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**Notes on a Leaden Vessel in Gloucester Museum**

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## NOTES ON A LEADEN VESSEL IN GLOUCESTER MUSEUM.

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A LEADEN casket, which some experts consider was made in the thirteenth century, was found in old Woodchester Church, and is now preserved in the Gloucester Municipal Museum. The bottom is a circular disc of lead, having a diameter of  $8\frac{3}{4}$  inches, and on this are placed four sheets of lead soldered together, giving the vessel a rectangular shape. The vessel is  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height, and the rectangular top is  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches square. It is very probable that the circular bottom is a later addition. The casket weighs 20 lb.  $3\frac{1}{2}$  oz., and the four sides are stamped with impressions from the same mould. The modelling is very delicate, and the panel is framed in a most beautiful wavy floral border. The subject selected by the artist is the deposition from the cross and the emblems of the Passion. In the foreground are flowering plants, and the Blessed Virgin is seated with the dead Christ on her knees. St. John supports the head of our Lord, while St. Mary Magdalene has placed one of her hands on His knee, and the other rests on His left hand. Our Lord's right arm hangs down over the knee of the Blessed Virgin. Behind is the empty cross, and the three nails which ancient tradition declares were used in the crucifixion are depicted—one on the top and one on each arm of the cross. The crown of thorns encircles the top of the cross, while on the scroll above are the letters, "I.N.R.I.," standing for "*Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum*." The spear of Longinus is crossed by the reed and the sponge, while above the two arms of the cross are the cock that warned St. Peter, and the pelican nourishing her brood with her own blood. The "pelican in its piety" is an ancient and very eloquent emblem of the self-

sacrifice of the Redeemer, who "gave His flesh for the life of the world."

On one side of the upright shaft of the cross the head of the High Priest, wearing a mitre, is depicted; and on the other is the head of Pontius Pilate, surmounted by a crown. Both the High Priest and Pontius Pilate have long pointed beards. The ladder with thirteen rungs, the purse of Judas Iscariot overflowing with money, an impudent repulsive head in the act of spitting, three dice—two with 6 on the top and one with 4—the seamless vest, and vessels for holding those liquids which the Evangelists narrate were presented to our Lord, are all depicted in this small picture. The pillar twined with the cord, and two scourges or flagella—the "horribile flagellum" as Horace calls it—or whips of several thongs are also represented in wonderful detail in the extremely limited space at the artist's disposal.

Before we consider the probable use of this ancient vessel, we must mention the existence of two other small leaden vessels. One is preserved at Lewis Castle,<sup>1</sup> and it probably dates from Anglo-Saxon times. It is rectangular in shape, being 14 inches in length by 8 inches in height. It had iron handles, of which parts remain, and it is ornamented with rows of dots. The vessel is adorned with a triangle, in which is a pattern and a small cross. The other small leaden vessel is in the Maidstone Museum, and is somewhat dilapidated. It is circular in shape, and was found in the Medway. This little casket is only 3½ inches in height, and has a diameter of 11½ inches. A rim, half an inch wide, is supported by twelve flanges affixed to the exterior of the vessel. At each of the two opposite points in the rim are two flanges which meet at right angles, to give hold-fast to an arched handle originally inserted at these points. The spaces between the flanges are decorated in low relief with an ornament of graceful foliage.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This vessel is illustrated in a paper in *The Architectural Review* (vol. xix., p. 100), written by Mr. Lawrence Weaver, F.S.A.

<sup>2</sup> See "English Lead Fonts," by Lawrence Weaver, F.S.A., *Architectural Review*, vol. xix., p. 100. It is also described in the *Archæologia Cantiana*, vol. xiii., p. 209.

Mr. C. Roach Smith some years ago described another small leaden vessel found at Felixstowe, and which he considered belonged to the tenth century. "It had lost its rim, but seems to have retained some traces of two or three flanges. It was 6 inches high, 31 inches in circumference and had an iron handle. There were but four ornaments on its exterior, each of which represented a stiff-stalked plant with leaves and flowers at its base, having also two branches each like the central stem ending in three leaves."<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to know what these small leaden vessels were used for. It is very doubtful if any of them were ever used as fonts. Small fonts were rarely, if ever, used at the time they were constructed, and even if they were portable fonts they would be heavy to carry any great distance. The fact that they are made of lead does not, however, militate against this theory, as fonts were occasionally made of this metal, and our country still possesses leaden fonts at Frampton-on-Severn, Siston, Oxenhall, Tidenham, Sandhurst, Llancaut, Slimbridge, Haresfield and Down Hatherley. Mr. Lawrence Weaver, F.S.A., writing in the *Architectural Review* for March, 1906, says of the leaden vessel at Lewis Castle: "The evidence of its use as a font is slender, in fact confined to the existence of a cross in a triangle of ornament. There are the remains of iron handles, which seem to show that it was not an ossuary, a reliquary or a stoup. But its use must remain conjectural." Could any of these small leaden vessels have been salt-cellars is a question which deserves some consideration. As they possessed handles, it is, therefore, unlikely they could have been used as heart-caskets, although the size would be about right for such a purpose. The heart-casket of Richard I. is a leaden box nearly 1 foot long, 8 inches wide, and 5 inches deep.<sup>2</sup>

The leaden vessel from old Woodchester Church is not at all likely to have been used as a font, as the decoration is

<sup>1</sup> See *Archæologia Cantiana*, vol. xii., p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Antiquary*, New Series, vol. iii., p. 385.

unusual for a vessel used for such a purpose, it is smaller than any known example, and it has no marking on the edge where hinges or locks might have been attached. It may have been a reliquary, or a stoup, or a lavabo. Possessing no lid, and apparently not constructed for one, it therefore seems unlikely to have been made for a reliquary. It may have been a holy water stoup, in which use it would, doubtless, have stood upon a stone bracket at the entrance to the church. However, there is no known instance of a stoup being made of lead, and the character of the decoration hardly encourages the idea, but it is at least not impossible that it should have been used for such a purpose. It may have been a lavabo. It could not, however, have been easy to carry and was heavy. Portable vessels are more convenient for the priest to wash his hands in at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Yet it may have been made for this object, and in that case it is probably unique, and is the only ancient leaden lavabo known to exist in England.

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