

I.

NOTICE OF THE AMBER SEAL (MATRIX) OF A CANON OF INCHAF-
FRAY, FOUND NEAR ST JOHN'S CHURCH, PERTH. By SIR J. NOEL
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The small amber matrix which I have now to bring under your notice was turned up some two years ago during excavations in the immediate vicinity of St John's Church, Skinnergate, Perth. It was found about fifteen feet below the surface, along with a quantity of human bones. But there was no indication of any kind of coffin; nor was anything else

¹ The cup of amber found at Hove, near Brighton, figured Arch. Journal, vol. xiii. p. 188; the vessel of bituminous shale discovered by the Rev. R. Kirwan in a barrow, near Honiton, as described, Transactions of the Devonshire Association, vol. ii. p. 625; the Kimmeridge coal-money, and several other relics of the like material, present remarkable evidence of the early use of the lathe in Britain.

of interest discovered in the course of the operations. A pawnbroker of the Fair City, who was present, bought it of the finder for sixpence, and immediately thereafter disposed of it, for the same sum, to the gentleman whose property it now is. Subsequently its edges got a good deal chipped and blunted by contact with old coins and other metallic rubbish amongst which it was kept. These slight facts are all in the way of history that I have been able to obtain regarding this seal; but they are sufficient to remove any doubts of its genuineness on the part of persons who may not have an opportunity of examining the thing itself.

Whether the beautiful substance in which this matrix is cut was frequently used for such purposes, I am not learned enough to say; but considering the wide use of amber in the manufacture of personal ornaments by the northern races, it seems not improbable that it was. The present is the only specimen I have met with, however. Nor, as Mr Henry Laing informs me, has he ever seen or heard of another in the course of his inquiries into the history of seals and seal-cutting. Probably some member who has made these matters a special study may be able to state whether other specimens are known to exist, or whether there are any allusions to such seals in old documents.

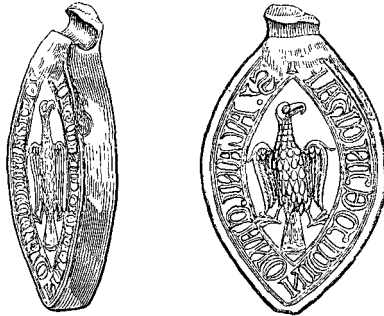
The present specimen is of the symbolical form generally adopted for monastic seals,—but not for these only, as is popularly believed; several seals of Laymen,¹ and all the seals of Ladies² figured in Mr Henry

¹ *Seals of Laymen of this form*:—Seal of Thor Longus, *circa* 1094 (Laing's Sup. Cat., No. 663). Seal of Philip de Petcox, *circa* 1214 (Laing's Cat., pl. vii. fig. 4). Counter-Seal (?) of Roger Avenel, *circa* 1190 (Ibid. pl. v. fig. 3).

² *Female Seals of this form*:—Seal of Aviccia Morvile, *circa* 1176 (Laing's Cat. pl. v. fig. 7). Seal of Margaret de Vesci, *circa* 1220 (Ibid. pl. vi. fig. 5). Seal of Petronella, daughter of Adam Harang de Meinichoch, *circa* 1170 (Ibid. pl. vii. fig. 6). Seal of Marjorie, Countess of Carrick, *circa* 1285 (Ibid. No. 141). Seal of Muriel, daughter of Convel of Stratherne, *circa* 1284 (Ibid. No. 764). Seal of Queen Matilda, daughter of Malcolm III., and Queen of Henry I., *circa* 1100 (Laing's Sup. Cat. pl. i. fig. 5). Seal of Margaret, sister of William the Lion, and wife of Conan, Duke of Brittany, died 1171 (Ibid. No. 134). Seal of Margaret Bruce, Lady of Kendal, third daughter and co-heiress of Peter de Bruce, Lord of Skelton, *circa* 1280 (Ibid. No. 142). Seal of Isabella, daughter of Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, sister of King Robert the Bruce (Ibid. No. 145). Seal of Lady Eleanor Lazouche, *circa* 1296 (No. 609). Seal of Devorgilla Balliol, daughter of Alan, Lord of Galloway, and wife of John Balliol (Ibid. No. 71).

Laing's interesting Catalogue—with the single exception of the seal of Mariota Keith, dating about 1390 (Laing's Suppl. Catal. pl. vii. fig. 4)—being of this form.

