

THE BONES OF ARCHBISHOP BECKET.

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DURING a series of excavations made in the Crypt of Canterbury Cathedral by a Committee consisting of Canon Scott Robertson, the late Dr. Sheppard, and myself, there were discovered in January 1888 some bones, respecting which a controversy at once arose that has been continued down to the present time. It is in my opinion advisable that a short summary of this controversy should be preserved in the pages of *Archaeologia Cantiana*. And therefore I propose to reproduce briefly a few of the arguments used in a pamphlet of my own at the time of discovery, together with some fresh light that has been thrown upon the subject from other sources by subsequent historical investigations—for it is perfectly certain that scarcely any question of greater or more universal interest can be discussed.

Were the bones found those of Archbishop Becket? The arguments in favour were thus briefly summarized by the present writer in 1888:—

(1) *The position in which they were found.* Excavations were being made at the time for the purpose of discovering any architectural or other remains of the structure which was placed over the original tomb of Becket, his body having been deposited in the Rectangular Chapel at the East end of the Crypt from A.D. 1170 to A.D. 1220. Immediately west of the steps of approach to the “Tumba” (a picture of which has been preserved for us in the Cathedral windows that record the early miracles of St. Thomas) at a distance of 4 feet there was unearthed a stone coffin or coffer, lying in a direct line from East to West. It would be impossible to name any spot in the Cathedral that would have been more likely to have been chosen as a burial-place for precious

relics if the monks had desired to conceal them during the stormy days of desecration, and at the same time to preserve their local religious associations.

(2) *The coffer in which they were contained.* It was not of the ordinary character of a stone coffin, being barely 18 inches at the widest part, roughly cut and irregular in shape, bevelled six or seven inches deep at bottom, and unworked on the outside. In the opinion of those who saw it the body of a full-sized man could not possibly have been placed in this receptacle in the customary way for burial. The coffer itself was of Portland Oolite, not of Caen-stone, as might have been expected, while the cover was of thin Sussex fire-stone, utterly unsuited for this particular purpose, and more usually employed as a kind of reredos behind altars, plenty of which material must have been lying about in the church.

(3) *The contents of the Coffin.* Without entering upon exact minutiae as to the position in which one or two parts of the body were found, it may safely be asserted, on the testimony of eye-witnesses, that a large majority of the bones were lying in a heap at the middle and upper end of the coffer; a boulder-like stone being found at the head, hollowed on its upper surface as if to form a pillow. It is most probable that the bones were placed thus by design, being deposited in the first receptacle found ready to hand.

(4) These bones were carefully taken out and placed together by Mr. Pugin Thornton so as to form a nearly perfect skeleton. And their anatomical investigation placed it beyond doubt that they were the bones of an adult man, of somewhat unusual height (probably 6 feet 2 inches), and of the age of about 50 years. This would correspond in a striking manner with what we know of Archbishop Becket, who was of great stature, and died at the age of 52.

(5) The skull, even to an inexperienced observer, was a very remarkable one; shewing (phrenologically) "large perceptive qualities, much intellect, and indomitable energy." Its appearance, when found, may be thus briefly summarized from Mr. Thornton's description: "The sides of the skull are . . . the damaged portions. On the *left* side by far the

greatest injury seems to have occurred. Here there was an aperture from 5 to 6 inches long, extending from a line drawn upwards from behind the ear to the centre of the forehead. . . . It is remarkable that the edge of bone which forms the upper border of this aperture is almost in a straight line for 5 or 6 inches . . . it may have been caused by a heavy cutting instrument, such as a two-handed sword. . . . Extending from the upper edge of this aperture, there is a crack in the skull about an inch and a half long, which might have been caused during lifetime."

There seems therefore so far much plausibility in the idea that the bones found were those of Archbishop Becket, removed there secretly from his shrine before it was destroyed (or after the destruction of the shrine, with the concurrence of the Commissioners), and deposited in a spot contiguous to the site of his original coffin. And if it be contended that in this case they would have been restored to a place of greater splendour on the accession of Queen Mary, the answer may be given that throughout England at that time (with the exception of St. Edward the Confessor) the saints' bodies were left in the obscure burying-places to which they had been consigned under Henry VIII.—and that at Canterbury, though the whereabouts of the bodies of many saints was known, not one was restored to a place of honour by Cardinal Pole.

The portion of the Crypt in which the bones were found was walled off in A.D. 1546, and not re-opened till some 50 or 60 years ago.

Now there are, in the opinion of the present writer, two arguments only that may at first sight appear to invalidate the authenticity of these bones as those of Archbishop Becket; for I pass over as of little moment such assertions as that his bones would be found in an iron box and not in a stone coffin: or that the skeleton could not have been Becket's because it was too *complete*, whereas many places claim to possess some relics of him. There were at any rate missing from this skeleton four of the vertebræ, portions of the ribs, the right knee-cap, a part of the upper jaw, several of the teeth, etc., some, or all, of which might have

been removed and treasured up in various churches, such as (for instance) the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury at Verona.

