THE NEWARK MEDAL OF ANTHONY ASCHAM

By MARY P. BELLAMY

The entry in the Calendar of State Papers for January 16th 1650 reads—'Anthony Ascham approved to go as resident to the King of Spain and to have notice to go in the fleet going southward.' After negotiations had taken place as to his allowance and about the instructions and letters he was to carry as ambassador from the Parliament of England, Ascham began his journey to Spain. On June 5th he arrived at Madrid. The day after he was murdered. As a result, six English royalists¹ were arrested and imprisoned. One report states that 'this murther was committed by former consultation and with a deliberate minde.' The murderers swore that they had acted heroically—'Let's kill the Resident for a destroier of our Nation.' Conversely, another account asserts that 'these persons rashly ventured on the act and had not so much consulted it among themselves but met accidently neere the Lodging and so came upon it.' Whatever the true reasons behind Ascham's murder, it served a useful political purpose. In his letters and speeches, Cromwell referred to the murder of 'poor Ascham' in connection with the war against Spain². On several occasions, Milton, in the Letters of State, wrote at length to the King of Spain about 'the villainous murder of our Agent Anthony Ascham' and demanded vengeance on the murderers³. Although his death was full

¹ John Guillim, William Spark, Valentine and Henry Progers, John Halsal and William Arnet. The spelling of the surnames varies according to the source.
³ Milton urges that 'deserved punishment may be speedily inflicted upon those parricides.' Westminster, 28th June 1650.
of religious and political implications, it is also of interest numismatically. The unfortunate Ascham was buried in the yard of the posada where he died but not before a medal was discovered on his person. There exist today three contemporary references, all varying in their interpretation of this medal or talisman. In addition, two of the three sources have a drawing of the medal accompanying the text.

Firstly, reference is made to the medal in the Madrid News Sheet, dated 1st July 1650, which is preserved in the Chapter library at Lincoln Cathedral. Besides hazarding a guess as to the significance of the medal the writer sends a copy of it (Fig. 1). The News Sheet is headed 'The Abstract of some Letters written out of Spaine concerning the Death of Mr. Ascham, Agent there, for the Rebels of England. Together with the figure of a Plate found on his left side next his skinne.' On either side of the drawing is the following explanation—'Wee send you likewise a modell of a plate found upon the Person of Mr. Ascham after hee was killed upon his left syde next his skinn and nearest his heart, whether it were a combina-tion entered into by such a number at that time as some heere believe or whether it were a charme by which he meant to preserve his vital parts from being hurt, and they who dispatched him say that they could not make their swords enter on that syde you will best judge.'

Secondly, among the Thomason Tracts in the British Museum there is a paper by a Doctor Don Augustine de Hierro entitled 'The Process and Pleadings in the Court of Spain upon the death of Anthonie Ascham, Resident for the Parliament of England.' According to the

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1 According to the Licentiate Don Fernando de Guevara and Altamirano in an account dated 10th June 1650 and included in the Thurloe State Papers, the Inn was in the street del Cavallero de Grava. Hyde comments—'The Fellow himselfe was the next night put upright in a deepe hole . . . the Posada ever since remayning without any Guests.'
The English translation of Hierro's description of the medal reads—"They say this Ambassador came to seduce and deceiv by a book of his which was found among his papers and a medall which hee had, which had on the one side Nebart and on the other XII and the word Obstricti, and they say that it signifies those XII which gain'd Nebart and occasion'd the wars: Hence they infer, that he came to deceive, there was also found a Crown stab'd with a poniard.' It is curious that in the original version in Spanish, Hierro makes no mention at all of the crown and poniard.

Thirdly, in a letter dated 21st June 1650, Lord Cottington and Sir Edward Hyde, Royalist Ambassadors to Spain, write in their account to the King of particulars relative to Ascham—'There was found about the person of the man when he was dead upon his left syde and next his skynne and nearest his heart, a plate of silver, which is now in his Majestie's keeping and a model whereof we herein send your Majesty, we here take it to be some combination entrecl into at that time, it may be the Hyrogliphique may be better understood nearen England, though it wants not severall coments here.' This letter together with the 'model' referred to are in the Bodleian library. The medal is drawn on an oval-shaped piece of paper which is stuck at the top of the letter.

