

Notice of a Seal formed of Bone, discovered in the Abbey Church, St. Albans, and now in the possession of the Rev. Dr. Nicholson, Rector of St. Albans. By ALBERT WAY, Esq.

THE remarkable seal, of which a representation accompanies these observations, was found in the year 1849, in the Abbey Church at St. Albans. The discovery occurred in removing the pavement of the chapel of St. Alban, behind the high altar; immediately beneath this pavement, formed of blocks of hard stone, almost cubical, the seal was found, a few feet north of the site once occupied by the shrine. It is highly deserving of attention on account of its early date and the material of which it is formed, rarely used in the fabrication of matrices of medieval seals. It supplies also a very curious example of the military equipment of a period, which has left few authorities except the designs in illuminated MSS., and of which we have scarcely any vestiges amongst productions of the sculptor's art.

This singular relic is of very rude execution, and the design is ungraceful; but it presents that truthfulness in the representation of peculiar details, with a close conformity to conventional usage in design at the period, which entitle it to be regarded by the antiquary as an interesting addition to the collection of ancient seals, illustrative of costume.

The date to which it may be assigned seems to have been fixed on sufficient authority as the earlier part of the twelfth century. Amongst the examples which may be cited for comparison, none appear to be more characteristic of their age than the seal of Alexander I., King of Scotland, who succeeded to the throne in 1107, and died in 1123, and that of Milo de Gloucester, created Earl of Hereford in 1140. The date of the last, a silver matrix found some years since at Ludgershall, in Wiltshire, may probably be rather earlier than the period when Milo was raised to the Earldom by King Stephen. Several other seals of the same period might be mentioned, but this example has been selected as bearing a very close resemblance to that found at St. Albans. A representation of it is given in the *Archæologia*, vol. xiv., plate 47. The chief variation in design consists in the gesture of the mounted warrior: Milo appears carrying a lance, with the three tailed pennon; the lower extremity of the lance resting apparently in less hostile bearing upon his foot; whilst the figure upon the seal under consideration presents the broad-bladed sword upraised, with a menacing attitude. In other respects the details of costume, and even of general design, are very similar, some allowance



being made for the material, upon which the engraver's skill was bestowed, silver being that best suited to elaborate perfection in execution, whilst bone or ivory was much less adapted for the purpose required. In both figures may be noticed the conical head-piece, with its apex slightly turned forward,* and furnished with the nasal. The body armour is seen, as yet not covered by any armorial surcoat: the nature of the defence being of the kind to which the late Sir Samuel Meyrick gave the distinctive name of "trellised." The mode of representing the construction of this armour is by lines crossing each other diagonally, forming a fretty or latticed work, which may, possibly, have been intended to denote the cross-stitching of gamboused or quilted defences. It must, however, be remarked, that this has been regarded as only one of numerous modes conventionally used by artists of medieval times, to elude the almost insurmountable difficulty of representing the interlaced rings of mail, especially upon objects of so small a dimension as a seal. Milo, as well as the warrior on the relic before us, bears on the left arm his kite-shaped shield, rounded at the top, and supported by two straps, through one of which (not here seen) the arm passed, whilst the hand tightly grasped both the second uppermost strap and the bridle-reins. The extremities of these last may be perceived, projecting slightly above the margin of the shield towards the nasal, and terminating in small tassels or knots, more distinctly shown in other examples. In the body armour, whether it be hauberk or gambouison, a peculiarity appears, namely that it is of very unusual length, reaching below the knee; whereas, on the seal of Alexander I., King of Scots, and other examples, it falls only to the bend of the leg. The accuracy of this curious detail in the St. Albans' seal is confirmed by comparison with that of Milo, whose armour reaches in like manner almost to mid-calf, appearing more like the termination of a garment in the form of wide *chausses*, or trousers, than the skirt of a coat of defence. It may deserve consideration that armour so fashioned, whether of mail or quilted work, consisting of a garment fitting the body and arms like a shirt, but formed below the hips with wide coverings for the legs, like loose trousers, would be far more convenient for the mounted warrior than a long skirt, and the protection more effectual. I am not aware of any evidence of the use in England of such defensive garment in the twelfth century; but, considering the oriental origin of mailed armour, the inquiry may claim attention, whether any fashion of the description referred to can be traced in the armour of mail used in the countries of the East.

* See this form of head-piece well shown on the seals of Godfrey I. (used in 1106) and Godfrey II. (1143) Dukes of Lorraine. Butkens, *Trophées de Brabant*, Supp. vol. i. Preuves, pp. 31, 38, 40.

The strange, and almost grotesque, mode in which the leg and foot (with the straight-necked goad-spur) are represented on both these seals, is a point of resemblance not undeserving of attention, as indicating apparently that the leg had, at that period, no defensive armour, but was clothed only in some thin close-fitting kind of stocking, or *chausses*. This is distinctly shown in a drawing of the close of the eleventh century, in a MS. preserved in the Public Library at Rouen, copied by Langlois in his treatise "sur la Calligraphie," and well deserving in many respects of careful comparison with the curious figures upon the seals under consideration.

