caput ejus et ad Ecclesiæ pavementum frangeretur." Idem. This fragment of Brito's sword was preserved upon the altar tomb at Canterbury, and large offerings were made "ad punctum ensis." See Pegge's Beauchief Abbey. Erasmus Colloq. Peregrination. Religionis ergo. In Dugdale, Monast. vol. i. is an engraving of the shrine and reliques.

There can remain, I think, no doubt that the name of each knight is clearly distinguished; and in all the ancient paintings of the subject which I have seen, the same order prevails, the same situations and attitudes are found. In the ancient glass in the window of the north aisle of Christ Church, Oxford;ⁿ in the bas-relief in marble, once the altar-piece at Beauchief Abbey;^o in the fresco at Stratford-on-Avon,^p in the Chapel of the Trinity; this order of attack is exactly preserved, and the latter painting has this additional confirmation of the statement from the historians, that the name of each knight is painted upon his dress. It therefore appears probable that one general arrangement was followed in representing this subject. The picture on board at Canterbury^q of a later date, has also the same *general arrangement*, and there can be no doubt of each *individual* name; in that painting, however, the armorial distinctions are differently appropriated, but Mr. Carter, in his representation, confesses some parts of these to be his own restoration, and Dr. Milner in describing the picture (after having been misled in naming two of the knights) seems to have felt the arms^r to be so incongruous with the history, that in defiance of his wearing a "Surcoat of azure charged with fleurs-de-lis," which should have proclaimed him "Morville," he says very justly, "this last actor in the tragedy (who is drawing his sword) certainly is Brito."

All the knights are clad entirely in chain armour, over which their long surcoats reach below the knee. A reddish brown and yellow ochre seem to have been the only two colours employed, and with the former colour the picture has afterwards received a new and careless

ⁿ Engraving by Fowler, published 1808.

^o Pegge's Hist. in Appendix.

^p Fisher's Series of allegorical and legendary Paintings at Stratford, folio, 1807.

^q Carter's Ancient Sculpture and Painting.

^r To Tracy are given the arms (I suppose) of Brito: to Morville those of Tracy: and to Brito those of Morville. The arms designating Tracy, are "*Or, two bars Gules*;" the present family bear "*Or, in dexter chief an escallop between two bendlets Gule.*" Vide Irish Peerage, before 1797, when their title of Viscount became extinct.

outline, and has been in many parts very rudely repainted, greatly disfiguring and confusing the original.

The date of this painting is presumed to be of the reign of Edward I. The costume is always an allowed criterion, and the painting gives us the style of mail in use at that period, with its appropriate shields, swords, &c. and without any admixture of plate armour. We may therefore trust it could not be later than Edward I., towards the end of whose reign greaves and other remarkable variations were introduced. In confirmation of this date it may also be observed that the foliage of the trees and of the crockets on the niche in the drawing (No. 2),^s partake strongly of the character then given to those ornaments when used in sculpture. It is probably therefore one of the earliest pictures of the death of Becket extant. Of this subject, so popular in the Church, we might expect naturally to be well supplied with representations, and we should probably have been overwhelmed with them had not Henry VIIIth, in the 30th year of his reign, issued a long proclamation^t greatly abusing the Archbishop, and commanding "all images and pictures of Bishop Becket through the hole realme to be put down and avoided out of all Churches, Chappells, and other places;" yet in spite of this decree (which indeed has probably been the means of preserving many by plaster which would otherwise have long faded away) we have the subject remaining in glass,^u illuminations, fresco, sculpture, seals, &c. some, however, not conforming with sufficient accuracy to the subject to distinguish them from other murders and martyrdoms.^x As most of these are works of the fourteenth and fifteenth

^s Plate XXVII.

^t Burnet's Reformation, in Appendix.

^u Archæologia, Vol. IX. on glass at Brereton, where the Archbishop (a mistake not very inappropriate) is in armour. His Biographers often style him "invictissimus Dei Athleta." See also Archæologia, vols. X. XI. and XVII.; Pegge's Hist. of Beauchief Abbey, and his references.

^x In this class we may place the enamelled paintings on the little shrines of Croyland and Hereford; which in no specific points concur with the history, and in most contradict it. See Gough's Sep. Monuments, Introduct to vol. II. p. 195, and his references.

centuries, we have in the Preston fresco not only an earlier record and authority of the historic circumstance, arranged with more accuracy and taste, but have what is becoming rare and valuable in the kingdom, a public work of pictorial art of the thirteenth century.

The range of figures above this painting of Becket, represent on the right hand, St. Catherine, virgin and martyr; at her feet the Emperor Maximinus, over whose persecutions she triumphed, and in whose reign she suffered martyrdom.^y The next is a figure of Christ after his resurrection, with a triumphant cross; beside him a female kneeling, and a shrub or tree between them. It seems intended for the scene where our Lord makes himself known to Mary Magdalene in the Garden (St. John, ch. xx). The figure of Christ, with a trifling variety of attitude, is repeated in the next figure, and from his pointing to his side, the obliterated figure was probably the incredulous Thomas.