The two drawings although very similar differ from each other. Are they independent versions of the medal or was one drawing copied from the other? The two accompanying descriptions are close and at times the wording is the same. Although the letter has an earlier date than the Madrid News Sheet it is difficult to conceive of anyone having access to a letter to the King written partly in code and signed by Cottington and Hyde. It is possible that there existed yet another drawing of the medal.

The general contemporary opinion of the medal seemed to be that it was either a charm or amulet or a medallion of political significance. What light can be shed on the medal, considering it now over three hundred years later? The subject can be viewed from four aspects.

1. A comparison of the drawings and descriptions.
2. To compare and contrast the medal with a Newark siege piece.
3. Why and how it came to be in Ascham’s possession on the day he was murdered and to consider his connections, if any, with Newark and the Civil War.
4. Perhaps the most aggravating question of all, what happened to the medal?

To take the first point. It is noticeable that one of the descriptions does not tally with the drawings. According to Hierro, the medal had on it Nebart and Obstricti. But it must be remembered that accuracy in the details concerning the medal may not have been of prime importance in the 'learned and elaborate charge'. To the Spaniards, it was the finding of such a medal on Ascham which indicated without doubt that the ambassador came as 'an imposter and a regicide'—a regicide referring to the part Ascham is believed to have played in the mock trial of the King in 1649. Hierro says that Ascham 'had been killed as

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1 The Spanish version was published in 1650. The Preface to the English account is dated 8th May 1651 and is dedicated by R. W. to 'his truly honoured friend Sir W. Butler.'
2 MS. Carte 130 fols. 224–5.
3 The Commissioners for the trial of the King chose, among others, Dr. Dorislaus and Mr. Aske, to draw up and manage the charge against Charles. If Aske and Ascham were the same man, as has been assumed by some scholars, then the deaths of the two regicides have some interesting parallels as both suffered a similar fate. Dorislaus was sent to the Hague as agent to the States of Holland. Like Ascham, he stayed in lodgings where he was murdered on May 12th 1649—roughly a month before Ascham's death. Both the Dutch and Spanish authorities appeared to make little or no attempt to bring the murderers of the two men to justice.
a heretic for a disturber of Public Peace who particularly fomented the death of the King and the change of government'. He sees some sinister meaning in XII as those 'who gain'd Nebart and occasion'd the warrs', in order to justify to some extent the murderers' actions.

As already mentioned, the interpolation by the translator, James Howell, is puzzling—'there was also found a Crown stab'd with a poniard'. If drawings of the medal had not survived, one would infer from this that two objects, a medal and a crown were found on Ascham. But it is probable that the translator is merely elaborating on Hierro's description. Possibly Howell had seen the drawing of the medal in the Madrid News Sheet which would have arrived in England by the time he had started on his translation of Hierro.

To come to the second point. Apparent is the very close resemblance, though not in size and shape, between the medal and a shilling siege piece of Newark (Fig. 3). Understandably the Spaniards could not be expected to recognise the similarity. Hierro is confused over the Nebart and Obstricti and totally ignorant as to the original meaning of XII. Moreover, he assigns Obstricti to the same side as XII. But it is strange that Cottington and Hyde, being Englishmen, did not comment on the medal but merely wrote that 'the Hyrogliphique may be better understood nearr England'. They had arrived from England only a year previously. Even if they had not seen a Newark siege piece at first hand, they would surely have heard of the siege at Newark which had played such an important part in the Civil War.

A first glance at the Carte MS drawing (is it the work of Hyde's secretary, William Edgeman, who wrote the letter?) suggests that the medal was an oval 'plate of silver' with lettering, similar to that on a Newark siege piece, scratched on with a finely pointed instrument. This supposition is possible though most probably the medal was originally a siege piece. Apart from details, however, such as the dots separating the letters OBS instead of the final colon, the medal differs in four distinct ways from a 1646 shilling siege piece of Newark.

