

## A NOTE ON THE CORONA OF ST. THOMAS OF CANTERBURY

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THE discovery at Canterbury, in 1888, of a skeleton which was held by some to be that of St. Thomas was followed by a surgical report on the bones by W. Pugin Thornton (afterwards printed in *Archæologia Cantiana*, XVIII), by a long correspondence in *The Times* and *The Kentish Observer*, in which Canon Routledge, Canon Venables, Father J. Morris, S.J., Mr. H. G. Austin, and Mr. Pugin Thornton took part, and by the publication, in the same year, of Father Morris' pamphlet, "The Relics of St. Thomas of Canterbury," and of Canon Routledge's "Summary of the Becket's Bones Controversy", in the "First Report of a Committee appointed to make an Antiquarian Investigation of the Cathedral."

In 1891, Mr. H. S. Milman read a paper before the Society of Antiquaries on "The Vanished Memorials of St. Thomas of Canterbury" (printed in *Archæologia*, LIV, Part 1); in 1895, Canon Routledge contributed an article on "The Bones of Archbishop Becket" to *Archæologia Cantiana*, XXI; in 1907, Mr. M. Beazeley read a paper to the Society of Antiquaries on "The Canterbury Bones" (afterwards issued in pamphlet form); and, in 1908, Father J. H. Pollen, S.J., wrote an article called "Becket's Bones" in *The Month*. All these writers were mainly concerned to prove either that the Canterbury bones were those of St. Thomas, or that they could not be his, and the exposition of their views necessitated considerable discussion of the nature of the injuries sustained by the murdered Archbishop.

In 1920, the late Dr. Mason treated the subject exhaustively in his book, "What Became of the Bones of

St. Thomas ? ” in which he reviewed the whole history of the martyrdom, the shrine, and the relics, and presented the essential parts of the documentary evidence from which our knowledge of the details of the murder is derived. As a result of his thorough examination of that evidence, his final conclusions were largely in favour of the claim that the skeleton discovered in 1888 was that of St. Thomas, but there was a weak spot in the case for the identity of the bones, as presented by him, which caused him to make the concluding pages of his book a summing-up, rather than a verdict. In spite of the arguments adduced by him in favour of the claim, he felt bound to say, “ If at the time of the martyrdom a large part of St. Thomas’ skull was severed from the rest, then this is not the head of St. Thomas,” and he could not get away from the fact that the accounts of the eye-witnesses, though conflicting on some points, seemed to agree on this. I hope to be able to show that those accounts can be explained in a way that would have removed his difficulty.

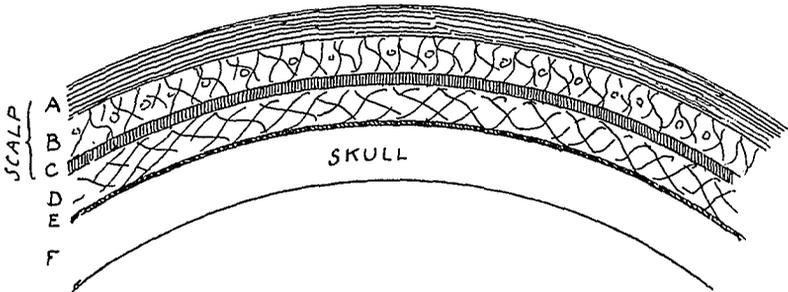
Dr. Mason devoted some ten pages to the consideration of the questions, (1) whether the *corona* and the *caput* were one and the same, or two separate relics, and (2) in either case, what, exactly, the *corona* was. After a detailed examination of the evidence, he formed conclusions on the first point with which, I think, it is hardly possible to disagree, but I venture to submit that his answer to the second question is less satisfactory. The accessibility of his book makes it unnecessary to recapitulate, here, all the details of his arguments. A concise summary of his conclusions will be sufficient for our present purpose. The chief points are as follows :

1. That the word *corona* in Canterbury records had a significance other than the architectural explanation of Willis, namely, that it denoted the Eastern or “ crowning ” chapel of a church ; and that the “ chapel of the *corona* ” at Canterbury, contained a relic of the martyred Archbishop, known as the *corona*, and mentioned in the Treasurer’s Accounts as early as 1199.

