XXII.—*Observations on certain Sepulchral Usages of Early Times.* By
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So little is known respecting the sepulchral usages of the early, or rather the middle Christian period, when Paganism still sought to maintain its deeply-rooted superstitions beneath even the very garb of Christianity, that any authentic notice, however imperfect, will, it may be hoped, prove acceptable and possibly useful. In such a hope I venture to beg the attention of the Society to certain mystic practices of Christian interments of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but chiefly to that of depositing written, or rather engraved, formulæ of absolution in the tomb with the remains of the deceased.

In the public library of Dieppe my attention was attracted by several old crosses, rudely cut out of sheet lead, and evidently bearing inscriptions, though from age, dirt, and original faintness of execution, it is difficult to decypher them.

Their history is as follows :—

In the valley of Arques, about two miles from Dieppe, still remain a few vestiges of the ancient and once greatly-venerated church of Butteilles. This building only escaped the perils of the French revolution of the last century to perish soon after by the neglectful indifference of the people, to which cause alone the ruin of other village churches in this neighbourhood is to be attributed. The church, with its precincts, had stood exactly in the course of the road from Dieppe to Arques, causing an awkward detour. About fourteen years since the road was carried straight over the ruins, and, in levelling the ground for the purpose, four tombs containing skeletons were found. On the breasts of the skeletons, one of which was that of a child, lay these crosses, just referred to, rudely cut out of sheet lead; no further relics were found. The inscriptions on them in no way elucidate the purpose or date of their employment. They are merely formulæ of absolution cut, or rather scratched, on the lead with some sharp implement. The politeness of the Abbé Cochet enables me to give the exact words of the absolution on one of the crosses; it is in a modified form, and we at least gather from it that

the deceased, on whose remains it was found, was named "Emmelina," and consequently probably of Merovingian extraction. He also has favoured me with a sketch of the cross in its present state, and the fac-simile of the two first lines of the inscription, pointing out how little the formula now used has varied from that of many centuries ago. It runs thus:—"Oremus. Jhesus Christus qui dixit discipulis suis quodcunque ligaveritis super terram erit ligatum et in cœlis et quodcunque solveritis super terram erit solutum et in cœlis, de quorum numero licet indignos nos esse voluit, ipse te absolvat, Hemmelina, per ministerium nostrum ab omnibus criminibus tuis quæcunque cogitatione, locutione, operatione negligenter egisti, atque noxibus (*sic*) absolutam perducere dignetur ad regna cœlorum qui vivit et regnat in sæc. secul."

Noxibus seems a clerical error for the usual "nexibus peccatorum." The Abbé says, "le dessin est exacte. J'ai mis au dos le texte précis, tel qu'il se trouve sur la croix. Il n'y manque que les caractères du temps dont il y a deux lignes seulement."

From the character of the writing, probably monastic, it has been thought these singular relics appertain to the eleventh or twelfth century. The accompanying outlines give the form of three of these crosses, from which it will be seen they all vary in detail, though more or less partaking of the character of the early Greek cross. (See Plate XIII.) Similar leaden crosses have been found at other places in the neighbourhood, and one of these, belonging to the Abbé Cochet, which I am now enabled to exhibit, will be viewed with interest. It was found in the old cemetery of Quiberville sur Mer, in 1846.

When these crosses of absolution were first used, whether they were in general use, and when their use was abolished, we appear to be hitherto without information.* The earliest mention of them seems to have been in the case of one found in the tomb of a bishop, at Metz, of the date of 1046, and others also have been found in that city. In England such leaden crosses have very rarely been met with. One, which is preserved in the Chichester Museum, was found, in 1830, in the cathedral cemetery, in the tomb of Godefridus, the second Bishop of Chichester, in the days of William the Conqueror. The formula on this is more positive, commencing—"Absolumus te, Godefride,"^b &c. Mention of another found in the Minster Close, Lincoln, and a sketch of it, will be met with in the

* "It is a custom at this day in Catholic countries to deposit crosses with the dead, as well with the clergy as laity. It would be useless to enlarge on this subject, as many discoveries and books concur to prove the custom of interring crosses with Christians." (Douglas, *Nenia Britannica*, p. 68.) Unfortunately he does not cite his authorities.

