

XII.

CHARLES I'S CORONATION AMPULLA. BY ROBERT B. K.  
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A unique vial of gold was offered for sale in London in March 1948, after being preserved for generations by the Sutties of Balgone. Its history had been engraved on it as follows (Pl. XLV, 2):—

AMPVLLA  
AVREA SACRI *olei*  
*Receptaculum quo CAROLVS*  
*eius nominis primus Scotiae*  
*Anglicae Fran : et Hib : Rex*  
*Edinburgi in Ecclesia*  
*S : Crucis unctus fuit*  
Iunii XVIII  
1633

As announced at the time, the Society was enabled, through the generous

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, vol. lxxix. p. 480.

<sup>2</sup> *Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries*, No. XII. "Maiden Castle, Dorset," p. 141 (4).

action of the Countess of Eglinton, Trustee of the late Sir George Grant Suttie, in withdrawing the ampulla from public auction, to purchase for the National Museum this notable relic of the most splendid Coronation ceremony in Scotland's history. A substantial contribution towards the price was made by the National Art-Collections Fund. (For our subsequently launched Special Purchase Fund, see p. .)

In his account of "Four Scottish Coronations,"<sup>1</sup> the Rev. Professor James Cooper stated that the "golden Ampule or vial with the sacred oil," referred to in the official records, still existed in the possession or custody of Sir George Grant Suttie, Bart. Later, in 1907, it was exhibited by permission of Lady Susan Grant Suttie to the Scottish Ecclesiological Society during a visit to Seton Chapel. The minister, Mr Anderson, then said that the ampulla was known to have been kept very private from George IV when he had visited Prestongrange. While it is not known how the ampulla came to Balgone, it has been suggested that it may have been furnished for the Coronation by a George Suttie who was then Treasurer of Edinburgh and who may have retained it after use.

Full details of the complicated Anointing Ceremony are readily accessible in Sir Francis Grant's paper, entitled "State Ceremonials in Edinburgh in the Olden Time," in the Book of the Old Edinburgh Club.<sup>2</sup> A synoptic account of the two contemporary published versions of the ceremony was given by the 3rd Marquess of Bute in his *Scottish Coronations* (1902). He noted a curious discrepancy. The Form originally written down by Archbishop Laud's secretary, and which the Marquess suggested was a draft sent to Scotland beforehand, directed that the oil vessel should be of silver, whereas the account of the Lyon King of Arms, Sir James Balfour, who actually carried it, called it a golden ampule. The Marquess also remarked (p. 93): "It is interesting to note that both the draft and Sir James habitually call the oil the *sacred* oil."

The ampulla itself, which is entirely of gold, stands to a height of 5 inches and weighs 3½ oz. troy, and would hold almost 3½ fluid oz. of oil. Its main constituent is a pear-shaped vessel 2.6 inches high and at most 2.1 inches broad, with a low (.5 inch) pedestal base 1.6 inches in greatest diameter. The upper .17 inch of the pear is vertical, and is encircled three times on the outside by a carefully cut thread to allow the lid to be screwed over it. The foot is made of three pieces: first a ring forming a deep hollow moulding, which in turn stands on a convex moulding finished by a flat ring projecting internally as well as externally. After the pieces were assembled, the convex moulding was decorated with a kind of egg-and-tongue pattern remarkable for the crudeness of its execution. At first glance it

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. Abdn. and Glas. Eccles. Soc.*, 1902, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> 1932, pp. 18-19; see also p. 16.

looks as if it were scratched, but it is deeply cut—once so much as to cut right through for a length of .16 inch.

The lid consists of a number of pieces. First there is a vertical-sided ring grooved inside to screw over the body. Over it was placed a disc 1.05 inches in diameter, perforated by two oval holes (.48 × .36 inch and .45 × .41 inch) with their long axes in a line. Into these were fastened two horn-shaped and diverging spouts, each tapering to a nozzle encircled by two small rings set close together. The horns measure 2.2 inches along their greatest curvature, and the inside diameter of the nozzles is only .12 inch. Though all the other joints are neat, with little trace of solder even on the underside, slightly copper-coloured gold solder forms an ugly joint around the base of each horn, while in the case of one of them something serious seems to have happened. A piece one-third of its circumference, and rising at most .6 inch back to back with the other horn, is identical to it in internal finish, but the remainder has been subsequently inserted in such a way as to cause a projecting overlapping joint inside, and a rising seam visible outside with an ugly kink at the crest. Solder has been daubed outside along the join. Lastly, the lower parts of the horns are united to one another by a strange little strip soldered between them, and rising to a point .3 inch above the surface of the lid.