2. That the *corona* and the *caput* were identical, the relic called the *corona* being either enclosed in a case, or reliquary, in the form of a head, or incorporated into an artificial head.
3. That the *corona* was "some portion of the skull" of St. Thomas; or one of several bony fragments detached from his skull; or a part of some other skull, used to make a spurious relic.

The first two of these points seem to be incontestable, on the evidence set forth by Dr. Mason, but as regards the third point, I think that he, and other writers on the subject, have been misled by assuming that the *corona* consisted wholly, or partially, of bone, and that this assumption has been the cause of much difficulty in understanding the evidence of the eye-witnesses of the murder. I suggest that the *corona* was not any part of the skull, but either the whole, or a considerable part, of the *scalp* of the Archbishop. Dr. Mason and others, knowing that the term crown, or *corona*, was applied in mediæval times to that part which received the tonsure and the unction, and that it was the scalp that was shaved and anointed, not the skull, still found it necessary to make the *corona* a bony relic, in order, as they thought, to reconcile their explanations with the contemporary accounts of the martyrdom. The limitation of the term *corona* to the soft tissues which form the scalp, however, is not only consistent with the accounts of the eye-witnesses, but even makes these accounts clearer, and more credible, by eliminating the difficulty, felt by most of the modern writers, of understanding how the top of the skull could have been sliced off by a sword-cut. At the same time, it removes the obstacle to the acceptance of the exhumed skeleton as that of Becket, arising from the fact that no considerable part of the vault of the skull was missing. An appreciation of the anatomical and surgical peculiarities of the scalp might have helped Dr. Mason in his inquiry into the nature of the relic called the *corona*, and enabled him to arrive at a more definite conclusion regarding the skeleton discovered in 1888.

The human scalp is not attached to the underlying tissues in the same way as the skin is attached in other parts of the body, but so loosely that it can be removed with the greatest ease. In other regions, the removal of the skin requires time, and some skill. It was this lax attachment that enabled the Red Indian to collect the scalps of his enemies. The first step in a *post mortem* examination of the head is to divide the scalp by a transverse incision across the top of the head, and to peel it forwards and backwards in two flaps. In the appended diagram of a vertical section of the skull and its coverings, A is the skin; B the subcutaneous tissue (fibrous bands enclosing fat lobules); C the



aponeurosis of the occipito-frontalis muscle (a dense membrane, attached to the skull in front and behind by muscular fibres); D a layer of connective tissue, so flimsy and so loosely attached to the contiguous layers that, for our present purpose, it may be regarded as a mere space; E the pericranium (a thin membrane attached to the bone); and F the skull. A and C are firmly connected by B, and these three layers together form the scalp. It is the existence of D that makes it so easy to detach the scalp from the layers beneath.

A slight wound of the scalp, which does not penetrate its whole thickness, will not gape, but in extensive wounds, which completely divide it, its laxity of attachment often allows a portion to be separated, in the form of a flap, that may be large enough to hang down and cover half the face. The treatment to which the head of St. Thomas was subjected

would be more than likely to cause the separation of such a flap, *before the infliction of the deeper, fatal injuries*, and the appearance of the flap so formed would be striking enough to explain the description of contemporary writers, who agree in the use of such expressions as "the whole crown of the head was cut off" (William FitzStephen), "shore off the top of his crown" (Grim), "cut off the greater part of his head" (Benedict), "severed the crown of the head from the head" (Herbert of Bosham). When I was acting as surgical dresser, a man was brought into hospital who had dived into a swimming-bath at a place where the water was shallow, and had sustained a wound that completely divided his scalp across the back of his head. Almost the whole scalp could be lifted up by the hair, like the hinged lid of a box, and in relating the story of his accident, he said, "When I got up, I couldn't see, because something was hanging in front of my eyes. I pushed it up with my hand, and found that it was the top of my head." An eye-witness of this accident might have used the very words of Herbert of Bosham, when he said "the top of the head . . . hung from the head like a plate, adhering still by a little skin to the forehead."

