

XXVIII. *Observations on the Discovery of Part of a Sarcophagus at Reading Abbey, in Berkshire, supposed to have contained the Remains of King Henry I. in a Letter from the Rev. ROBERT NARES, B. D. F. R. S. and S. A. to HENRY ELLIS, Esq. F.R.S. Secretary.*

Read 15th February, 1816.

SIR,

IT appears from Sandford's Genealogical History, that, at the suppression of the Religious Houses, under Henry VIII, the rage of Reformation went so far as to destroy even the tombs and monuments of the founders. This he particularly specifies to have been the case with the tomb of Henry I. the Founder of Reading Abbey, whose bones, he says, "Could not enjoy repose in his grave,—but were thrown out, to make room for a stable of Horses." p. 28. Accident having lately brought to light what appears to be a part of the wreck of that very tomb, I have thought that a short account of it might be acceptable to the Society of Antiquaries.

On the 24th of November 1815, in digging for some dry earth or gravel, to assist in making a footway to our National Schools,^a there was found, not three feet below the surface, a large fragment of a stone Sarcophagus, or rather Coffin; since it had the form of the modern Coffin, not of the antique Sarcophagus. The part found consisted only of the bottom of the Coffin, and that broken; but only into two large fragments. Of the upright sides and ends nothing remained, but so much as was included within the thickness of the

^a Now built in an appropriate and neat manner, within the ruins. Thus restoring to Education and Religion, in a better form, what had been taken from them.

bottom. From this small specimen, however, it appears, that the whole had been elegantly carved; for it exhibits the bases, and the bottoms of the shafts, of a complete row of small columns, or rather half-columns, which evidently surrounded the whole Coffin. The forms of the columns have been fancifully varied, being alternately semi-circular and semi-hexagonal.

The whole length of the Sarcophagus is seven feet, by two feet six inches at the head, but gradually contracted to two feet at the smaller end. The thickness of the Stone is seven inches and a half. The columns have been fifty in number; namely, eighteen on each side; at the broad end eight, and at the narrower six. Six very strong iron rings had been let into the substance of the stone, and soldered in with lead: namely, two on each side, and one at each end, at regular distances.

It is difficult to imagine for what purpose these rings could be intended, except for that of letting down the coffin, with all its contents into a vault. In a vault however it was not found, nor could any more fragments of the coffin be discovered near it. The probability is, that all the vaults have been long ago filled up, by the fall of the ruins, and the accumulation of rubbish.

The place where the Coffin was found must have been near the centre of the Choir, in the Abbey Church, but it had probably been removed from its original situation, broken, and left upon the surface; the small quantity of earth found above it, being evidently such as had been gradually accumulated on the spot. No bones were near it.

The reasons for conjecturing that it may have been a part of the Coffin of Henry I. are founded chiefly on the curious workmanship which had been bestowed upon it; a decoration not likely to have been given to any thing less important than a Royal Coffin, when destined to be buried in a vault. Its mutilated state attests the violence of the destroyers, which stands upon historical testimony; and it might perhaps, not unfairly, be urged, that the small columns, as they evidently belong not to any style of Gothic design, were probably of

the earlier kind, which has been termed Saxon. The bases stand so close together, that the columns were probably made to support a set of small, interlaced, semi-circular arches, resting on the alternate capitals, according to an ordinary style of decoration in use at that period.

A leaden Coffin was found in the ruins, in the year 1785; which was rather hastily attempted, (by a person who had not seen it;) to be considered as belonging to the Founder; but the suggestion was victoriously refuted, almost immediately after.* Whether my conjecture may be liable or not to the same fate, I cannot pretend to say; but having stated my reasons, if they can be fairly refuted, I shall make no attempt to defend them.

The fragment is now deposited in the National School for boys, within the ruins, and may be inspected at any time, by applying to the Master.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient humble Servant,

ROBERT NARES.

St. Mary's, Reading,
Feb. 10, 1816.

* See *Gent. Mag.* Dec. 1785.