Journal of the Archæological Institute.^a On the one side is the name and title of the deceased, a priest named Siford, and on the reverse is an inscription in minuscules, covering the limbs of the cross. It is altogether illegible, but probably was also a formula of absolution.

Reference to such a practice in old writers seems of rare occurrence and indistinct. In the *Miracula S. Benedicti*, lib. 3, is a passage referred to by Ducange, where the earth declined receiving the corpse of an excommunicate person, till the ban was removed by the Church; “*eâdem relaxatione in schedulâ admotâ pectori mortui superpositâ, non eum tellus perpulit ultra.*” This, however, merely goes to show that absolution was bestowed on the dead,^b and that the formula of absolution was placed on the body. But in none of the above-cited examples, where crosses have been found, can the interments be supposed to have been those of excommunicate persons. A passage in Mabillon’s *Annals*^c better shows that the custom was in use in the eleventh century. On the death of the celebrated Abelard, in 1142, Heloisa applied to Peter, the Venerable Abbot of Cluny, for a formula of absolution to place on the tomb of Abelard. The words are remarkable:—“She asks,” says Mabillon, quoting them, “*ut aliud sibi sigillum, id est, alteram epistolam sigillo obsignatam, mittat, quo in sigillo Magistri absolutio litteris apertis contineatur, ut sepulcro ejus suspendatur.*” The absolution was graciously granted, apparently as a matter of course, and the form is still extant.^d In some other old Benedictine writer I have read it was placed on the body of Abelard; now Abelard had died a monk, in his convent, and certainly not excommunicate.

Till a more precise and satisfactory explanation is rendered we may perhaps refer the practice, if general practice it were, to the superstition of the times, in common with many others that can however scarcely plead the same Christian origin. One of the common points of belief was that in demoniac possession, and it was deemed a religious duty to preserve the bodies of the dead from Satanic

^a Lincoln volume. Cat. Antiquities Exhibited, p. 44.

^b Of this we have historic evidence in England in the reign of Henry III., viz. the case of the interment of the Earl of Pembroke, in Matthew Paris.

^c *Annales Ord. S. Benedicti*, vol. vi. p. 356, ed. Paris, 1739.

^d *Absolutio Petri Abaëlardi his verbis concepta est.*

“Ego, Petrus Cluniacensis Abbas, qui Petrum Abaëlardum in monachum Cluniacensem recepi, et corpus ejus furtim delatum Heloissæ Abbatisæ et monialibus Paracliti concessi, auctoritate omnipotentis Dei et omnium sanctorum absolve eum pro officio ab omnibus peccatis suis.” Mabillon, *Ann. S. Benedict.*

From Butteilles, near Dieppe.

Quiberville-sur-Mer, Dieppe.

Chichester Cathedral.

Lincoln.

Scale 1/4 in. of original

*Outlines of Leaden Crosses,
bearing inscriptions, from old cemeteries in France and England.*

Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London 1854.

J. Basire, Lith.

agency. So, too, the Romans dreaded lest magic arts should disturb the repose of the dead,

“ Ut nullos cantata magos exaudiat umbra.
. nec verba, nec herbæ,
Audebunt longæ somnum tibi solvere Lethes.” a

Hence possibly the employment of these leaden crosses of absolution was amuletic. "Quia," says Durandus,^b "hoc signum diabolus valde veretur, et timet accedere ad locum crucis signaculo insignitum." In another place he adds, "Solent namque desævire in corpora mortuorum, ut quod nequiverunt in vitâ saltem post mortem agant."

