

On the reputed discovery of King Arthur's Remains at Glastonbury.

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AS it would scarcely be deemed proper for the Somersetshire Archæological Society to hold a Meeting at Glastonbury without referring to some of the most ancient and interesting historical associations connected with the place, I beg leave to lay before the Society a brief resumé of the sources and value of the information we possess in reference to the interment and reputed discovery of King Arthur's remains in the cemetery of Glastonbury Abbey.

I confess I have no sympathy with that school of historical critics who find the myth and the fable preponderating to such an extent in all early records as to wipe out from the page of historical fact almost every event and every personage in which our minds and our hearts have been most deeply interested. Notwithstanding all that has been said to the contrary, I believe King Arthur to have been a real historical personage, and not a mere myth. Even the legends and romances in which he and the Knights of his Round Table occupy

so prominent a place, are to me otherwise perfectly unintelligible and unaccountable. It is, moreover, worthy of note that the mythological fictions which have given rise to the doubts and the disbelief as to the reality of this great personage had their origin, or at least their main development, on the Continent and not in Britain. In the earliest poetical literature of the Cymri, Arthur is represented only as a great and distinguished military chief. His cotemporary, Llywarch Hên, speaks of him as such, in the battle of Llongborth.* The Welsh Triads in like manner preserve the same historical character, and more than thirty of them refer to this distinguished British king.

The fondness for the marvellous which possessed the monasteries was the origin of some of the extravagant additions which gradually accumulated around his name. Though we may, and I believe must, reject a great part of the marvellous narratives associated with King Arthur, yet that does not involve nor require the rejection of the leading facts which underlie the whole complicated structure of fiction which has been raised thereon.

As this subject opens a very wide field of historical criticism, I shall confine myself to the reputed discovery of the great monarch's remains in the cemetery of the Abbey which will be visited by us this day.

The existence of the tradition *anterior* to the reputed discovery of his remains in the reign of Henry II—that Arthur the king had been interred at Glastonbury—is clearly established by the *Chronicle of Tysilio*, and the *History of Gruffyth ab Arthur*, more commonly known as *Geoffrey of Monmouth*. Though only a vague tradition, it is sufficient to prove that it was not invented to give a

* See *Proceedings of Somersetshire Archaeological Society*, vol. IV., p. 45.

colouring of probability to the subsequent search and discovery. The *Chronicle of Tysilio* is supposed to have been compiled about A.D. 1000, and Geoffrey died several years before the year 1170, when, according to Giraldus Cambrensis, the discovery was made. It was not, however, a certain and universally admitted fact that Arthur had been buried at Glastonbury, for among the Cymri the precise locality was still regarded as a secret. Thus the ancient British Triad :

“Bedd i March, bedd i Gwythur,
Bedd i Gwgawn Gleddfrudd,
Anoeth bydd bedd i Arthur.”

“Here is the grave of March (ap Meirchion),
Here is the grave of Gwythyr (ap Greidiol),
Here is the grave of Gwgawn Gleddfrudd,
But unknown is the grave of Arthur.”

Looking at the question, a priori, there is every probability that King Arthur, after having received his mortal wound at Camlan, in Cornwall, should desire to avail himself of the medical skill which was found in those days in great monasteries, and at Glastonbury in particular, and if he should die to be interred near the shrine which was at the same time the most famous and the most sacred in his time. Arthur was not like his Saxon enemies—a pagan. Imbued, probably, with the culture which Roman civilization had introduced, he had superadded the holy influence of the Christian faith, and to him nothing could be more to be desired than to rest near the consecrated walls and within sound of the sacred service of prayer as offered up by the holy men of the Abbey of Avallon. The mode of transit which tradition describes, namely by water along the north coast of Devon and Somerset and into the lake or

æstuary which at that time, probably, ran inland on either side of Polden, was at the same time the safest and most easy for an invalid. The tradition presents itself in a very beautiful and poetical form in a MS. Latin poem in the British Museum, which bears the title of "*Vita Merlini per Galfridum Monumetensum versu Heroico ad Robertum Lincolniensem.*" (Cott. MSS. Vespasian E. iv.) About page 128 of the volume, the poet describes the favoured spot where we are now assembled as *Insula pomorum, quæ fortunata vocatur*, which is a literal translation of the ancient British name, *Ynys Avallon*;* and he further describes the skill in the healing art possessed by nine sisters who dwelt here, one of whom greatly excelled the rest, and whose fame had spread far and wide. I give the extracts from notes I made in the British Museum some years ago from the original :

"Quarumque prior est fit doctior arte medendi
Exceditque suas forma præstante sorores
Morgen ei nomen."

