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The Madonna di Rocca Melone.

Central portion of the engraved Brass Triptych originally placed in the votive chapel built on the Rocca-Melone, near Susa, by Bonifazio Rotario of Asti, A.D. 1368.



Engraved Brass Triptych originally placed in the votive chapel of Our Lady of the Snow on the Rocca-Melone, near Susa, A.D. 1368.

On one of the wings appears St. George; on the other, Bonifazio Rotario, of Asti, the Donor, accompanied by his Patron Saint.

The Archaeological Journal.

SEPTEMBER, 1857.

NOTICE OF AN ENGRAVED BRASS TRIPTYCH, OF FLEMISH WORKMANSHIP, ORIGINALLY PLACED IN THE CHAPEL OF THE MADONNA DI ROCCA-MELONE, ON THE ALPS.

BY ALEXANDER NESBITT, ESQ.

THE traveller when crossing the Mont Cenis, if so favoured by the weather as to see the Rocca-Melone (the mountain which rises on the north-west of Susa) free from cloud, may have discovered with surprise a small building upon its summit, at an elevation of upwards of 11,000 feet above the level of the sea. From Murray's Handbook he will learn that this is the Chapel of our Lady of the Snow, and that it owes its existence to the vow of Bonifaccio Rotario of Asti, who, when on a crusade, was taken prisoner, and while in captivity vowed if he recovered his liberty to build a chapel in honour of the Virgin Mary on the highest mountain in the states of the House of Savoy. A pilgrimage is made to it annually on the 5th of August.

The history of Bonifaccio Rotario seems to be very obscure. From a little memoir written, I believe, by one of the canons of the Cathedral of Susa, and published under the title, "Sunto della Festa della Madonna di Rocca-melone," it would appear that what is known of him is chiefly traditional. When he took the cross seems to be unknown, but the author of the work above-mentioned surmises that he may have joined the crusade promoted by Pope Clement VI., which set out for the Holy Land in 1343, and terminated disastrously at Smyrna; or that he may have accompanied the reinforcements which, in 1345, were led by Humbert II., Dauphin of Vienne. All that appears to be certain is that by the 1st of September, 1368, he had fulfilled his vow, and placed in the chapel the remarkable

object which is the subject of this notice. This information is derived, as will be seen, from the inscription.

The "sacra effigie" of Our Lady of the Snow, or the Madonna di Rocca-Melone, is, as shown in Mr. Utting's accurate engravings which accompany this notice, in the form of a triptych, consisting of a central piece joined by hinges to two wings which fold over and cover the former, and these folding leaves when closed are fastened by three hooks. It is of brass, and measures when open, $20\frac{1}{2}$ inches in breadth, and $22\frac{1}{2}$ in height. The gable of the central piece had no doubt originally a finial and six crockets; only two of the last remain. The outside is perfectly plain, but the inside is engraved in a manner precisely similar, both as regards drawing and execution, to that of the monumental brasses made in Flanders in the fourteenth century.

The engravings which accompany this notice, make any lengthened description unnecessary. The central piece, it will be seen, is occupied by a figure of the Virgin crowned and seated upon a throne, holding in her arms the Infant Christ, who caresses her chin with his right hand, while his left holds an orb. On the wing to the right of the Virgin, is St. George on horseback, treading under his horse's feet the Dragon, whose jaws he pierces with his lance. The saint is seated on a saddle with a high back, and the *arçon* appears prolonged so as to overlap the thigh, as in the tilting saddle of a later date. In the armour we may notice the riveted plates protecting the shoulder, the short jupon, the upper part of the thighs being protected with mail, and the lower bezanty. The spurs are a late instance of the pryck spur, formed of a point issuing from a ball. The form of the shield is peculiar for so early a date. On the spear may be seen a remarkable variety of the vamplate, which is in the contrary direction to that of a later period. The defences, apparently of plate, protecting the head and breast of the horse, are of unusual character.