The Abbey of Inchaffray was dedicated to God, the Virgin Mary, and St John the Evangelist; and this seal, like the well-known circular great seal of the establishment, bears in the field an eagle, the symbol of St John. This eagle is what the heralds call *displayed*, however, and has no nimbus; in these respects differing from the eagle in the great seal. In another, and perhaps a more important point historically, the two seals also differ. In the great seal, and in the seal of one of the abbots of this monastery preserved in the Chapter House, Westminster (the date of



Amber Matrix of Seal (full size) of a Canon of Inchaffray.
Found near St John's Church, Perth.

which I have been unable to ascertain, though I do not think it can be earlier than the fourteenth century), the Latin form of the name—"Insula Missarum," is adopted; whereas, in the seal before us, the Gaelic form—"Inchaffray" is used. I am uncertain how far the date of the great seal has been determined; but from this circumstance, as well as from certain scarcely definable differences in the art of the two seals, I am inclined to think the amber seal the earlier. The inference that the use of the Latin form of the name points to a date posterior to the use of the Gaelic form,

is supported by the fact that, in all the charters of the founder, Gilbert, Earl of Stratherne, and others of that early date—with but few exceptions,—five, I think, in all—it is called *Inchaffray*; but in the charters of Earl Gilbert's successor, Robert, who died prior to 1244, and all subsequent documents, it is invariably called by its Latin name. In two charters¹ dated 1238, which would seem to be the transition period, both names are given:—"Monasterio de Inchaffryn quod Insula Missarum dicitur."

The legend of the seal is, "✠ S' ALANI CANONICI DE INCHAF.," and the lettering is undoubtedly that of the thirteenth century. No list of the canons of Inchaffray has been preserved, and the list of abbots is imperfect. But from 1258 to 1271 there was an Abbot Alan, whose name appears in various charters.² And from the coincidence of the name, and the fact that the seal must be assigned to this date, I am disposed to believe that in it we have the private seal of that shadowy personage, prior to his elevation to the abbacy of the Isle of Masses. The brother destined to fill so elevated an office as that of abbot must have been a person of more than ordinary importance in the community; and this may account for his possession of a seal. For the use of seals by canons would seem to have been somewhat rare: only two other instances having come under my observation,—one, that of John de Gamery, Canon of Caithness, *c.* 1360, figured in Laing's catalogue; the other, that of Brother John Morel, Canon of Jedburgh, *c.* 1292, figured in the recently published *Monasticon of Scotland*. An additional interest, therefore, attaches to this seal as another illustration of the practice. There is, however, in the Museum of this Society the brass seal of a simple *monk* of Arbroath—Matthew by name (dating, I should think, about the middle of the fourteenth century), which may be

¹ *Liber Insula Missarum*, Reg. pp. 71, 78.

² He gives a charter under the designation of Abbot of Insula Missarum, dated 1266, *Liber. Ins. Miss., Reg.* p. 47. He witnesses two charters of Malis, fifth Earl of Stratherne, who died in 1270, *Ibid. Appen. to Preface*, p. xxxiii., and *Reg.* p. 53. Also a Confirmation Charter, dated 1271, *Ibid. Reg.* p. 54. I also find amongst a number of unprinted documents preserved in the Archives of Mag. Col. Oxford—copies of which Professor Cosmo Innes, with his usual obliging courtesy, has sent me—a Confirmation Charter by Alexander III., of a lease of Gasknes, granted by one of the De Quencys, Earls of Wynton, which Alan signs as Abbot of Insula Missarum.

held as proof that the use of seals was not unknown even among the humbler members of monastic communities. And this we can understand: for many of these were the sons of high families, who brought considerable possessions to their respective establishments; over which possessions they may have continued to exercise some rights of administration requiring the use of a seal, even when—as in the case of these Canons Regular of St Augustine—the property thus brought to the Monastery was devoted to the common sustenance of the brethren.

The powerful family of Stratherne were the founders and liberal benefactors of the Abbey of Inchaffray; and it is not impossible that, in accordance with the practice of the Alban as of the Irish Church, Alan, the third Abbot, may have been of “founder’s kin.” That the first head of the establishment in 1200, called Malis—a name of frequent occurrence in the Stratherne pedigree—was of the same stock, is, I should think, more than probable. But however this may be, between this seal of Alan the Canon and that of Muriel, daughter of Convel of Stratherne, appended to a Charter, *c.* 1284 (No. 764 in Laing’s Catalogue), there is a resemblance in shape, size, lettering, and artistic treatment of the bird which forms the principal object in both, so strong as to have suggested to Mr Laing—what had previously occurred to my own less experienced eye—that they may have been the work of the same hand,—as undoubtedly they are the work of the same period. Upon the whole, the probabilities would seem to be in favour of the identity of the Canon Alan, of whose existence this tiny bit of amber is the only known record; and the Abbot Alan, who certainly has bequeathed to posterity his name, but nothing more.