There does not appear to be an easy solution to these inconsistencies in craftsmanship. The body of the vessel is elegantly designed and excellently carried out, but the decoration on the base looks like a hurried afterthought. Mr Ian Finlay, however, tells me that Scottish engraving was habitually of a lower standard than the metal-working. The lower part of the lid is good, and the screw suggests that the vessel had from the beginning been designed to hold oil. Moreover, the horns themselves are subtly shaped and well finished, though slightly dented with time, and show no external trace of their longitudinal joint; they can hardly represent an addition to the design. There has never been a division up the centre of the flask to correspond with the two nozzles, and clearly only one substance was contained in the vial. The shape and size of the body are such that it can be conveniently grasped in the hand. The two nozzles, besides providing a necessary airhole and an alternative in case of a stoppage, would allow the oil to be poured to right and to left without the grip being shifted. The horn shape may have been an intentional reference to the Horn of Zadok, mentioned in the text of the Coronation sermon (1 Kings i. 39). Neither accidental damage requiring replacement nor an initial incorrect diameter would explain in themselves the two pieces of the imperfect horn. But an accident at the last moment might have necessitated the use of a thoughtless and inexpert workman, and the deficiencies can only be seen by a close observer. The Coronation was a much postponed and controversial ceremony, and the change of plan, noted by the Marquess of Bute, from a

silver to a gold vessel, may in any case not have left much time for leisurely preparation. Though no maker's marks were ever placed on the vessel, it may be assumed, both from these circumstances and from the features of the execution, that the ampulla was made in Scotland, probably either in Edinburgh or the adjoining Canongate.

As shown in the illustration, the lettering of the inscription is well designed and executed, if we except the inconsistencies in the use of capital letters at the beginning. It appears to be of seventeenth-century date, though from its very nature subsequent to the use of the vial. The wording of the first two lines corresponds with that of Sir James Balfour's description, cited above.

The specially shaped case is doubtless contemporary. Two identical halves come entirely apart. They are fastened by two brass hooks, one on either side of one half and entering upwards into two eyes on the other. The body is formed of thin sheets of leather, covering at the base a flat semi-circular piece of wood. The inside is lined with red velvet and the outside covered with green velvet, the latter now very worn and entirely wanting on the base of one half, along with the corresponding leather. Strips of silver tape .4 inch wide ran the length of each edge and along the top, and a pair up the middle of each half—only the pairs and one side piece remain. The tape is woven from yellow-brown woollen thread which has silver foil wound round it.

The shapes of Coronation oil vessels are very various. The original English ones were destroyed as a result of the Civil War, and that now used is considered to have been made after the Restoration.<sup>1</sup> Following fourteenth-century precedent, it is in the shape of an eagle 9 inches high with outstretched wings, standing on a pedestal. The head forms a lid, which screws off and on at the neck. The body can hold about 6 oz. of oil, poured out through the beak. The officiating Archbishop pours the oil into a special spoon (in part very old, about A.D. 1200), into which he then dips the tips of two fingers. At earlier Coronations there were two oil vessels,<sup>2</sup> one being for the especially sacred and priestly Chrism, which was a compound of oil and balsam.<sup>3</sup> The Kings of France were also anointed with Chrism, mixed with oil from the Sainte Ampoule destroyed at the Revolution, "a small object about the size of a pocket scent bottle."<sup>4</sup> The medieval Kings of Jerusalem and Sicily were anointed, but with oil only, not with Chrism, and in 1329, after a famous controversy, the Pope granted to the King of Scotland the right to be anointed with oil. Of countries where the

<sup>1</sup> J. Jackson, *Illustrated History of English Plate*, 1911. See also G. J. Younghusband and C. Davenport, *Crown Jewels of England*, 1919.

<sup>2</sup> P. E. Schramm, *History of the English Coronation* (1937), p. 109, has an important chapter on anointing.

<sup>3</sup> Marquess of Bute, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284-7, 284-9.

Reformed faith prevailed, anointing was not confined to the British Isles. The Danish vessel <sup>1</sup> was made between 1660 and 1670. It is a cylindrical vessel little over 3 inches high, ornamented with enamelled flowers and set with tablecut diamonds. The screw-lid is flat, and clearly the oil was not poured out. The Swedish vessel is shaped like a horn and was made in 1606.<sup>2</sup>