Another superstition of the sepulchral ritual of those times, in France at least, was the interment of vessels containing holy water, and charcoal, on which incense was sprinkled, in the tomb with the dead. This we learn from Johannes Belethus,^e an ancient liturgist of the twelfth century, and his statement is confirmed by his commentator, the celebrated Durandus. In the old cemeteries of France the earthen vessels thus used for the holy water and fumigation have continually been found. In England I believe no such instance has hitherto been noticed; nor do we meet with mention of such a custom, nor of the use of the absolutionary crosses in Italy. Had such curious practices ever prevailed there, they would scarcely have escaped the searching observation of Muratori.

It was doubtless a remnant of old pagan funeral rites too strong to be entirely shaken off, and therefore acquiesced in, or rather, with divers others, craftily engrafted by the clergy on the Christian ceremonial. Roman paganism outlived in the provinces Roman civilization and refinement.

The beautiful lines of the Christian Prudentius, "In exequias defunctorum"—

“ Nos tecta fovebimus ossa
Violis, et fronde frequenti,
Titulumque et frigida saxa
Liquido spargemus odore.”

are they not but the echoes of the pagan elegies of Albinovanus Pedo and Propertius?

“Semper certa tibi dabimus, tibi semper odores ;
Non unquam sitiens, florida semper eris.”^d

^a Lucan. Pharsalia, l. vi. l. 767.

^b In *Rationale Div. Off.* l. vii. c. 35, *De Off. Mortuorum*.

^c "Aquam benedictam ac prunas cum ture apponerent." C. 161, De Divinis Officiis.

^d Alb. Pedo, Eleg. 2. l. 141.

Or,

“ Afferet huc unguenta mihi, sertisque sepulcrum
Ornabit, custos ad mea busta sedens.” ^a

The funeral libation of wine, and the lustral waters of the heathen rites, were but commuted for the “aqua benedicta” of the Christian priest; and so might the pagan and true believer exclaim together with Ausonius—

“ Sparge mero cineres, bene olentis et unguine nardi,
Hospes, et adde rosis balsama puniceis.” ^b

To render undue honours to the unconscious remains of the dead seems indeed inherent in human nature under most phases of heathenism, and to proceed from various causes. Under the influence of this practice the polytheistic idolator would have little difficulty in deifying, after death, any person who had been the object in life of his exaggerated veneration. Thus we see the recent Christian convert, Clovis, anxious to propitiate St. Martin, and sending to his tomb, as it were to the shrine of an oracle, to inquire the results of his approaching contest with the Wisigoths.^c

Durandus, indeed, in his *Rationale*, endeavours to throw his usual mystic veil over this employment of charcoal and incense, and also the leaves of evergreens which were strewed in the grave. For the use of the holy water he assigns the pious reason, “that it was very unpopular with the demons, and kept them away from the corpse,” a feeling that has probably been stereotyped in the vulgar saying of “the devil hates holy water.” The whole of this apology, or commentary, of Durandus is very curious.^d

The learned Oberlin, who, towards the close of the last century, appears to have been a fellow of this Society, mentions this usage in his “*Museum Schæpflini*,” and refers to Johannes Beletus. Oberlin considers it extinct in the thirteenth

^a Propertius, *Eleg. lib. iii. 16, l. 23.*

^b Ausonius, *Epitaph*, 36.

^c Greg. *Turon. l. ii. 37.*

^d “Deinde ponitur in spelunca, in qua in quibusdam locis ponitur aqua benedicta et prunæ cum ture. Aqua benedicta ne demones qui multum eam timent, ad corpus accedant; solent namque desævire in corpora mortuorum, ut quod nequiverunt in vita, saltem post mortem agant. Thus propter fætorem corporis removendum, seu ut defunctus creatori suo acceptabilem bonorum operum odorem intelligatur obtulisse, seu ad ostendendum quod defunctis prosit auxilium orationis. Carbones in testimonium quod terra illa in communes usus amplius redigi non potest; plus enim durat carbo sub terra quam aliud. Hedera quoque, vel laurus, et hujusmodi quæ semper servant virorem, in sarcophago corpori substernuntur,
. Fiunt enim hæc, non quia cadaveribus insit sensus, sed in figuram.”—*De Off. Mortuorum.*

century,^a but we have evidence of its continuance down to the sixteenth. In the graves at the Abbey of Graville earthen vessels containing charcoal have continually been found, and the most convincing proof of the custom was afforded in the tomb of Renaud de Calletot, interred in the sixteenth century. This tomb is in the church of St. Martin en Campagne, near Dieppe, and when opened by M. Feret, in 1827, some small earthen vessels containing charcoal were found at the head and at the feet of the deceased.^b

