

III.

THE SO-CALLED ROMAN HEADS OF THE NETHER BOW. BY DANIEL WILSON, LL.D., PRINCIPAL OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, TORONTO, HON. MEM. S. A. SCOT.

On my last visit to Edinburgh I was pressed into the service of some young friends to explore what little still remains of the memorials of olden times, which, in my own younger days, gave such a charm to the quaint old town occupying the ridge and its northern and southern slopes, between the Castle and Holyrood Abbey. Many a curious relic, once familiar to me, had vanished, though still enough remained to reward the search and gratify the curiosity of younger antiquaries. But among the vanished relics, which helped to confer on the romantic town of past generations so fascinating an interest, I was specially reminded of one curious antique, the restoration of which, as it then seemed to me, was as desirable as it is of easy accomplishment. Civic and sanitary reform have done their destructive work so effectually that the spirit of conservatism would fain cast its shield over what little remains of the past; and the work of restoration effected by Dr William Chambers on the collegiate church of St Giles may be accepted as some atonement for the wholesale eradication of so much that was quaint and historically interesting, though perhaps altogether unsuited to the wants, or even to the well-being of this nineteenth century, in the old town of Edinburgh.

The special relic of antiquity, to which I refer, is what was known in my younger days as the "Roman Heads" at the Nether Bow. So many years have passed since I had an opportunity of looking on the ancient bas-reliefs that, were it possible, I should be glad to have an opportunity of inspecting them anew before claiming for them an antiquity of so remote a date as the third century. If they had been correctly ascribed to a Roman sculptor, and rightly identified as representing the Emperor Septimius Severus and his Empress, they would have had a prominent claim to interest as by far the most ancient relics in the Scottish capital.

When I learned that my old friend, Dr J. Collingwood Bruce, had been appointed to the Rhind Lectureship, and had selected "The Romans in Scotland" as the subject to which he was so specially qualified to do justice, I recalled to his attention the old sculptures. But it is possible that, in the greatly overcrowded state of the Society's collection, to which they now pertain, he may have missed an opportunity of inspecting them. It may not even yet be too late to invite his verdict as a skilled expert, in reference to the authenticity of the bas-reliefs as sculptures of the age to which it has been so long the fashion to assign them.

In the construction of Jeffrey Street, and the adjacent approaches embraced in the city improvements of 1867, the old avenue of Leith Wynd, which skirted the eastern line of the city wall, has been effaced. It was, as I believe, a portion of the line of an ancient Roman road which led from the Roman seaport at the mouth of the Almond, by Canonmills, Broughton, St Ninian's Row, and Leith Wynd, to the point of intersection with the "King's Hie Gait," and thence by St Mary's Wynd and the Pleasance,—the site in mediæval times of the Convent of S. Maria de Placentia,—southward by Romana, and the Roman Trimontium, in the vale of Melrose, to the fords of the Solway. I have long since set forth the evidences of the Roman footprints.¹ The western portion of the road was still visible when Gordon was collecting the materials for his *Itinerarium Septentrionale* in the early years of the eighteenth century. After describing the Roman coins and medals in the collection of Baron Clerk, found at Cramond, "including that invaluable medal of Severus supposed to be coined on the peace with the Caledonians, one of Julia, one of Domitian, and another of Severus, with this reverse—*Felicitas Augustorum*," he goes on to say—"From this same station of Cramond runs a noble military way, towards *Castrum Alatum* or Edinburgh; but as it comes near that city it is wholly levelled and lost among the ploughed lands, and is therefore discernible but a little way." Cramond, as he conjectures, may have been "one of the Hiberna, or winter quarters of Septimius Severus

¹ *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, 2nd ed., vol. ii. pp. 53-56.

when he was in Scotland, as his medal found here, with the inscription *Fundator pacis*, seems to denote." ¹

The traces of the old Roman road which, in Gordon's days, were so soon lost among the ploughed fields, have been recovered at various points in subsequent years. A coin of the Emperor Vespasian, in the Society's collection, was found in 1782 in a garden in the Pleasance.² In digging in St Ninian's Row, in 1815, for the foundation of the Regent Bridge, the discovery of a quantity of fine embossed Samian ware afforded still more indubitable evidence of the Roman presence.³ At various subsequent dates, in 1822, in 1845, and on the demolition of the Collegiate Church of the Holy Trinity in 1848, portions of an ancient causeway were brought to light, which from its materials and construction confirmed the idea that it was part of the old Roman road, over which the foundations of the church were laid in 1462. Beyond this it climbed the steep ascent towards the Nether Bow, and near the point of intersection there were found, in 1850, two silver denarii of the Emperor Severus, now in the Society's cabinet, one of them bearing on the reverse a Roman soldier, holding the figure of Victory in his right hand, with the legend *AVGG. VICT.* On the reverse of the other a Victory, in flowing drapery, bears in her right hand a wreath, and in the left a cornucopia; the legend, *VICT. PARTHICA.*

