Ethelred the Unready's gift to parturient women: an agate touch-stone said to ease childbirth.

An aura of combat existed about the experience of childbirth in mediaeval Europe, as it does in many parts of the Third World today. Understandable that when in mediaeval England there existed a touch-stone that might alleviate something of the problem, the talisman proved so effective in one family to which it was loaned, as to be illegally retained for two generations or more.

Ethelred the so-called 'Unready' ruled Anglo-Saxon England from 979-1016. Far from 'unready' in the modern sense, he seems to have been particularly successful if measured by his length of reign: at thirty-seven years, longer than any other including Alfred the Great, William the Conqueror or any to come for a further two centuries. The Old English term ***unraed*** from which his surname derived meant 'uncounselled' - perhaps simply believing himself without need of councillors. Whilst out of the country for a short time during his forties he was asked to return for a further period of rule. As with any mediaeval king, his treasury included gemstones reckoned to exhibit medical powers.

The Anglo-Saxon ***Lapidary*** is the oldest English account of such materials. The one copy to survive was written probably at St Albans Abbey before finding its way, together with their tenth abbot, to Christ Church, Canterbury, the senior establishment of the Christian Church in England. There it was bound into a book including medical essays and a dumb-show guide to sign-language (British Library, Manuscript Cotton Tiberius Aiii, f. 101^{v}).'

Little more than a list, this lapidary was compiled as a curator's inventory rather than written by way of an academic essay. It starts with gemstones from the ***Revelation*** of St John that forms the Bible's very end: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth'. This heavenly paradise, which might be approached from all sorts of directions, boasted twelve gateways, each with a different kind of gemstone forming its foundation.[1]

The compiler goes on to glance at a number of geological substances like asbestos, familiar up to the present time for their practical utility, before finally adding half-a-dozen imported gemstones claiming magico-medical powers. Three or four of them are said to have come from the kingdom of the Persians: anciently not the Persia, or Iran, of recent centuries but formerly extending westwards into the Mediterranean and in contention with Rome for control of southern Italy. Their renown for medical knowledge was witnessed in early England by academic appreciation of the eleventh-century polymath Avicenna's ***Book of Healing*** and ***Canon of Medicine?***

In the Anglo-Saxon ***Lapidary*** one of these magico-medical stones called Pyrites, if touched by hand was said to instantly burn; another, called Selenite, was curious in that it would enlarge and diminish together with the waxing and waning moon. One called Cathotices would cling to whatever it touched. Another, known as Mocha-stone ***(Mocritum),*** was not only efficacious 'against every kind of poison and powder', but would exhibit power of some kind that there was 'never a night so dark that two armies cannot fight each other' - a significant factor given the staged character of early battles.

[1]J. Evans and M.S. Serjeantson, *English Mediaeval Lapidaries,* (London: Early English Text Society, Original Series, 190, 1933), 11-15.

[J] Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing,* transl. M.E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

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[1] *Revelation*, 21, 1-21.

One particular stone referred to as 'In Sicily' is presented as a figured bas-relief cameo or engraved intaglio, the image on which was Mike a man piping with nine pipes and a harp player'. Although common enough iconography from Classical intaglio work, this jewel we are told significantly had come down from Pyrrhus, king of the Persians. When Pliny had spoken of Pyrrhus' magic agate, the picture he said it bore was of Nine muses together with Apollo holding his lyre, adding that was not creative work but rather the result of natural veins in the stone.[2]

For the early English doctor there was probably no need to explain who Pyrrhus was any more than there would be for us were it said to have once belonged to Napoleon or Nelson. A boy king, whose family claimed descent from the Trojan hero Achilles, Pyrrhus was named after a boys' war-dance of the time: third-century BC Macedonia. Ruler at 12, he became renowned as a general throughout the Classical world and beyond. Although the body of writings he left on the art of war have now disappeared so it is no longer possible to be clear as to his strategic principles, Hannibal was said to have been influenced by them, probably adopting hence the notion of employing professional troops and using Egyptian war-elephants. But a cold-blooded strategist prepared to countenance massive losses, Pyrrhus is now best remembered for a supposedly comic remark following one anti-Roman victory: 'Another victory like that and we are absolutely done for!' (the Pyrrhic victory).[3]