Whether the practice was continued to this late date merely as an old, accustomed rite, or whether the idea of Durandus as to its religious necessity was still maintained, we have no certain information. It was no doubt a general custom in the time of Johannes Belethus, and may have gradually fallen into disuse, lingering in some places longer than in others, according to their respective circumstances.

The same superstitious idea seems to have been attached to the fact of burying the corpse in a monk's cowl, for which we may, among many other authorities, refer to Holinshed. Speaking of the death of King John, he says, "For the manner was at that time in such sort to bury their nobles and great men, who were induced, by the imagination of monks and fond fancies of friers, to believe that the said cowl was an amulet, or defensitive to their soules, from hell and hellish hags, how or in whatsoever sort they died."^c

The same amuletic superstition then which could hope for protection, and desire consolation, from perishable matter in the form of water, charcoal, incense, a monk's cowl, &c., would naturally impute a greater efficacy to the more spiritual charm of a formula of absolution, engraved on an imperishable substance, in the figure of the emblem of the true faith. As in the case above quoted of the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, the absolution of such ecclesiastics as led holy lives may have been in great request, and thus they may have enjoyed a species of saintship while yet alive.

Sundry other and less defensible sepulchral customs appear to have existed prior to the eleventh century. Could we succeed in ascertaining these we should no doubt find them very curious, and savouring greatly of Roman or Teutonic

^a "Hunc morem, qui sæcul. xiii. in desuetudinem abiit, prioribus sæculis viguisse vascula multa figlina in sepulcris Gallicis subinde inventa testantur, etc." Mus. Schapfl. p. 147; Argentorati, 1773.

^b Sous les ossements nous recueillîmes les fragments de deux petites urnes, dont l'une avait été posée sous les pieds, l'autre sous la tête du défunt. Ces urnes d'une terre blanchâtre, et d'une couverte d'un beau vert, contenaient du charbon." Soc. Archeologique de l'Arrond. de Dieppe.

^c Holinshed's Chronicle, vol. ii. p. 337.

paganism. Such called forth the *Capitulare* of Charlemagne, and which was renewed by his son the Emperor Louis, as late as 819.^a Among the funeral superstitions here alluded to are, probably, the heathen practices at graves, prohibited at the Council of Lestines in 743, and which, with many other relics of Paganism, are catalogued in the well-known "*Indiculus Superstitionum et Paganismorum*." It will not then seem extraordinary that at the far earlier period of 578, the Church, at the Council of Auxerre,^b was forced to prohibit the abomination of administering the eucharist to the dead, together with the kiss, and decking the corpse in the sacred vestments of the altar. This last irregularity, indeed, is noticed in the canons of several of the early councils. If then the parochial clergy of those times could thus sanction, instead of repressing, superstitions so gross in their reality, and suspicious in their origin, we cannot greatly err in supposing the minds of the laity to have been by no means cleared from the obscurity of paganism. That this was so appears from an injunction of the Council of Nantes^c in the ninth century, "*De quodam cultu superstitiosi abolendo*," under which title remains of pagan idolatry appear.

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^a Cap. 28, Aquisgr.

"Episcopos monemus, etc.

. . . . et ut superstitiones quas quibusdam in locis in exequiis mortuorum nonnulli faciunt, eradicant."

Conc. Ant. Galliæ, vol. iii. ed. Sirmond.

^b Can. xii. "Non licet mortuis nec eucharistiam nec osculum tradi; nec velo vel pallis corpora eorum involvi." Concilia Ant. Galliæ, vol. i. p. 368.

^c Ibid. vol. iii. p. 607.