Nor need we be detained by any difficulty arising from the alleged skull of Becket which was for a long time placed at an Altar in the Crypt, and there shewn: being afterwards perhaps removed and kept within the "golden head" in what is now called "Becket's Crown;" for in the words of a memorandum by Thomas Derby, Clerk of the Privy Council at the time, giving an account of the destruction of the shrine (to which further allusion will be made hereafter), "His hedd almost hole was found with the rest of his bones closed within the shryne, and there was in that church a grete scull of another hede, but much gretter by the iij quarter parts then that part which was lacking in the hede closed within the shryne, whereby it appered that the same was but a feyned fiction." The alleged skull was therefore (according to his account) burnt as an imposture.

But it has been contended:—

1. That the skull of the skeleton found in the Crypt was not nearly as much *smashed* and mutilated as that of Becket must have been after the wounds said to have been inflicted upon him by his murderers. After reading the record given by Edward Grim, William of Canterbury, the monk Benedict, John of Salisbury, and Fitz-Stephen, most or all of them eye-witnesses of the martyrdom, and the narratives of Herbert of Bosham and Roger of Pontigny, who were not themselves present, we may summarize the account mainly in the words of Benedict: "The *first* blow caused a flesh wound on the head, and glanced on the left shoulder: the *second* caused Becket's fall, fracturing the head: by the *third* the whole crown was amputated: by the *fourth* wound the crown was thrown forward, hanging on the forehead, adhering by the skin. These blows were followed by the frightful deed of Hugh of Horsea . . . who placed his feet on the neck of the saint, and with his sword drew out the brain and scattered it on the pavement."

Now we must allow for unconscious exaggeration on the part of the terrified monks viewing the scene in a state of partial darkness, and I cannot myself see anything in the

account inconsistent with the present state of the skull. The first blow only grazed the crown of Becket's head, and the second one was with the "flat of the sword." By the third (which was the critical blow) *corona capitis amputata est*. *Corona* is surely here not the *top of the skull bone* (as is often suggested), for I believe it to be utterly impossible that this could be cut off from a person lying, as Becket was at the time, "flat on his face" (if indeed this piece of the skull *could be sliced off at all by a sword!*). A blow aimed vertically at the crown of a person's head lying in this position could glance down either on the right or the left side; and this would harmonize with the fact that the sword was snapped in two on the pavement. But (as Mr. Milman* suggests) in reading these contemporary stories we must give to the word "*corona*" its proper mediæval meaning, which was that of a scalp clipped bare in the middle, and retaining a rim of short hair on its edge. On this scalp Becket received many gashes so that it was almost severed. When prostrate on the pavement his skull received several heavy strokes from the sword breaking the left side in many pieces, the fracture ultimately being so extensive that part of the brains gushed out upon the pavement. "According to the stories the monks afterwards refitted and sewed the crown over the broken skull so as to include every particle of skin and bone in the burial." Is there anything absolutely irreconcilable between contemporary records and the existing state of these relics?

But the crucial objection still remains:—

II. "*The bones of Becket were burnt, not buried.*"

Now *à priori* this would certainly seem to be improbable. We might indeed conjecture that the monks, having received distinct warning of the impending destruction, would not allow the precious relics of their great saint to be destroyed without attempting to conceal them. It would then be their interest to propagate the story that the bones had been burnt, so as to prevent their own punishment at the hands of the King in case of removal—and this story, having been put into

* *The Vanished Memorials of St. Thomas of Canterbury*, by H. S. Milman, Director, read before the Society of Antiquaries Feb. 26 and March 12, 1891.

circulation, would naturally be accepted as true by writers who had not themselves been present, but compiled their narrative from hearsay, in many cases several years afterwards.

Besides, the violent Puritan hostility to relics had not at that time come into existence. It was the usual practice at the time of the Reformation, while destroying false relics, images, and shrines, to re-inter the bodies decently near the places where the shrines had stood. And this was done with those of St. Cuthbert at Durham, St. Alban at St. Alban's, and St. Edward the Confessor at Westminster. No copy of the Canterbury Commission has yet been discovered, but Mr. Milman reminds us that the Chichester Commission of the same year shews the usual form adopted. The Commissioners there were ordered to raze the site of the shrine of St. Richard to the ground, and convey away the treasures of the shrine and other valuable objects connected with the relics, but they received no command as to the *disposal of the unshrined body*. And doubtless we should expect the case to be the same at Canterbury.