Pyrrhus and Ethelred's careers must have seemed very similar to the mediaeval mind. Boy kings: Pyrrhus at twelve, Ethelred no more than ten years of age, they carried through markedly turbulent periods of history with continual warfare and large-scale diplomatics. The English king finally admitted the survival of Viking settlement in eastern and northern England begun under Alfred (Dane-law). But maintaining his own position was a reliable system of taxes, handled by son-in-law Eadric. This man's surname, 'Streona', seems to have been an occupational designation meaning 'collector' or 'curator', at worst 'scrounger'. He was obviously efficient inasmuch as he remained in high-standing with subsequent kings Edmund Ironside and Canute. It was no doubt from the Collector's resources or some-such that King Ethelred obtained the precious jewel he donated to St Alban's Abbey, Hertfordshire, in 1004. The premier monastic establishment in the country, this was an exceptionally wealthy institution having received particular patronage from royal personages.

The stone was large as well as unusual, and was apparently expected to form the crown of a shrine to be built for the national protomartyr Alban, but was reserved on account of its therapeutic properties - leaving the sacred structure without its intended crest (British Library, Manuscript Cotton Claudius Eiv, f. 30).[4] The Abbey provided Ethelred's gift with a precious silver fauteuil, the whole more than 51bs (2.25kgs) in weight, from which it might be lifted for approved use. It was believed to be of value specifically in gynaecological medicine and would be loaned to (an assumedly chosen few) women to ease childbirth.

Although its material must be foreign (probably east European) in origin, the manufactured jewel need not have been imported directly into Anglo-Saxon England. Dr Hart's study of the Classical god of medicine Asclepius shows the worship of that deity to have been widespread in Roman Britain,[5] and Ethelred's talisman could very well have derived from one or other of the many centres of worship. Certainly if inherited from a native devotee, any therapeutic virtue the jewel was understood to possess would no doubt have survived the centuries no less than appreciation of its antique beauty.

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2 Pliny, *Natural History,* 37. 3, transl. D.E. Eichholz (London: Heinemann, 1940-63), X, 166-67.

3 Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus,* 21.14, transl. B. Perrin (London: Loeb, 1920), 417.

4 Thomas Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani,* ed. H.T. Riley, (London: Rolls Series, 28, 1867), I, 83-4.

5 G.D. Hart, *Asclepius: the god of medicine* (London: Royal Society of Medicine Press, 1998).

Similar if not identical to that said to have belonged to Pyrrhus, this stone was reported to have been a jewel so large it could scarcely be held in the hand. In a later mediaeval picture-book of the abbey's benefactors, the stone is depicted twice the size of Ethelred's hand (British Library, Manuscript Cotton Nero Dvii, f. 4^{V}). Its mount was inscribed in black with the names of both possessor and donor. A customary curse of excommunication was to be laid on anyone acquiring the gem fraudulently or retaining it beyond due leave. In any case, the stone's powers would reduce if kept away too long.

In 1005, to assuage a famine grim enough to send some of the more recent Viking settlers back across the North Sea, the duly charitable monks sold off a great part of their treasury to feed the starving poor. But there were retained on the one hand ornaments so valuable they would find no buyer and on the other hand certain 'finely carved stones of the kind popularly called cameo' - a term commonly used for stones believed to possess magico-medical properties. Thus it was it had remained into the thirteenth century to be sketched and discussed by the abbey's historian, author-artist Matthew Paris (British Library, Manuscript Cotton Nero Di, f.l46^{v}).[6]

If drawn full size, as other, smaller and simpler gem-stones on the page seem to have been, it would measure some three-and-a-half by two-and-a-half inches (9.5 x 7cms). However, it seems likely this is a half-size insert, for the gem is said to be 'truly almost half a foot long', ***vero fere semipedalis*** (14 cm); and by weight more than 5 ounces (0.14 kg).