1. There is a dagger or poniard through the crown.
2. There is no c e.
3. The crown on the medal is shallow and quite unlike any of the crowns portrayed on a Newark siege piece.
4. Newark is spelt with an e.
As far as the difference in the crowns is concerned, an artist would not be expected to copy in detail the elaborate crown of a Newark siege piece. The addition, however, of the E at the end of Newark is odd. Could it have been a slip by the artist? For there are no 1646 shillings spelt with an E in either of the two representative collections of Newark siege money, that in the British Museum and that formerly in the museum at Newark. Some of the 1645 shillings are spelt in this way but not those dated 1646.

But the dagger through the crown and the omission of c R are more difficult to explain away and point to the fact that the medal seems to have been a siege piece tooled. The engraving of the dagger could have been added. The rather indistinguishable cross surmounting the crown may even have been enlarged to form the hilt and at the same time the c R erased. On one 1646 siege piece a definite attempt has been made at some time to remove the lower part of the c and the scratches made by the tooing instrument are hardly noticeable. It is significant that no mention is made of the letters c R in either of the two drawings or in the three descriptions.

Both the drawings would have us believe that the medal was oval-shaped with lettering on only one side and was much larger than a siege piece. But we know from Hierro that the medal had an obverse and reverse. He states this quite clearly—‘on the one side Nebart and on the other XII and the word Obstricti.’ A person copying the medal would most probably start with the dagger and crown and the XII on the obverse, then turn to the reverse; and the lettering is in this logical sequence in the drawings. As to the size. According to the Madrid News Sheet (and also Cottington and Hyde) Ascham wore the medal nearest his heart for protection. But the News Sheet also states that the medal was thought to be a charm and here ‘charm’ is the operative word. No doubt the writer was thinking foremost of the spiritual property which would protect the wearer rather than the actual metal of the medal itself. The murderers said that ‘they could not make their swords enter on that syde’ on which Ascham carried his medal. It would have been a miracle if so small an object as a siege piece could have afforded such protection.

Why should a siege piece of the shilling denomination have been chosen? All three sources infer that the twelve was a ‘combination entred into’. As far as I know no evidence has so far come to light of a conspiracy, secret society or suchlike in which Ascham was involved and in which the number twelve was significant. If twelve had no special meaning a shilling was probably chosen due to the fact that a piece of this denomination would be most readily available for tooing. Of all the siege pieces minted at Newark the shilling was one of the most common denominations.

Ascham’s medal must in some way have been affixed to his clothing but how the drawing does not make clear. Presumably it was pierced. Several of the Newark siege pieces which survive today are holed and these were probably kept as keepsakes or badges. One, in fact, has been pierced at the four corners which indicates that it may have been fastened to material.

To discuss the third point. Why did Ascham wear the medal? The alterations, the dagger through the crown and the deletion of c R, suggest that the medal may have been a Parliamentary badge. Newark had been besieged several times and the surrender to the Scottish army on May 6th 1646 of a town which had been for many years a strategic and important stronghold for the royalists was a great triumph for the enemy forces. A great variety of

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1 The artist must have copied direct from the actual medal. It would have been impossible for someone to concoct a drawing from the meagre reference of Cottington and Hyde and the misleading description by Hierro.
devices and mottoes were used by the Parliamentarians on standards and banners to urge on their troops. So why could not a 1646 Newark siege piece have been altered in order to commemorate a victory for which they had all been striving? A dagger through a crown was indeed symbolic of the downfall of the royalists and later the death of the King. Ascham wrote a book against monarchical government which showed that he felt strongly about the Parliamentarian cause, so it would be quite in keeping for a man of his temperament and position to be wearing such a badge.