In *Morgen* we recognise the Morgana who forms so prominent a feature in all the romance literature—the name itself being Keltic, and signifying "beside the sea." The poet then describes the voyage from Camlan, on the Cornish coast, to "the blessed Island of Apple-groves," whither the wounded king desired to be conveyed :

"Illuc post bellum Camblani vulnere lesum
Duximus Arcturum nos conducente Barintho
Equora cui fuerant et Cæli sydera nota
Hoc rectore ratis cum principe venimus illuc
Et nos quo decuit *Morgen* suscepit honore

* For the various names by which Glastonbury has been known, and their signification, see a paper *On the Application of Philology to Archaeological Investigation*, by the writer of this paper in *Proceedings of the Society* for 1854, vol. v.

Inque suis thalamis posuit super aurea regem
 Strata, manuque sibi detexit vulnus honesta
 Inspexitque diu : tandemque redire salutem
 Posse sibi dixit, si secum tempore longo
 Esset, et ipsius vellet medicamine fungi.
 Gaudentes igitur regem commissimus illi
 Et dedimus ventis redeundo vela secundis."

Tunc Merlinus ad hæc ait : O delecti. . . *

I do not, of course, attach any *historical* value to the details as given in this poem, but I think we are fully justified in accepting the leading facts as based on very early tradition—an authority by no means to be despised.

We come now to the authorities for the reputed discovery of the remains. There can be no ground whatever of doubt, I think, that a rude coffin with a stone slab (in fact, nothing more than a block of oak hollowed out), purporting to be the coffin of King Arthur, was dug up in the reign of Henry II., and that in this flat stone there was found inserted a leaden cross, with an inscription relative to King Arthur. This we learn from the Abbey Records and from the detailed account of Giraldus Cambrensis. How far we are justified in regarding the leaden cross with the inscription as genuine, is not so clear, but of that more hereafter.

The Abbey Records are the *Parvus Liber*, and the

* "Piloted by Barinthus, skilled in the navigation of the seas and in the knowledge of all the stars of heaven, hither we brought Arthur, sore wounded in the battle of Camlan. With him as captain of our bark hither we came with our prince, and Morgen receiving us with due honour, laid the king upon her couch covered with embroidered gold. With her own hand she uncovered the wound, and examined it long. An length she declared that health might return, if his stay with her be prolonged, and if he were willing to submit to her healing art. With joy we therefore committed the king to her care, and spread our sails to favouring breezes on our return."

Magna Tabula Glastoniensis. These, according to Usher's *Primordia*, give substantially the same account of the exploration and discovery which is found in the works of Giraldus Cambrensis, namely his *Liber Distinctionum* and his *Institutio Principis*. In the main facts all these are agreed, but the testimony of Giraldus Cambrensis is most deserving of attention, because he visited Glastonbury about fourteen years after the event, and professes to give the account of the occurrence which he had received from the lips of the then Abbot, who had also been an eye witness of the search and the discovery. The date of this visit was about A.D. 1184, the coffin having been dug up in A.D. 1170; but the accounts do not seem to have been written by Giraldus till between thirty and forty years after the date of his visit, and at an interval of about ten years, which accounts for some slight discrepancies that appear in his narratives.

The account which gives the fullest details occurs in the *Liber Distinctionum* of Giraldus, beginning with the 8th chapter. He states that, "In their own times while the 2nd Henry reigned, the long celebrated tomb of Arthur the British king was dug up in the consecrated cemetery of St. Dunstan at Glastonbury, between two lofty obelisks on which were inscriptions to the memory of Arthur, and which had been erected with great labour, the search being undertaken by the command of the fore-said king, and under the supervision of Henry the Abbot, who was afterwards translated to the bishoprick of Winchester. The body had become reduced to dust and bones." The writer then states that "after the battle of Kemelen in Cornwall, Arthur, being mortally wounded, was borne to the island of Avallonia, now called Glastonia, by a noble matron named Morganis, his relative, at whose instance he was

afterwards buried in the consecrated cemetery of the Abbey. That this was the origin of the belief very generally entertained that Arthur was not dead, but had been carried into fairy-land by Morganis, to return again in strength and power to resume the Government of Britain."