That the wound received by Nelson, at the Battle of the Nile, was of an exactly similar character is evident from Southey's description. "Meantime," he says, "Nelson received a severe wound on the head from a piece of langridge shot. . . . The great effusion of blood occasioned an apprehension that the wound was mortal; Nelson himself thought so; a large flap of the skin of the forehead, cut from the bone, had fallen down over one eye, and the other being blind he was in total darkness. . . . when the surgeon came in due time to examine his wound, the most anxious silence prevailed; and the joy of the wounded men, and of the whole crew, when they heard that the hurt was merely superficial, gave Nelson deeper pleasure than the unexpected assurance that his life was in no danger."

Anyone who reads the descriptions of the attack on St. Thomas, with the above facts concerning injuries of the

scalp, and the illustrative cases quoted, in his mind, cannot fail to see how easily one of the earlier blows directed at the Archbishop might have separated his scalp. Even a stroke with the flat of a sword might have done so. An injury of this kind is often the result of a blow with a blunt weapon, such as a policeman's truncheon, or of the impact of a hard surface, as in the case of the diver mentioned above. Assuming that a considerable portion was separated by one of the blows which he sustained, and "hung from the head like a plate", as Herbert of Bosham says, the fact that it corresponded, more or less, to the sacrosanct *corona* would be very likely to suggest its preservation as a relic. This would not be difficult. The skin of the scalp is thicker than that of any other part of the body, and would form a substantial piece of leather. The further step of fitting the fragment of scalp on to an artificial head, for the purpose of exhibition, follows quite naturally. An ornate and costly setting would be desired for so precious a relic, whose anatomical origin would suggest the form which that setting should take. And so, in 1314, a sum of £115 11s. was expended "*Pro corona Sancti Thomae auro et argento et lapidibus pretiosis ornanda*", the result being the *caput aureum*, or golden "head of St. Thomas", of which we read so much. Milman's contention, that the corona was altogether artificial, a model, or image, of the Saint's desecrated crown, afterwards expanded into a head, does not appear to be supported by any evidence. There seems to be as little reason to postulate a fabricated *corona*, as there is to accept Dr. Mason's suggestion that a portion of some other skull was introduced.

Assuming that the *corona* was a considerable part of the scalp, but included no bone, let us see what bearing this assumption has upon Dr. Mason's conclusions regarding the disputed bones. The main points of his summing-up are as follows :

1. The bones found in 1888 are those of a man corresponding in age and height to what is known of St. Thomas, and of a man who appears to have been killed by a blow

on the left side of the head from a sharp-edged weapon.

2. The size and condition of the coffin showed that the bones had been previously buried elsewhere.
3. If at the time of the martyrdom a large part of St. Thomas' skull was severed from the rest, then this is not the head of St. Thomas. But the evidence concerning the wounds is conflicting.
4. There is no direct evidence that the contents of the shrine were burned. If not, the burial need not have been done furtively by the monks, but by Cromwell's agents as in the case of St. Cuthbert at Durham.
5. The objection that the bones, if those of St. Thomas, must have been brought out again by Queen Mary fails, because that queen took no such action at Durham, and elsewhere.

All these points, except the third, tell directly in favour of the identity of the discovered bones with those of the martyr, and the case which I have tried to put is that it was not necessary for any bone to be removed, in order to explain either the origin and history of the relic called the *corona*, or the contemporary accounts of the murder, which are less conflicting than might have been expected, considering the circumstances in which the observations of their writers were made. These accounts present no difficulty in the way of our acceptance of the identity of the bones, provided that we do not start with the notion that such expressions as "the top of the head" must mean the top of the skull. No doubt, many of those who saw Nelson carried down to the cockpit would say that "the top of his head" was torn off.

My submission that the relic known as the *corona* was the scalp, and no part of the skull, strengthens the case for the identity of the bones found in 1888, by showing that the condition of the exhumed skull was not inconsistent with the contemporary accounts of the murder; removes the difficulty of those who see the extreme improbability of a

swordcut slicing off the top of the skull ; makes Dr. Mason's alternative suggestions (that a part of some other skull was used, or that the *corona* consisted of several bony fragments) unnecessary ; and supports the contention that the *corona* was a genuine relic, known by the name which was a correct contemporary description, and ultimately enclosed in a *chef*, or reliquary in the shape of a head, or incorporated into an artificial head.