On the other wing is a standing figure of a saint, probably St. John the Baptist,¹ presenting to the Virgin the donor, kneeling, who is in similar armour to St. George, but bare-headed, and raises his joined hands. The shield which stands by his side, as also his surcoat, may have had each an inser-

¹ The author of the "Sunto," &c., considers this figure St. Joseph, but the bare head, breast, and feet, and single

garment, loosely wrapped around him, would seem to point to St. John the Baptist.

tion, which has disappeared: these spaces were possibly filled by separate pieces of copper, enamelled with the arms of Rotario, in the same manner as the arms of D'Abernon are inserted on the shield of Sir John D'Abernon, on the sepulchral brass at Stoke Dabernon, in Surrey.²

Above the head of Rotario is his large helm, surmounted by a coronet and a crest; the latter, it would seem, representing the trunk of a tree with lopped branches. The inscription which runs across the triptych, when written at full length, is as follows:—"Hic me aportavit Bonefacius Rotarius Civis Astensis in honorem Domini nostri Jesu Christi et beate Marie Virginis, Anno Domini MCCCXLVIII. die primo September."

From this inscription, it would appear that the triptych was originally placed in the chapel of the Rocca-Melone—no doubt, over the altar—by Rotario himself; and it may possibly, have remained for a considerable period in this position. All that is known respecting it with any certainty is derived from a judicial act extant in the archives of the municipality of Rivoli, from which it appears that, on the 3rd of August, 1673, this curious relique was brought to the castle of Rivoli, where Carlo Emmanuele II., and Giovanni Baptista of Savoy-Nemours, were then resident, and was afterwards exposed to public veneration in the church of the Capuchins in Rivoli, when a *novena* was celebrated and attended by an immense concourse of people of all ranks, as well from Turin as from the various parts of Piedmont. In this act, Agostino Pedavino of Ivrea, Master of the Ceremonies, and several other officials, depose that the effigy then exposed was the same which had been venerated in the Chapel of the Rocca-Melone, and which they had several times visited there.

Since that time, the effigy of Our Lady of the Snow has probably remained where it is still kept—in a receptacle over the altar of the Virgin, in the Cathedral of St. Just, at Susa. It is annually carried on the occasion of the pilgrimage to the Rocca-Melone, and placed on the altar while mass is celebrated in the Chapel, assuredly the most elevated place of worship on the European Continent.

As has been said above, both the drawing and the mode of execution are precisely those of the Flemish sepulchral brasses of the fourteenth century; the architectural details

² See Mr. Waller's "Sepulchral Brasses."

are also identical with such as may be found on those memorials. Nothing of Italian character is to be seen either in the drawing of the figures, or in the architecture. It cannot, I think, be doubted by any one familiar with the works of the Flemish brass-engravers, that this triptych was executed by one of those artists. Why an Italian nobleman, in an age when art was already so flourishing in his own country, should have had recourse to Bruges or Ghent, seems difficult of explanation. The Flemish artists of the fourteenth century had undoubtedly gained a considerable reputation for works of the same kind, as is shown by the fine specimens of sepulchral brasses of that school which still exist in England, and in Lubeck,³ Schwerin, and other towns of the north-east of Germany; but hitherto no example of their skill has been noticed in Italy. In the manufacture of ecclesiastical decorations, the art of the craftsmen of Asti, Alessandria, Milan, or Genoa rivalled, if not excelled, that of their brethren in Flanders.

Two explanations may, however, be suggested; either, that a Fleming may have established himself in some neighbouring city, and there executed this work; or, that Rotario did not join a crusade directed against the Infidels in the East, but the enterprise which was then vigorously prosecuted by the Teutonic Knights against the pagan Prussians, and that he may have returned from his captivity through Flanders, and there caused this *ex voto* offering to be made. There is nothing unreasonable in this supposition, as it is well known, that many knights of all countries fought in the ranks of the Teutonic brethren,⁴ and the statements made as to the history of Rotario seem to rest on little more than legendary foundation.

If our gallant knight was a captive, not of the Saracens, but of the Prussians, he had abundant reason to be thankful for his escape or release, as the custom of the Prussians was to burn alive their prisoners of war, with their chargers, as an offering to their Gods.

ALEXANDER NESBITT.

³ Hermann Gallin, senator of Lubeck, who died in 1365, ordered by his will that his executors should place over his sepulchre, "unum Flamingicum auricalcium figurationibus bene factum lapidem funeralem." It does not now exist, but there are still in that city several examples of Flemish brasses.

⁴ Every reader of Chaucer will recol-

lect the knight who had shown his prowess—

"Aboven alle nations in Pruce

In Lettowe hadde he reysed and in Ruce."

In the church of Felbrigge, in Norfolk, on the brass commemorative of two of the Felbrigges and their wives, the epitaph tells us that Roger "morust en Pruse ou est son corps en terre."