Giraldus then specially remarks, "that though the Abbot possessed some clue to the resting place of the British king from ancient writings and chronicles, as well as some from the inscriptions on the obelisks, yet he derived most knowledge from the representations of the king himself, who had often reported to him that he had understood from the chronicles and historical bards of the Britons, that King Arthur had been buried between the two obelisks, which had been afterwards erected in the cemetery, but that, lest the Saxons and his enemies should disturb his remains, the body was buried very deep in the ground. Accordingly, on digging, a broad flat stone was found about seven feet under ground, the sarcophagus being nine feet below that, and a leaden cross discovered, inserted not on the upper but on the lower surface of the stone slab, bearing the following inscription :

HIC JACET SEPULTUS INCLITUS REX ARTHURUS IN
INSULA AVALONIA CUM WENNEVEREIA UXORE SUA
SECUNDA.

"And this cross," continues Giraldus, "after it had been taken from the stone, we ourselves saw, being shown to us by the foresaid Abbot Henry, and these words we read. Now, as the cross was inserted in the lower surface of the stone, so the side of the cross on which the inscription was placed was turned towards the stone, in order to be the better hidden. . . . Thus were found the remains of Arthur: not in a marble tomb, as became a distinguished king, not in one of stone nor Parian, but

even in a wooden sepulchre—an oak trunk, hollowed out for the purpose; and this, moreover, sunk sixteen feet or more underground, a mode of interment, for so great a prince, indicating haste rather than honour, according to the exigencies of those troubled times.”*

The value of this testimony to the principal facts does not seem to me to be at all vitiated by the few errors and discrepancies which manifestly present themselves in the account. Thus the inscriptions on the two obelisks are said to be in “memory of Arthur,” though all the most authentic records represent them as of purely Saxon origin. Again, the inscription on the leaden cross, as given in the *Liber Distinctionum*, contains the words CUM WENNEVEREIA UXORE SUA SECUNDA, which do not occur in the engraving of the cross as given by Camden. And lastly, Giraldus

* The original text of the passage is as follows:—Notandum hic etiam quod licet abbas prænominatus aliquam habuerit ad corpus Arthuri quærendum ex scriptis antiquis et chronicis notitiam, nonnullam quoque ex literis pyramidum inscriptis quamquam antiquitatis et fere omnino vetustate deletis, maximam tamen habuit per dictum regem Henricum ad hæc evidentiam. Dixerat enim ei pluries sicut ex gestis Britonum et eorum cantoribus historicis rex audierat quod inter pyramides quæ postmodum erectæ fuerant in sacro cemeterio sepultus fuit rex Arthurus valde profunde propter metum Saxonum quos ipse sæpe expugnaverat. Propter eundem etiam metum in lapidem quodam lato tanquam ad sepulchrum a fodientibus invento quasi pedibus septem sub terra, quum tamen sepulchrum Arthuri novem pedibus inferius inventum fuerit reperta fuerit crux plumbea non superiori sed potius inferiori parte lapidis inserta literas has inscriptas habens HIC JACET SEPULTUS INCLITUS REX ARTHURUS IN INSULA AYALLONIA CUM WENNEVEREIA UXORE SUA SECUNDA. Crucem autem hanc extractam a lapide dicto abbate Henrico ostendente perspeximus et literas has perlegimus. Sicut autem crux inferius lapidi inserta fuerit sic et crucis ejusdem pars literata ut occultior esset versus lapidem versa fuit. Sic Arthuri corpus inventum fuit: non in sepulchro marmoreo ut regem decebat eximium, non in saxeo aut Pariis lapidibus exsecto, sed potius in ligneo ex quercu ad hoc cavato, et sexdecim pedibus aut pluribus in terra profundo propter festinam potius quam festivam tanti principis humationem, tempore nimirum turbationis urgentis id exigente.

Liber Distinctionum, Giraldi Cambrensis.