(No. 2.)^z

Upon the wall southward of the arch is a female Saint within a Gothic niche or tabernacle, standing over the dragon, with a cross or spear in her hand. Among^a the figures of the Saints we find St. Margaret so represented. There are two other figures much obliterated, one appearing, from the crosier, to be a Bishop, and the escallop would mark the other for a pilgrim. The tree and other ornaments are too undefined to admit any thing but conjectures on the subject. Beneath these paintings we have an angel in the act of weighing the souls of the departed (an office appropriated to Michael^b), the devil striving by his weight and strength to pull up the lower and successful scale, in which is a little figure in the posture of prayer, whose fate is in delibera-

^y The person of Maximin was of a gigantic structure, being eight feet in height, with strength of form proportionate. We must, I suppose, believe it to be his moral prostration and littleness that is here impersonated.

^z Plate XXVII.

^a Callot's fig.

^b See clear and numerous authorities in Gough, Introduction to Sep. Mon. vol. II. p. ccxxxiv.

tion, and beside it another figure (probably the Virgin) affording her strength to counteract the efforts of the adversary.

Of the date and history of this religious emblem in the Church I am not informed. The selection of the Archangel Michael from the celestial Hierarchy for this office, must have arisen from his being considered by the Rabbis in the Jewish Church as the officiating Angel of *Justice* (as Gabriel was of *Mercy*) ; and he continued, probably for that reason, to be so represented in the Christian Church, “ *bearing the scales in his left hand and a sword in his right* ;”^c and he was moreover the especial and vigilant guardian of souls after death ;^d and in general, as the devil is the sworn enemy of good and holy men, so Michael is their special protector against his assaults and accusations ;^e and the contest between them for the possession and appropriation of the body of Moses (mentioned in St. Jude’s Epistle, ver. 9) was not unlikely to continue in the Christian Church the tradition of the Rabbis, that a similar contention existed for the possession of every departed soul or person. But in itself, the subject of the scales presents so simple and clear an image of the scrutiny to which our works are to be subject after death, that a very slight authority from scripture and tradition would be sufficient to establish its reception in the Church.^f The invention is indeed so natural that we find it in Homer,^g Virgil,^h and

^c Callot’s Figures of the Saints.

^d “ Cum anima ascendit ad portas Hierosolymæ cœlestis Michael Dux Magnus cum ipsâ ascendit, eamque salute excipit.” Pirke, Eleizer, c. 42. “ Cum David mortuus est angeli superni noluerunt ipsi transitum per portas Hierosolymæ celestis concedere. Michaeli vero precepit Deus ut Davidem unctum introduceret per portas.” Schemoth Rabba.

^e “ Michael et Sammael (Satanas) stant ante thronum Schekinæ, et Satanus accusat ; Michael vero merita Israelitarum proponit.” Jalkut Rubini, fol. 72, 3. See the interesting and learned Notes to the fourth Discourse of Reginald Heber’s Bampton Lectures, where the character and office of Michael is treated of, and from whence the above quotations are copied.

^f As in Job, xxi. ver. 6, and Daniel, v. ver. 27.

^g Iliad, viii. ver. 69, xxii. ver. 209 ; see Heyne’s observations.

^h Æneid, xii. ver. 72 ; Heyne’s Annot.

Milton;ⁱ and Æschylus wrote a tragedy upon the thought, entitled *Ψυχοστασία*, of which only fragments remain; but from Plutarch's account of it,^k and the drawing from it on an Etruscan Vase,^l it appears to have had the closest analogy with the subject of our present enquiry; for Achilles and Memnon are themselves (*Ψυχαί*;^m not as in Homer the *Kῆρες* or *Fates*, of the parties) placed in the scales of Jupiter, and their mothers standing beside each scale, are praying to him for the success of their sons. Plutarch in observing upon it says, “ὅτι μυθοποίημα καὶ πλάσμα πρὸς ἡδονὴν ἢ ἐκπληξιν ἀκροάτου γέγονε;” a fiction altogether contrived for exciting fear and delight in the audience. Its strong and pleasing power over the affections indeed is not experienced from poetry only, but has been exercised by the pencil of Barry with a pathos that will bear being mentioned, although the descriptions of the noblest poets have been referred to.

The accompanying drawings were made by Mr. William Twopeny of the Temple; and in mentioning his name I shall be spared the necessity of assuring you of their minute accuracy and characteristic spirit. The figures are reduced about one inch to a foot.

Very faithfully yours,

CHARLES TOWNSEND.

ⁱ Paradise Lost, iv. ver. 995. In Homer, Virgil, and Æschylus, the scale ascending to Heaven is the token of good; in the prophet Daniel, Milton, and in this painting, the metaphor is changed, and the ascending scale is made the sign of lightness and insufficiency.

^k De Audiendis Poetis.

^l Lanzi, Saggio de lingua Etrusca, vol. ii. p. 224.

^m Heyne describes them, “*duæ umbræ seu animæ ad formam humanam effictæ.*” In one part of the paintings in the Campo Santo at Pisa, we see the *souls* of deceased men escaping from their mouths in the forms of thin *youthful* figures, for the possession of whom much contention is represented between the good and the evil angels.