

V. *A Letter addressed by CHARLES ROACH SMITH, Esq., F.S.A., to JOHN GAGE ROKEWODE, Esq., F.R.S., Director, on an ancient enamelled Ouche, in Gold.*

Read 3rd December 1840.

DEAR SIR,

I NOW proceed to submit to you some remarks on the presumed Saxon Fibula or Ouche, which I had the pleasure to exhibit last year to the Society. (Plate X.)

The interest attached to so superb an illustration of the state of the arts in one of the most obscure periods of history, will, I hope, afford sufficient grounds for having delayed the attempt to do justice to the merits and claims of a gem, which may be pronounced almost *sui generis*.

Inscriptions, which, from the language and forms of the letters or characters, serve so materially to settle dates, fail here to aid our investigations. Comparison with works analogous is our only safe guide: the means for applying this test extend only to a few specimens preserved in our own country.

I have little doubt but that in some of the continental museums and libraries, collateral or direct evidence may be found that would assist us in making a correct and satisfactory appropriation of a work so beautiful in design and construction. Yet the delay that such a research would require, would not perhaps procure so effective a remuneration as the publication of an engraving of the gem itself, with such opinions as at present we are justified in holding, thereby affording our friends abroad an opportunity of refuting or confirming our position, and showing that our aim is not to advance theory, but to elicit truth.



Ancient Enamelled Ouche in Gold.

The subject of our inquiry was discovered in the spring of last year while excavating a sewer opposite Dowgate Hill, in Thames Street, at the depth of about nine feet, in a dark-coloured artificial stratum of earth, unaccompanied by any remains that could aid in throwing light on its history.

It came immediately into my hands in the fine condition in which it now appears, the only cleansing process required being the application of a soft brush and water. The measure of the Ouche is four inches and a half in circumference. It is composed of a circular compartment, one inch and a quarter in diameter, set with variegated enamel, representing a full-faced head and bust, the outlines of which, with a crown on the head and the drapery of a mantle and tunic, are formed of threads of gold, effectively arranged so as to mark the features of the face and the folds of the drapery; this is enclosed in a border of rich gold filigree-work, set at equal distances with four pearls.

The enamel work is composed of a green and blue semi-transparent material of a vitreous character for the garments, and a white opake substance of the same nature for the face. The hair, indicated by a darker colour, is divided in two bands over the forehead. A crown, with three globes, surrounds the head, the fillets of which appear pendent on either side, with a foliated termination. The bust is arrayed with the chlamys or mantle over a tunic gracefully attached to each shoulder. Whether the base be metallic or siliceous, analysis can alone determine. It exhibits distinct characters from the material used in the ordinary enamelled productions of the 9th to the 16th centuries, which are invariably opake. It is almost transparent, possesses little hardness (as a fine steel point will scratch it), has a fractured texture, and presents the appearance of an imperfect crystallization.

In the absence of means for making an analysis of the materials, or for ascertaining the mode of the construction of this work, we must rest contented with a close superficial observation.

It would seem that a kind of box had first been prepared, and in it arranged the outlines or skeleton work of the figure, formed of thin plates of gold, and constituting cells for the reception of the vitreous substance, which appears to have been poured in when in a semi-fluid state, and

subsequently ground down to the required thickness. This is the opinion of Mr. Bridge, the eminent goldsmith. Mr. Albert Way thinks that the coloured material was introduced into the lodgements in a pulverised form, which melted on exposure to heat at a low temperature, and assumed a vitreous appearance.

The fibula,^a ouche, or brooch, is an ornament of the remotest antiquity. Originating in the very earliest periods of civilisation, as an indispensable adjunct to the dress; it has, through thousands of years, retained its place in the costume of all nations, varying from the simplest form and material to the most elaborate embellishments of the most precious gems and metal, according to the taste or luxury of the times.

Towards the decline of the Roman Empire, the passion for decorated dress gradually increased. From the fourth century, the diadems of the Emperors become more and more enriched with pearls and costly stones, the fibulæ appear embossed, and the paludamentum embroidered also with pearls and jewels. Later still, we perceive on the coins of the Byzantine princes, the diadems and robes profusely studded with these ornaments, so as almost to conceal the objects they were intended to adorn.

It is curious to trace the analogy at certain epochs, in works of art, between the Byzantine school, France and England; but Eastern fashion seems to have had but little, if any, influence on the customs and habits of the Saxons, who retained a nationality of costume as well as of character, the superior elegance and classicality of which, as exemplified in the illuminated manuscripts, appears uncorrupted by intercourse with their Eastern contemporaries.

Now, though our gem reminds us of the style of Byzantine work, also of works of art preserved in France, attributed to the 11th and 12th centuries, yet this similarity appears to extend only to general character; in details there is a marked difference.

^a It is probable that this fibula might have been used for fastening the mantle to the shoulder. Throughout the Saxon illuminated manuscripts, the fibula or brooch appears as one of the chief characteristics of nobility, generally on the shoulder, though sometimes it secures the mantle in front.