The *poitrail*, or breast band of the horse, with its pendant ornaments like a fringe, appears on both seals, as also on that of Alexander I., and other examples. The high *arçon* of the saddle is distinctly marked behind the rider; the customary projection of the cantle in front is not seen in the figure on the St. Albans' seal, a portion of the centre of the seal being lost; and, when found, the matrix presented a large perforation in the middle, in which doubtless a handle of bone had been fixed. The defect thus caused has been supplied in the wood-cut.

It is curious to remark the conformity of design, rude as it may be, shown on a comparison of the St. Alban's seal with that of Milo of Gloucester, in regard to the movement of the horse. One might almost entertain the notion that they had been portrayed by the same hand.

The form of this curious seal is remarkable. It is obvious that the intention of the designer was to give to his work the pointed-oval form, which may be traced both on the obverse and reverse. The difficulty of adapting the central subject to such a shape has caused the legs of the charger to encroach upon the elliptic outline, which may, however, be distinctly traced in the arrangement of the legend; and on the reverse of the seal, the peculiar form in question is marked by lines engraved upon the bone. This shape was adopted, as it has been supposed, almost exclusively for the seals of religious foundations, of ecclesiastics, or of females. The rule was certainly not invariable, at least on the Continent, but I am not aware that any example of this form of seal, used by a knight or layman, has hitherto been noticed in England. The curious seal of Woldemar, Margrave of Brandenburg, in the fourteenth century, is of the pointed-oval form, which in that instance is well suited to the design, the figure being erect, on foot, not mounted as more usually seen on such seals.* Other foreign examples might be cited; and, as apparently

* Heineccius, de Sigillis, tab. xvii., no. 6.

some conventional usage was observed in this country, in regard to this particular form, the peculiarity presented by the St. Albans' seal may merit further investigation.

Seals of bone, the horn of the walrus, or of ivory, are of rare occurrence. It is remarkable, that the ancient seal of St. Albans Abbey, preserved in the British Museum, is of the like unusual material. Another highly curious example, is the seal of Lundores Abbey, in Fifeshire, founded in 1178, by David, Earl of Huntingdon, brother to William, King of Scotland. It may be regarded as coeval with the foundation, and is a relic of singular interest.* It is described as formed "of the bone of some animal." In the Ashmolean Museum, at Oxford, a small matrix, formed of ivory, is preserved, being the seal of the Archdeaconry of Merioneth. Its date may be as late as the sixteenth century.

I regret that all research into ancient evidences has hitherto proved fruitless, in the endeavour to ascertain any particulars relative to the history of the warlike personage so quaintly portrayed upon this seal, or to trace any connexion which he may have had with St. Albans. The precise reading of the name in the legend has even appeared questionable. I have been inclined to decipher it thus: + SIGILLVM . RICARDI . DE VIERLI. The two last letters are much damaged, and with difficulty to be discerned. It is due to a gentleman who communicated to the St. Albans Society an interesting memoir on medieval seals, and especially on this remarkable example, to state that he has entertained a different opinion. I allude to the discourse read by Mr. W. L. Donaldson, at the fifth anniversary, held at St. Albans, June 17, 1850; and by his courteous permission I subjoin the following statement of his interpretation of the legend:—

"The inscription is,—SIGILLVM RICARDI DE VIER . . , and then occurs a defacement which creates a doubt; but I think there were two more letters. If the defaced part was only occupied by the letter s, we have the name VIERS, and we find on the roll of the warriors who came over with the Conqueror, the name of Avenil de Viers. The owner of the seal might have been the son or other relative of that person. But I think the indication is of *two* more letters, and that the name might have been VIERNY; and I find that name also on the roll. I was at first inclined to think that the name was VIERIS, and that the knight was one of the family, afterwards renowned in this country as the De Veres, Earls of Oxford. In a MS. in the British Museum, which formerly belonged to St. Alban's Abbey, containing a list of benefactors, occur the names

* It is represented in the *Archæologia*, vol. xiii. pl. 13, p. 196.

of "Alfonsus de Veer, miles, et Domina Johanna, uxor ejus, progenitores Comit̄s Oxonie:" it might be inferred that the family had some connexion with the Abbey, and that Ricardus might have been buried there, and his seal deposited with him. If the name were spelt *Veris*, I should have no difficulty, but I do not find the name written with an I, although it occurs spelt in various ways, as VER, VEER, and VERE. I find that in the Norman Rolls, preserved in the Tower, there is a document of the second year of King John, addressed to the inhabitants of *Vieris*, granting to Guido, son of the *Vicecomes* Thoarcus, *Vieras* with its appurtenances; and they were to render to him such services as were before rendered to the Crown."

I must leave this question to the decision of the antiquaries of Verulam, and at the same time state my own persuasion, that the true reading of the name is VIERLI. I anticipate that further inquiry may show the connexion of the person who appears upon this seal with the Robert de Virley, recorded in Domesday Book, as holding lands both in Norfolk and Suffolk; or with Roger De Virley, who held lands in Berkshire and Norfolk, in the reign of John. The name occurs also in connexion with Yorkshire and other parts of England, in early times. Whether the locality, from which the surname of *De Vierli* originated, was a place so called in the Honor of Lithaire in Normandy, I am unable to determine. The name may, very probably, have been connected with the parish of Virley, in Essex, to the south of Colchester.