It is true that at a Papal Consistory held at Rome on Oct. 25, 1538, Pope Paul III. alludes to the "new cruelty and impiety of the English King, who had ordered the body of the Blessed Thomas of Canterbury to be *burned*, and the ashes to be scattered and given to the wind." Wriothesley's *Chronicle* of Sep. 1538 states that "the bones of St. Thomas of Canterbury were *brent* (burnt) in the same church by my Lord Cromwell." John Sleidan (*de Statu Religionis*) 1555, Thomas Stapleton (*The Three Thomases*, printed at Douay) in 1558, Stow's *Chronicle* 1580, and other writers make similar statements, which need not be dwelt on in detail, for they are familiar to all students of ecclesiastical history.

Special weight, however, has been given to a passage in the *Life of Sir Thomas More* by Nicholas Harpsfield, who was Archdeacon of Canterbury in 1554, and was contemporary on the spot with the events he describes: "Albeit we have of late . . . unshrined him (St. Thomas) and *burned* his holy bones." But the value of this testimony is somewhat lessened by a passage in a later *Life of Sir Thomas More* (extant in three MSS. bearing the date 1599), in which a Roman Catholic

writer (Ro: Ba:), professedly paraphrasing Harpsfield's statement, uses the following words, "Albeit we have of late unshrined him and *buried* his holy relics."

It is clear therefore that two stories were current in the sixteenth century as to the disposal of Becket's bones. The Papal declaration was evidently founded on a not unnatural misapprehension of English practices and ideas, and the statement therein contained was accepted without question abroad. It was also reproduced by many subsequent writers in this country without further examination, chiefly on the authority of John Sleidan, a Dutch Priest, alluded to in the preceding page. Whereas Harpsfield's evidence is at the best doubtful, since out of the five original MSS. of Lives of "Sir Thomas More" two have the crucial word *burnt* and the other three *buried*.

But we are indebted to Mr. Milman for a remarkable piece of evidence (contained in his *Vanished Memorials of St. Thomas of Canterbury*, already quoted above), which makes the burning of Becket's bones still more incredible. In consequence of the Papal Sentence dated 17th Dec. 1538, the King found it necessary to explain and vindicate his policy. This was to be done, in accordance with the prevailing custom of the age, by a sermon at St. Paul's Cross.

The manuscript derived from Paper Office, 1539, is quoted by Collier in his *Ecclesiastical History* as a "Declaration of Faith," though in a somewhat untrustworthy form. It is in reality the sketch of the sermon to be preached (as I have said) at St. Paul's Cross as a public justification of the proceedings of King Henry VIII., and is in the handwriting of Thomas Derby, Clerk of the Privy Council. It states that His Majesty caused "the shrynes, corpses, and reliquaries of saints (so called) to be taken away and the abusive pieces thereof to be burnt, the doubtful to be set and hidden honestly away for fear of idolatry." And then it goes on as follows: "As for the shryne of Thomas Becket sometime Archbishop of Canterbury . . . it was arrested that his shrynes and bones should be taken away and bestowed in suche place as the same shuld cause no superstition afterwards, as it is *indede amongst others of that sorte conveyed*

and buried in a noble toure.” The latter passage is lined out in the original MS., as if it was considered imprudent to proclaim publicly the hiding-place of such famous relics.

And this uncorrected draft is confirmed by the subsequent testimony of *William Thomas*, a man of ability, late in the suite of the King’s Ambassador at Venice, who narrates how in February 1546-7 at Bologna he was “earnestly apposed of divers particular things” touching the King then lately dead. In answer to a series of questions assumed to be put by an Italian gentleman, one of which was, “The poor S^t Thomas of Canterbury! alas, it sufficed hym (the King) not to spoyle and devoure the greate riches of the shrine; but to be avenged of the dead corpse, dyd he not cause the bones openly to be burned?” he uses these words, “The Kynge could no lesse do then deface the shryne that was an authour of so muche idolatry. Whether the doying thereof hath bene the undoing of the canonized saint or not, I cannot tell. Butt this is true, that his bones are spred amongst the bones of so many dead men that without some greate miracle they will not be found agayne.”

Now this “noble toure” mentioned by Thomas Derby might naturally be supposed to be the part called Becket’s Crown; but no relics have been found there—and, taking all the circumstances into consideration, I do not think it is any great straining of the words to suppose that the site indicated is that portion of the Crypt, built between 1179 and 1184, immediately beneath the Trinity Chapel, in which the shrine of the Archbishop stood for more than 300 years. The bones discovered in 1888 are almost certainly the remains of some distinguished saint, and it appears to me quite a probable conjecture that they are the veritable relics of St. Thomas of Canterbury. In this case we trust that at no distant time the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury will see their way to erect over them a suitable memorial befitting their historical interest.