It will be observed that at its upper point the matrix has been extended into a sort of flattened knob, pierced transversely for the insertion of a ring or cord, no doubt with the intention of its being worn on the person of the owner. This portion, which was entire when the seal was found, has since, unfortunately, been broken. But enough remains to remove all uncertainty as to its purpose. That certain of these smaller seals—what are called counter-seals, especially—were designed to be thus worn is clearly indicated in several of the engravings from impressions, given in Laing’s interesting work, and in Anderson’s *Diplomata*. Above a dozen of these I have noted as bearing the more or less distinct indentation of

the loop by which the seals were suspended,¹ but this list I need not now take up your time by reading. In the impression of the counter-seal of Eustace de Vesci, *c.* 1160, given in Mr Laing's Catalogue, this indentation is so well defined as to have suggested to that adept, that the matrix had "been worn as a locket as well as used as a seal." But the impressions of the counter-seal of Bricius, Bishop of Moray, *c.* 1208, and that of Richard, Bishop of St Andrews, *c.* 1163, show yet more distinctly the loop, which in the latter instance bears unequivocal traces of ornamentation. The wearing of these privy seals upon the person was obviously necessary as a check upon fraud, in a state of society in which it was probably as much beneath the dignity as it was generally beyond the capacity of great barons and doughty paladins to do more in the way of "shaveling's" work than dash down their *cross*, as chief party or witness to a charter. The great seal of the Baron or high Ecclesiastic was unavoidably left in the keeping of his Chancellor; his counter-seal, which was used as his sign manual—a practice still general in the East—was carried upon his own person, suspended—as the cases I have cited would seem to prove—by cord or chain, either from his belt, or, as is more probable, from his neck. But, no doubt, many of the smaller of these signets were worn, as in classical times, on the finger; and I dare say not a few were held to possess talismanic virtues.

The necessity of wearing these counter-seals on the person must have

¹ *Pendent Seals*.—Seal of Sir Thomas de Aunoy, *circa* 1237 (Laing's Cat. pl. vii. fig. 9). Counter-seal of Richard, Bishop of St Andrews (set with antique gems, ornamental loop), 1163-77 (Ibid. pl. xiv.). Counter-seal of Eustace de Vesci (set with antique gem), *circa* 1160 (Ibid. p. 138, and pl. vi. fig. 4). Seal of Sir Patrick de Ridel, *circa* 1170 (Ibid. pl. 5, fig. 10). Seal of Peter de Curri, *circa* 1179 (Ibid. pl. iv. fig. 1). Seal of Roger Burnard, *circa* 1165 (Ibid. pl. iv. fig. 2). Seal of Philip de Petcox, *circa* 1214 (Ibid. pl. vii. fig. 4). Counter-seal of Patrick, Earl of Dunbar, son of Earl Gospatrick, "set with an antique gem, fine Greek or Roman work," Laing, *circa* 1150 (Laing's Supplemental Cat., No. 308). Counter-seal of Earl Gospatrick the Younger (Diplomata Scot. pl. lxxi.). Seal of Robert, Bishop of St Andrews, Cons. 1126 or 28 (Ibid. pl. c.). Seal of Richard, Bishop of St Andrews, elected 1163 (counter-seal, an antique gem, charioteer driving a biga—Melr. Ch.), (Ibid. pl. c.). Counter-seal of Bricius, Bishop of Moray (antique gem), 1203-1222 (Laing's Cat., pl. xviii. fig. 1). Counter-seal of Walter, Bishop of Glasgow (chaplain to William the Lion), 1207-1232 (Ibid. pl. xv. fig. 4). Seal of Walter Fitzalan (gem), *circa* 1130 (Ibid. pl. iii. fig. 1).