In the *Reliquiæ Galeanæ*, of date March 1742, Sir John Clerk gives an account of what he assumes to have been a Roman arch, which had been recently pulled down at Edinburgh. "It was," he said, "an old arch that nobody ever imagined to be Roman, and yet it seems it was, by an urn discovered in it, with a good many silver coins, all of them common except one of Faustina Minor, which I had not. It represents her bust on one side, and on the reverse a *lectisternium*, with this inscription, *SÆCVLI FELICITAS.*"⁴ Unfortunately, Sir John Clerk gives no definite information as to the site of the demolished arch; but the Edinburgh of 1742 was confined within very narrow bounds, and

¹ *Itiner. Septent.*, p. 117.

² *Archæologia Scotica*, App., vol. iii. p. 72.

³ *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, 2nd ed., vol. ii. p. 54.

⁴ *Biblio. Topog. Brit.*, vol. ii. p. 348.

whatever may have been the true date of the masonry, the genuineness of the Roman coins is beyond all doubt. Other traces of the presence of the Romans in Edinburgh, or its immediate vicinity, are produced in the *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*. With the abundant evidences of Roman occupation of the neighbouring seaports of Cramond and Inveresk, it can excite no surprise to recover either coins, pottery, or sculptured tablets, on so important a site of early urban settlement, midway between the Almond and the Esk.

The earliest notice of the "Roman Heads" is that of Gordon, in 1726, in the appendix to his *Itinerarium Septentrionale*. In earlier years he had explored the line of the wall of Severus, in Northumberland, in company with Sir John Clerk, had enjoyed the hospitalities of the Duke of Queensberry at Drumlanrig Castle, and minutely investigated the famous Roman works at Birrenswark, and other remains between the Nith and the Solway. He had also surveyed the line of the Antonine wall, between the Forth and the Clyde, but it is doubtful if he had visited Edinburgh, prior to the publication of the prized folio on which *The Antiquary* of Scott has conferred such enduring interest, and it was, apparently, only when he was adding the final remarks to his appendix that he was "favoured by the ingenious Mr Alexander with a draught of two very curious heads built up in a wall in Edinburgh, the sculpture of which is so excellent that," he says, "I have been advised, by the best judges of antiquity, to give it a place in my book." He pronounces the sculptured heads to be "attired in Roman habits, and indisputably works of that nation." "A very learned and illustrious antiquary," he adds, "judges them to be representations of the Emperor Septimius Severus and his wife Julia," and he himself surmises them to have been originally designed as adornments for a sarcophagus.

Immediately after the publication of the *Itinerarium Septentrionale*, Sir John Clerk wrote to his brother antiquary, Roger Gale, informing him of an expected visit of Gordon. Baron Clerk was then residing in the fine old civic mansion, still standing in Riddle's Close, in the Lawnmarket, where, in 1598, Bailie Macmoran entertained the Duke of Holstein as the City's guest, and was honoured with the presence of King James and his Queen at the banquet. There, as we may assume, Sandy

Gordon found hospitable entertainment at the later date of the occupation of the ancient lodging by Baron Clerk ; and as he wended his way from the Lawnmarket to Queensberry House, in the Canongate, the mansion of his noble patron the Duke of Queensberry, to whom the *Itinerarium* is dedicated, he would pass the house of the old Scottish typographer, Thomas Bassendyne, into the front wall of which the " Romn Heads " were built, with, as Gordon notes, " a Gothic inscription, in the Monkish times, thrust in betwixt them. " When in 1742 the demolition of the Roman arch disclosed the urn with its coin of Faustina Minor, and other indubitable traces of the Roman invaders, the author of the *Itinerarium Septentrionale* had itinerated far beyond the furthest flight of the Roman Eagles, and was making a new home for himself in South Carolina, where he died in 1754, leaving behind him, among other memorials, the curiously characteristic Will which is printed among the Society's *Proceedings*.¹

