



Wm. A. Woodcut

PYX,

Found in the Parish of Exning, 1845.

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

Bury & West Suffolk Archaeological Institute.

MARCH, 1851.

PYX FOUND AT EXNING.

[READ JUNE 13, 1850.]

The pyx or ciborium shewn in the annexed plate was found in the parish of Exning*, near Newmarket, Suffolk, not far from the church; whence, in all probability, it had been ejected and hastily buried, with other church furniture, at the time of the Reformation, as several altar candlesticks, bells, &c., were found at the same time. It is of latten or mixed yellow metal, and is in the form of a covered cup, surmounted by a conical spire, on the summit of which is a crucifix. The height of the whole is eleven inches, and the diameter of the cup four inches and three quarters. Around the cover is engraved in large characters of singular form, **Magnificat aīa†**; and the workmanship of the whole is exceedingly good. At the top of the cross is a ring and a link of a chain by which it had been suspended over the altar, and another small ring is attached underneath the foot of the cup. It is probably the work of the earlier part of the 15th century.

The pyx (πυξίς, Gr.) was the box or casket in which the host or consecrated wafer was reserved; and in which it was conveyed to the abodes of the faithful *in extremis*‡. On

* Erroneously said to have been found at Chippenham, in Arch. Journ. ii., 205.

† The inscription and ornaments generally are engraved so as to produce a light and a dark shade, but the effect is almost obliterated by the corrosion consequent upon its lying so long buried.

‡ It sometimes served as a pax, *de osculatorium*, for the faithful to kiss at the end of the mass, hence the confusion of the two words, but the pax never could or did serve for a pyx.—*Croft MSS. penes W. Mills, Esq.*

Good Friday it was deposited with the crucifix of the altar in the Holy Sepulchre, and watched day and night till the morn of Easter Sunday, when it was taken out again with great ceremony*. It was esteemed so sacred that upon the march of hostile armies it was especially prohibited from theft; and Henry V. delayed his army for a whole day to discover the thief who had stolen one—a fact which Shakspeare has thought worthy of record in his historical play of Henry V. (*Act iii., sc. 6.*)

“Fortune is Bardolph’s foe and frowns on him;
For he hath stolen a *pyx*, and hanged must a’ be.”

It was generally made of metal, more or less ornamented, frequently of gold or silver, set with precious stones†, and sometimes of ivory or wood. In form it was mostly circular, or in the shape of a tower or a dove; and was suspended over the altar under a canopy‡, with a circlet of lights, or a lamp, burning perpetually before it§. The following account of the *pyx* at Durham Abbey will give an idea of the splendour of this important piece of church furniture: “Over the high altar, hung a rich and most sumptuous canopy for the blessed sacrament to hang within it, which had two irons fastened in the French trieme very finely gilt, which held the canopy over the midst of the said high altar that the *pyx* hung in, that it could neither move nor stir: whereon stood a pelican, all of silver, upon the height of the said canopy, very finely gilt, giving her blood to her young ones, in token that Christ gave his blood for the sins of the world; and it was goodly to behold for the blessed sacrament to hang in. And the *pyx* wherein the blessed sacrament hung was of most pure gold curiously wrought of goldsmith’s work; and the white cloth that hung over the *pyx* was of very fine lawn, all embroidered and wrought about with gold and red

* See *Vetusta Monumenta*, iii. pl. 31, 32.

† “Dans l’église de l’Abbaye de l’Einsidelen, dans le canton de Glaris, est un ciboire d’or, haut de plus de huit pieds, orné de 1174 grosses perles, de 303 diamans, de 38 saphirs, de 154 émeraudes, de 875 rubis, de 44 grenats, de 26 hyacinthes, de 19 amethystes, et de 4 rubis spinelles.”—*Journ. Encycl.* 1783, Oct., 258.

‡ This usage of suspension is considered by Lyndwood objectionable, as

the sacred vessel might more easily be abstracted by a profane hand than if it were deposited, as in Holland and Portugal, in an ambry or other secure place.—*Provinciale*, lib. iii., tit. 26.

§ In 1509, Sir Wm. Taylour, priest, of Bury, directed his executors to “fynde the lampe afore the sacrament in the chauncell, nyght and day, as it hath been vsid in tymes passed, as long as the seid *ixli.* will indure.”—*Tymms’s Hist. St. Mary’s Church, Bury*, p. 57.

silk, and four great round knobs of gold curiously wrought, with great tassels of gold and red silk hung at them; and the crook that hung within the cloth that the pyx hung upon was of gold, and the cord which drew it up and down was made of fine strong silk*.”

The Constitutions of the Bishops of Worcester, Walter de Bleys, A.D. 1229, and Walter de Cantilupe, A.D. 1240, ordained that the eucharist should be reserved in a pyx formed either of silver, or ivory, or of the work of Limoges; and pyxes of this period, of Limoges enamel, are in the possession of Dr. Rock and Mr. S. P. Cox.†

At the beginning of the 16th century the pyxes in parochial churches appear to have been of a description so very inferior to what were considered to be required by the principles of the Church of Rome, as to excite the special displeasure of Henry VII.; as appears by the following extract from his will‡ :—

Item, forasmoche as we have often and many tymes, to our inwarde regrete and displeasure, seen at oure Jen, in diverse and many Churches of oure Reame, the Holie Sacrament of the Aulter kept in ful simple and inhonest Pixes, specially Pixes of copre and tymbre; we have appointed and commaunded the Tresourer of our Chambre, and Maistre of our Juellhouse, to cause to be made furthwith Pixes of silver and gilte, in a greate nombre, for the keping of the holie Sacrament of th'Aultre, after the faction of a Pixe that we have caused to be delivered to them, every of the said Pixes to be of the value of iiiij^l, garnished with our armes, and rede Roses and Poortcolis crowned: of the which Pixes we wol, that to the laude and service of God, th'onour of the holie Sacrament of th'Aulter, the weale of our soule, and for a perpetual memorie of us, every house of the iiiij ordres of Freres, and in likewise every Parisshe church within this our Reame, not having a Pixe, nor noon other honest vessell of silver and gilte, nor of silver ungilte, for the keping of the said Holy Sacrament, have of our gifte in our life oon of the said Pixes, assone and spedely as goodly may be doon. And if this be nat performed in parte or in all in our life, we then wol, that that shall rest not performed in our life, bee performed by our Executours, within oon yere at the farrest next after our deceasse.

Few, if any, it is believed, of the pyxes bequeathed by Henry VII., now remain: probably (it has been suggested) from the circumstance of having the royal arms engraved on them, they were regarded as family plate by the next successor to the crown, and appropriated accordingly!

Newmarket, June, 1850.

J. F. CLARK.

* Rites of Durham.

† A representation of the latter is given in the Arch. Journal, ii., 167.

‡ Quarto, 1775, p. 37.