In the Abbey book of benefactor portraits there was to be no attempt to indicate any cameo figuration (difficult at such a scale); but, as though simulating actuality, Ethelred's donation is painted in block colour: blue speckled white, with a white streak horizontally across the middle. Matthew had spoken of the material as being basically onyx, part chalcedony, and reddish sardonyx with the possibility of other colours out of sight.

Although not block-coloured like other stones illustrated on the page, colour variations seem indicated by two or three fine lines drawn horizontally across the stone, faded green and chestnut over paler grey background **(Fig. 1).** The artist's prime concern is apparently to provide a fully intelligible diagram of his sculptured subject. There in outline is clearly represented a Classical Greek or Roman cameo (possibly intaglio) of a kind well-known throughout Europe bearing the image of Asclepius.[7] This deity's particular relevance to childbirth lay in what his myth told of how he had himself been cut from the womb of his mother who had died in labour, and as a result of which he was given a name signifying 'to cut open'.

Unrecognised, or perhaps preferably unacknowledged, for what we now perceive the picture to have been (that of a pagan deity, albeit one of healing), Brother Matthew tells us the portrait was that of a figure in ragged dress ***pannosa,*** holding in his right hand a spear up which a twining serpent climbs, while he holds up on his left hand a clothed infant, shield on shoulder, gesturing backwards towards the man's head. However, his drawing allowed for no spear point such as might be figuratively expected, but rather the god Asclepius' ***caduceus:*** the serpent-befriended staff eventually familiar as a badge adopted by medical organisations like The Royal Society of Medicine or The BMA.

Significantly, at Asclepius' feet is drawn an emblematic eagle. Unfortunately ignored in Matthew's text, this probably portrays the prognostic caladrie: a bird whose forecast of success or failure in any situation was reflected in the direction it would face. Alternatively it might merely represent the cockerel sacred to a number of classical deities, though none more so than Asclepius, to whom it was commonly sacrificed on promise or receipt of healing.

In childbirth, probably with reference to the spearman it supposedly depicted, the St Albans stone was to be laid on the upper breast of the parturient woman, between the mamillary glands ***ponendus est supra pectus inter mamillas pariturae,*** then gradually and

6 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora,* ed. H.R. Luard (London: Rolls Series, 57, 1872-83), VI, 387-8.

7 Hart, *op. cit.* in footnote. 5.

successively drawn towards the lower part of the body ***paulatim et successive versus occiduam corporis partem submittendus;*** thus the baby secretly flees the approaching stone so as to be born, ***infantulas enim nasciturus lapidem subterfugit appropinquantem*** Presumably the spear's conjectured point would be directed foremost.

Unlikely that this should be equated with any kind of general massage as allowed the parturient in the encyclopedic Byzantine ***Gynaecology*** of Soranus where a variety of possibilities are discussed.[8] A range of depictions of conventional childbirth in mediaeval art are available in F. Weindler, and more conveniently, L.C. Mackinney.[9] Use of touch-stones by the mediaeval medical interest was wide-ranging.[10] When discussing uterine bleeding consequent upon miscarriage or difficult labour, Soranus had admitted the possibility of a talisman's psychological help inasmuch as 'through hope it might make the patient more cheerful';[1] although specifically dismissing any question of their physical therapeutic function.

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2016

Soranus, Gynaecology, II, 5-6, transl. O. Temkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 73-76 et passim.

" F. Weindler, Geschichte der gynakologisch-anatomischen Abbildung (Dresden: Zahn & Jaensch, 1908); L.C. Mackinney'Childbirth in the Middle Ages as seen in manuscript illustrations', Ciba Symposium, viii (1960), 230-36.

[12] T. Blaen, MedicalJewels, Magical Gems (Crediton: The Medieval Press, 2010), 3.1.

[13] Op. cit., Ill, 42; Temkin, 165.

Fig. 1 From British Library, Manuscript Cotton Nero D i, f.l46v
Enlarged so as to represent probable dimensions of original stone.