led, in the natural course of things, to their becoming objects of decoration and display. For with that love of personal magnificence,—or may we not rather say, with that instinctive passion for beauty which permeated the society of the middle ages to a degree which we, in this era of white chokers and Government schools of design, can but dimly recognise,—there was nothing the hand of man then made, which this quickening spirit within did not compel him to make beautiful. That this influence was at work in the case of these seals—not less than of the other items of male and female—of military, ecclesiastical, and civil costume—is sufficiently proved by the specimens brought together in Mr Laing's Catalogue and the Diplomata; both of which works—to go no further—contain numerous instances of the fashion of enriching seals with the costly and delicate productions of the glyptic art of the ancient world, so many of which must have percolated northwards through various channels, from the great southern fountains of civilisation. These engraved gems are sometimes found introduced into the true seal, in pairs, as in the beautiful seal of Hugh Normanvill, *c.* 1200 (Laing), or in greater number, as in the seal of William de Vesci, *c.* 1220 (Laing), which has three, and that of Walter de Berkley, to be again referred to, which has six. The De Vescis would seem to have been rich in these gems; for, besides using one for the pendent counter-seal, mentioned above, Eustace de Vesci has one introduced into his great seal (Laing, pl. vi. fig. 4). But, in spite of the analogy of other seals where the gems were clearly fixtures, and in spite of the design of this seal itself, which has obviously been contrived to leave a central space for the gem, I suspect, from certain indications of upcast in the wax, that Mr Laing is right in believing this imprint to have been made from a detached gem—probably worn as a ring—after the impression of the seal itself had been completed. In numerous cases an intaglio has been simply surrounded by a rim of metal, bearing the legend, as in the pendent counter-seal of Walter Fitzalan, *c.* 1130 (Laing), which is formed of one magnificent intaglio of a warrior and horse; that of Richard, Bishop of St Andrews, above mentioned, which is formed of a smaller gem, representing a charioteer driving a biga at full speed; that of Thomas Colvil, *c.* 1220 (Laing), and others which I need not enumerate. In the Diplomata (pl. lxxvii.) is engraved—but unfortunately not well engraved—an impression from the seal of Walter

de Berkley—a member of a Norman family settled in Scotland, and chamberlain of the kingdom in the reigns of Malcolm IV. and William the Lion. This must have been an extremely beautiful specimen of this description of composite seal. It was circular, about three inches in diameter, and bore in the usual way the name and designation of the owner. But its chief interest for us at present lies in the circumstance that it was studded with no fewer than six gems, probably intaglios, of unquestionably classical execution—one, large, in the centre, surrounded by five of smaller and slightly unequal size. Although the impression bears no trace of any loop by which this seal might have been suspended, it can scarcely be doubted that an object of so much beauty must have been worn as a personal decoration. In all likelihood it was hung by a ring affixed behind, like the curious brass matrix found on Arthur Seat, and described in the Proceedings of this Society (vol. i. pp. 39, 150), or by a perforated piece of ornament attached to the upper posterior rim, like the beautiful Chapter Seal of Brechin, figured in the Proceedings (vol. i., p. 189), and also the Arthur Seat matrix—in the Catalogue of the Archæological Exhibition of 1850.

Doubts have been expressed to me by one whose opinions must always command respectful consideration, as to the fact of these bosses having been antique gems at all. But if not antique gems, what were they? They bear no resemblance to any details of jewellers, seal-cutters, or other work of the period to which this seal belonged, or, indeed, of any portion of the period which we broadly call *Gothic*. While, rudely and imperfectly as they are presented in the Diplomata, they do resemble the productions of the classical gem-cutter, in those leading lines and quantities, which, however rudely reproduced, no eye accustomed to compare the characteristics of various schools of art can well mistake. The number of these beautiful works worn as signets, or applied as embellishments to parts of male and female dress, and to articles of religious and domestic use, in the classical ages was, as we know, very great. It is also clear that in the earlier middle ages they were still to be obtained in immense quantities, as may be seen in several of the cities of Germany and northern Italy, where on altar, shrine, pulpit, and reliquary—each a miracle of Christian art—they are scattered in bewildering profusion. But we have just seen that these things actually were used in our own country

during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as seals, or as the enrichment of seals. We are, therefore, I think, more than justified in concluding that the bosses on the seal of Walter de Berkley were indeed antique gems.

In saying thus much of ornamental seals I have not wandered so far as may seem from the matter before us; for, simple and unadorned as it is, this seal of Canon Alan comes within the category; the substance of which it is made having no doubt been chosen for its beauty and its fitness for becoming an ornamental adjunct of dress. I do not remember to have seen this custom of wearing seals as personal ornaments noticed elsewhere than in the brief note of Mr Henry Laing on the counter-seal of Eustace de Vesci, above quoted. But the subject is not without interest in its relation to the costume of the ages of Faith and Chivalry, and to the ideas and social habits of which costume is to so great an extent the unrecognised exponent. I profess no special knowledge of sphragistics, however, and only venture to hope that these necessarily superficial remarks, which I have been accidentally led into making, may be the means of eliciting from some one more deeply versed in the subject the information which I have failed to supply.