The drawing, the arrangement of the dress and the simplicity of the crown, have altogether a purer and chaster stamp than the Byzantine works exhibit; while, at the same time, in the gold filigree, there is a certain resemblance to the *entourages* of those beautifully ornamented gold Roman coins adapted for suspension round the neck. Not that I am prepared to call this Roman work from mere resemblance (for I know of no instance of pearls being used in the borders of such medallions), but coupled with the costume, this similarity might have weight in establishing the claims of our fibula to an earlier period than we may else be disposed to assign. This, I think, cannot well be allowed to be later than the ninth century, and if the evidence I am about to adduce should not, in your opinion, fix it to *that* period, I should be disposed to think it still earlier.

It will often be observed, that in these ornamental works, no decisively distinct features will for centuries be perceptible. The filigree round Roman gold coins is allied to that surrounding the jewel, and later works of a similar nature, and even to the present day filigree almost identical is produced in the East, in Africa, and at Malta. In reference to this analogy in works of different eras, may be noticed the resemblance the gem, in the Hamilton collection before alluded to, bears to that figured by Lane as worn on the forehead by the ladies of modern Egypt.

The well-known and often discussed jewel of King Alfred, deposited in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and a large convex brooch, in the case of the Hamilton gems in the British Museum, are specimens analogous to this under consideration. The three are of precisely the same character and work, though differing in details. That in the Hamilton Collection, which is the largest, being about two inches and a half in diameter, and has the filigree work of like character, set with pearls; but no portrait or image, and the coloured glass is arranged in stars of four points, while that on the uppermost compartment somewhat resembles the *croix fleurie* of later times. This is believed to have been found in Scotland, but unfortunately nothing elucidating its history is on record.

I am indebted to the courtesy and research of Mr. Albert Way, for fur-

ther comparison with analogous enamels. The most remarkable is the Golden Chalice, designated that of St. Remigius, formerly in the cathedral of Rheims and now in the King's Library at Paris, which Mr. Way thinks may be safely ascribed to the thirteenth century. It is ornamented with gems and pearls set in collars like those of our jewel, and with small plates of enamelled work of the same kind surrounded by delicate filigree. Another instance is the binding of an Evangelium, now in the Hall of Jewels in the Louvre. It is enriched with plaques of large size, formed in the mode used in our specimen.

The jewel of King Alfred, however, more closely resembles our brooch. There is the same mode of setting, and the same simplicity of costume in the two figures, though the design on our specimen is much superior. The fillets also which form the outlines of the subject are much finer. The transparency of the materials of the former is also greater, especially the green in the central compartment, which in appearance resembles glass. The filigree work of the two has a close affinity.

We are therefore justified, I think, in considering them of the same period, and if so, that period is ascertained by the Saxon inscription of

+ AELFRED MEC HEHT GEVVRCAN: "Alfred me ordered to-be-wrought."

Though I will not venture to assert that the beautiful subject of our inquiry is one of the very productions of the foreign artificers mentioned by the historian Asser, who, under the personal superintendence of Alfred, executed works in silver and gold, still it is not only not improbable, but very possible, that this may be the case, and thus would be explained the apparent mixture of Byzantine and Saxon work.

Alfred had visited Rome, his father Ethelwulf also, who resided there twelve months. On his return, this latter Prince married a daughter of Charles the Bald of France.^d To this foreign intercourse may be referred the introduction in this country of a taste for Byzantine ornament.

^d Ingram's Saxon Chronicle, p. 94. The great pomp with which Ethelwulf visited Rome is also mentioned. The love of this prince for show and ornament is also apparent by the costly work he made for the shrine of St. Aldhelm.—Will. Malmesbury, de Pontificibus, Lib. v.

Artisans brought into England from Rome or Constantinople, would, if they attempted a portrait, copy what was before them, and thus the costume of England, and not of Rome or Byzantium, would be attended to, while the general style of the work, and the embellishments, would be influenced by designs to which the artist had been accustomed and familiar.

The crown, surmounted by globes, is not unusual in illuminated MSS. I have met with no precedent for the wavy kind of fillets: the nearest resemblance is in some foliated ornaments appended to the crown in the Bible of Charles the Bald, and the Gospels written for Lothaire, both in the King's Library, at Paris. Charles was contemporary with Alfred, and it may be observed there is also a degree of similitude in the costume.^e

With regard to the object intended by the artist to be represented, a question may arise, whether it be meant for a saint or for a portrait of some royal personage? A close inspection will show that what at a first glance may seem a nimbus, is in reality a crown; but, while (for reasons above mentioned) I have ventured to assign this Ouche to the time of Alfred, and have presumed it to be the work of foreign artists, though executed in England, yet I do not feel warranted in advancing more than a conjecture, that the portrait is intended for a likeness of that Prince.

I remain, dear Sir,

your faithful servant,

CHARLES ROACH SMITH.

To JOHN GAGE ROKEWODE, Esq.
Director S.A. &c. &c.

^e See Montfaucon's *Monarchie Francaise*, vol. i. plate xxvi.