Some twenty-seven years later than the first notice of the " Roman Heads, " they were described anew by Maitland in his *History of Edinburgh*, and their locality defined. According to the old civic historian, they had stood at some earlier date in the wall of a house on the northern side of the street, from whence they had been transferred to their later site in the Nether Bow, nearly opposite John Knox's House. On their new site, if not before, they were inserted in a panel, separated by the introduction between them of a black-letter inscription, borrowed from the Vulgate, of the curse pronounced on Adam and Eve, after the fall :—**In · sudore · vult' · tui · vesceris · pane · tuo.** To this is added the reference G. 3, which Maitland misread ANNO 1621. Mr David Laing drew attention to the correspondence of the abbreviated inscription *vult'*. to the reading of the first edition of the Bible, printed at Metz in the year 1455. The incongruous conjunction of this text with the heads of Severus and Julia had given rise to the popular recognition of them as Adam and Eve ; and on this Maitland attempts to improve, by noting that they occupied a panel in the wall over a baker's shop, and thence surmising that the inscription was put up in allusion to his trade. In reality such inscriptions were characteristic of the

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant., Scot.* vol. x. p. 364.

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The town mansion of the Abbots of Melrose stood opposite, the site of the Chapel and Convent of St Mary was near by, and such an inscription was a most likely relic of some older building in the vicinity. Its interposition between the heads of the Roman Emperor and his Empress added to the quaint incongruity of the later arrangement which thus placed in conjunction relics of such widely different dates, and adapted them all the better to their site.

But are the basso-relievos which so long figured among the lions of the old Scottish capital, and stood so near to the intersection of the High Street by the ancient line of the Roman road, which then crossed the ridge on its way to the Roman sea-ports of Inveresk and Cramond, really genuine memorials of the visit of Severus and his Empress to this remote northern region? When I last looked on them, upwards of thirty-two years since, they still graced the façade of the old typographer's lodging in the Nether Bow; and looked Roman-like enough, at the distance from which they were viewed, with the obscuring veil that time and exposure had helped to throw over them. But so far back as 1783, the celebrated local artist, David Allan, executed an admirable engraving of them, which was subsequently produced in the third volume of the *Archæologia Scotica*, and from this a sufficiently definite opinion may be formed of the sculptures. A renewed study of them, in so far as that can be efficiently done with the old Scottish painter's aid, leads me, however reluctantly, to the conclusion, that "the Gothic inscription in the Monkish times," the intrusion of which between "Severus and his Empress" was so distasteful to the old Roman antiquary of the *Itinerary*, is in all probability the older relic of the two; and that the "Roman Heads" are in reality works of the Renaissance period, probably little, if any older than the heads which adorned the City cross, till its demolition in 1756.

But whether of the third or the sixteenth century, the old sculptures, with their incongruous motto, and the quaint fancy to which it gave rise, that the Roman Heads represented the primeval human pair on the eve of their forfeiting paradise, constituted an interesting feature of the old town which it is a pity should be lost. Transferred from the site which they so long occupied in the Nether Bow to a place in the Antiquarian

Museum, they present a contrast somewhat akin to that of a wild flower on its native hill-side, and the same when reduced to a withered mummy in a botanist's herbarium. It is not improbable that the sculptured heads, as well as the mediæval inscription, belonged originally to some structure near their old well-known site. Their locality, at any rate, by long-established prescriptive right, is unquestionably the Nether Bow; and much of their interest vanished on the demolition of the old house there, and their transfer to the safe custody of the Scottish antiquaries. A work of true conservatism was accomplished when the Society gave up the finely sculptured boss from the Kirkpatrick Sharpe collection, in order to have it replaced as the keystone of the ground ceiling of St Eloi's Chapel, in the Cathedral Church of St Giles. My object in recalling the Society's attention to the "Roman Heads," now in their safe keeping, is to offer the suggestion that the venerable sculptures be replaced in a deeply sunk panel in the façade of the building which has replaced the tenement occupied of old by Thomas Bassendyne, one of Scotland's famous typographers. I would by no means divorce the mediæval text from its former conjunction with the sculptures to which it helped to give a novel popular significance. But it would add to the interest if the whole were supplemented by a further inscription commemorating the old typographer whose rare edition of Sir David Lyndsay's poems bears to be "imprinted at Edinburgh be Thomas Bassendyne, dwelland at Nether Bow, M.D.LXXIII"; and whose beautiful folio Bible, one of the choicest specimens of early Scottish typography, issued from the same press in 1576.