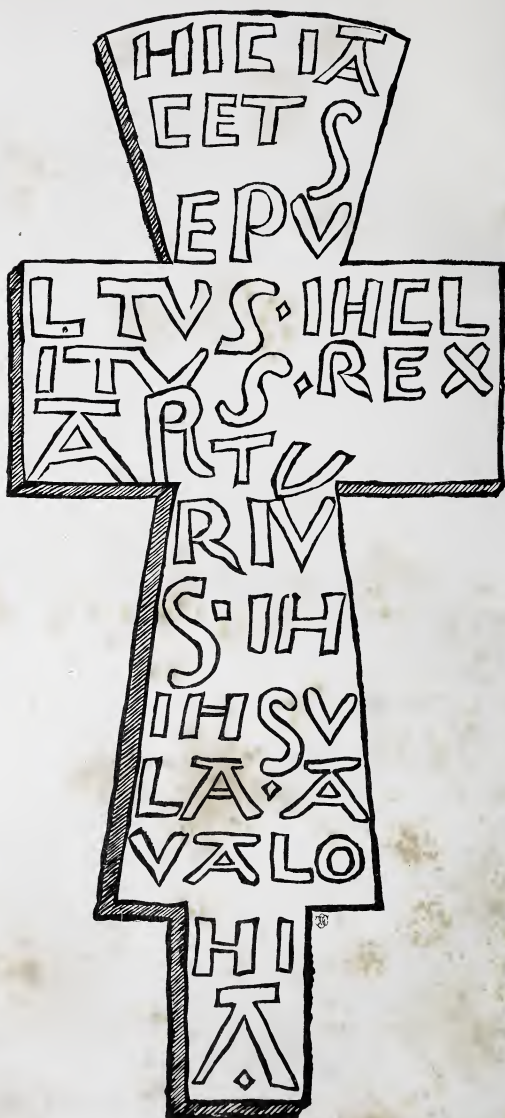
evidently confounds Henry de Swansey, who was the Abbot at the time of his visit, with his predecessor Henry de Blois, in whose time the discovery was made. These discrepancies are not to be wondered at, when we remember that the account was probably written at an interval of nearly forty years after the visit Giraldus paid to Glastonbury.

Henry de Blois, who was also Bishop of Winchester, died, according to Dugdale, in the year 1171, having had the pastoral charge of the Church for forty-five years, and retaining the government of the Monastery after he had been promoted to the Bishoprick. This helps us to determine the date of the reputed discovery. In addition to this, it is represented in the *Antiquitates Glastonienses* that the search was made soon after the return of Henry II. from Wales, and it does not appear that he revisited Wales after the year 1169. We find also that in 1170 Henry was doing all he could to consolidate his dynasty, his son Prince Henry having been crowned at York, in June of the same year, in order to be associated with his father in the royalty. From all this we are led to consider A.D. 1170 as the date of the exhumation.

Such is the testimony of Giraldus, who wrote, as I have before intimated, about A.D. 1210, concerning what he saw at Glastonbury forty years before. The remains then discovered were evidently believed to have been those of the ancient British king, and they were treated accordingly as sacred relics. Dugdale states that they were afterwards removed into the Presbytery of the Church and re-interred with the following inscription by Abbot Henry de Swansey :

“Hic jacet Arthurus, flos regum, gloria regni

Quam mores, probitas commendant laude perenni.”



THE LEADEN CROSS FOUND AT GLASTONBURY, Temp. Hen. ii.

From Holland's Edition of Camden, MDCX

The next authority is Leland, who, in the *Collectanea* (v. p. 55), states on the authority of a Monk of Glastonbury, that Edward I. with his queen visited the Abbey in 1276, and removed the shrine from the place where it was first deposited, placing it before the high altar. The leaden cross had meanwhile been deposited in the Treasury of the Abbey, and in the reign of Henry VIII it was seen by Leland, and treated with marked reverence and enthusiasm so characteristic of the old antiquary. In speaking of it in his *Assertio Arthuri*, he says, "Quam ego curiosissimis contemplatus cum oculis et sollicitis contraxi articulis, motus et antiquitate rei et dignitate."

Still later we have the authority of Camden in his *Britannia*, who gives a sketch of the "broad cross of lead" with the inscription, as he says, "drawn out of the first copy in the Abbey of Glascon." A fac-simile of this woodcut is given in the present volume, taken from the princeps edition, by Dr. Philemon Holland, MDCX., and which may be regarded as the best authority extant. The inscription is as follows :

HIC JACET SEPULTVS INCLITVS REX
ARTVRIVS IN INSVLA AVALONIA.

What became of the original after the dissolution of the monastery is not known. There is no clue to its subsequent history, that I know of, if it may not be found among some of the treasures of the Monks of Glastonbury, which were removed to Naworth Castle, the ancient seat of the Howards, and still the property of that noble and distinguished family. Before closing the notice of Camden's testimony it is necessary to observe that on the authority of William of Malmesbury and of Giraldus, he states that "the sepulchre wherein the bones of that famous Arthur were bestowed, was of oake made hollow."

We now come to the question—was the leaden cross with its inscription a forgery, and the search and reputed discovery a pretence?

There were very powerful reasons of state which would make Henry the Second at this time especially anxious to be able to bring forward so manifest a proof of King Arthur's death and burial, to convince the Welsh of the vanity of their national expectation of his re-appearance to resume the sway of the British tribes. Henry had completed the subjugation of North Wales, but the people of the South still held out, influenced mainly, among other reasons, by the deeply and universally cherished hope and conviction that Arthur was not dead, but would soon come to restore the kingdom of the Kymri. Henry de Blois, the Abbot of Glastonbury at this time, was first cousin to the king, being the brother of Stephen. Could there have been a collusion between him and his cousin, and the whole pretended discovery have been a delusion? That certainly is possible. But is it probable? The Abbot could not well have carried out the scheme without the knowledge and concurrence of the whole community. Would it be deemed safe to confide so important a state secret to so many witnesses who could not be under the control of the court?

I do not attach much importance to the fact of Henry de Blois' near relationship to Stephen, which would make it unlikely he should further the interests of his brother's rival and successor; for during his own brother's life we find that the Abbot sided with the supporters of Matilda on the other side on several occasions. It must be remembered, however, that the Abbot of Glastonbury was not so dependent upon the king that he could be compelled against his will in such a matter. The mitred Abbots of

Glastonbury, and Henry in particular from his noble birth and lordly position, were not likely to be made the tools of any monarch. Henry de Blois at this very time was Abbot of Glastonbury, Bishop of Winchester, and held the office of the Pope's Legate throughout England. He was drawing so near to the close of his earthly pilgrimage, and was in the enjoyment of so many great and distinguished honours, that no motive can be conceived sufficient to induce him to take part in or connive at so great and palpable a fraud.

I admit the difficulty arising from the gigantic and superhuman proportions of the bones which were exhibited by the monks as the remains of King Arthur. Thus Giraldus himself, in speaking of the bones he saw exhibited, says: "His leg bone being placed along side the leg of a very tall man reached three fingers' breadth above the knee, as the Abbot shewed us. His skull was also very large and thick, being a hand's breadth wide between the eyes and the eye-brows." The proportions even of the bones exhibited are no doubt greatly exaggerated in this account, and it does not at all follow after all that they were the bones found in the sarcophagus. The lapse of time which had passed from the interment to the discovery would imply the almost complete decomposition of the bones, and there is no improbability in the surmise that the bones afterwards exhibited were not the bones found, but some others selected purposely, because of their size, to increase the wonder and enhance the value of the relics. Our rejection of the purely legendary and impossible does not involve our rejection of the record, and our acceptance of the leading features of the event does not commit us to the exaggerations of that wonder-loving age.

There are difficulties also arising from the inscription on

the leaden cross. To say the least, the addition of the words IN INSULA AVALONIA, is suspicious. The adverb *hic* (here), would be sufficient to determine the locality without the addition of the very name of the place. It is an addition, I admit, very unlikely to be made under the circumstances. It would be interesting to know if similar forms ever occur in sepulchral inscriptions. I do not know of another instance myself. After all, it is quite within the range of possibility. In other respects, the form of the letters, which are of the debased Romano-British type, and the character of the inscription, appear to harmonize with its alleged antiquity. The description given of the sarcophagus itself—namely, a solid oak, hollowed out—adds very much to the evidence in favour of its genuineness. It is well known that this was not the mode of sepulture in vogue at the time the exhumation took place, and that it was occasionally, at least, adopted in the very early ages of the Christian æra. It is known also that the cross, the hallowed symbol of the Christian's faith and hope, was used in this way at a very early period; and there is no reason to doubt its having been employed to mark the grave of the great Christian king, and nephew of a man so distinguished in the Church as St. David, Bishop of Menevia.

Upon the whole, then, I am led by these considerations to the conclusion that it is more than probable that King Arthur had found a resting place, after his mortal wound at Camalet, in the precincts of the Abbey of Glastonbury; and that the interesting traditions connected with these beautiful ruins are founded upon fact.

At the close of this paper a discussion ensued in which Messrs. Warre, Bouverie, Freeman, Parker, Jones, and the

President took part. The Rev. F. Warre maintained that there were the strongest reasons to believe the tradition to be founded on fact. Mr. Freeman sifted the historical evidence, and argued strongly against the probability. Mr. Parker, on the other hand, observed that the custom of burying in a coffin formed of a hollow oak-tree agreed with that of the time at which King Arthur is said to have been buried here, and mentioned the skeleton found in a similar coffin near Scarborough, and now preserved in the Museum there, the bones of which are dyed black by the action of the gall of the oak in the moist clay in which it was buried, and hence is popularly called the Black Prince. He also observed that the thin leaden plate of a cruciform shape, with the rude inscription upon it, agrees exactly with many similar leaden plates found by the Abbé Cochet in early graves in the neighbourhood of Dieppe, in Normandy, several of which have been engraved in the "*Archæologia*." These graves are assigned by that learned antiquary to the Merovingian period, and this point has not been doubted by any of those who have examined the question.