If the medal was not worn by Ascham primarily as a Parliamentary emblem, why was he wearing it at the time of his death? May it have been a good luck talisman or as the Madrid News Sheet suggests 'a charme by which he meant to preserve his vital parts from being hurt'? From various sources it appears that Ascham expected trouble at his new post and that he felt the need of some protection, however slight. Indeed, his murder is proof that Ascham’s fears were justified. Certainly in some quarters news of his appointment was not favourably received and points to the fact that Ascham could not expect much of a welcome when he arrived in Spain. Charles the Second’s ambassadors, Cottington and Hyde, remonstrated to the King of Spain against the reception of Ascham as Parliamentary ambassador. It inflamed the Spaniards too, that a book against monarchical government had been written 'by this man who now comes agent for the rebels' and this is emphasised in Hierro’s paper—'this ambassador came to seduce and deceive by a book of his which was found among his papers.'

The Clarendon State Papers for February 27th 1650 record that before his departure, Ascham said that he expected some affront at landing. Reports state that on his arrival at Puerto Santa Maria, Ascham was 'in so much alarm for his safety that he would not stir from the port . . . until he had a Maestro di Campo and three or four soldiers to guard and accompany him.' In Ascham’s letter, however, to Speaker Lenthall in London, the tone is one of frustration rather than fear.

Even if Ascham was fearful of his life and felt that he needed some sort of charm or talisman to ward off danger, was there any significance in that he had a medal resembling a siege piece from the town of Newark? Did Ascham have any connections with Newark either during the Civil War or at any other time? Certainly throughout his life he was connected with this part of England. The family name itself is a regional one apparently of great antiquity and is said to have taken its name from the villages known as East and West Askham near York; and Askham, south of Retford. The Lords’ Journals, in the entry concerning the appointment of Ascham as tutor to the Duke of York, later James II, describe him as a ‘Lincolnshire gentleman’. Also the Parish Registers for Boston record the baptism, on March 6th 1613/14, of Anthonie, son of Thomas Ascome. From Eton where he was a King’s scholar,
Ascham went up to King's College, Cambridge at the age of sixteen. There he became a B.A., an M.A. and subsequently a Fellow until his death in 1650.

It is also of interest to note that the Madrid News Sheet is, at the present time, in the Chapter Library of Lincoln Cathedral. In all the documents made available to me on my visit to Lincoln I could find no record of how the News Sheet came to be in this particular library, for it was not, as one would expect, part of Dean Honeywood’s collection acquired during his travels at the time of the Civil War and Commonwealth. Its presence there may be due to the fact that Ascham’s controversial book brought forth a paper and censure from Robert Sanderson who was, according to Isaac Walton, consecrated Bishop of Lincoln in 1660—ten years after Ascham’s death. ¹ A connection may have been established earlier during the Civil War when Sanderson, a prisoner at the Parliamentary garrison at Lincoln, was released in exchange for a Mr. Clark, prisoner at the Royalist garrison at Newark.

I have done a great deal of research into the life of Ascham but as yet I have been unable to find any definite link between Ascham, Newark and the Civil War. Moreover, the whereabouts of Ascham at the time of the siege is not known. The Commons Books² consulted in King’s College library reveal that, particularly between the years 1645 and 1648, he was more often than not away from Cambridge. The Catalogues of both Anthony Allen and Berkeley Seymour draw attention to the fact that Ascham was a great traveller. In accounts of the siege housed in Newark library, I could find no mention of the name Ascham. This does not rule out the possibility that he may, in some way, have been connected with the Parliamentarians at Newark. We know from mention made of him in the Interregnum Volumes under the General Assessment for the Borough of Boston³ that Ascham’s father, Thomas, an Alderman of Boston, was actively engaged in the war.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a tooled siege piece from Newark should have been discovered on a man with these connections in this part of England.

To deal with the last point. Naturally one is led to wonder where the medal is now. What happened to it after the murder? Contemporary accounts in this respect are illuminating. George Fisher, Ascham’s secretary, reported to the Council of State that ‘a multitude of people (as the custome is here in such cases) as soon as the murther was committed entred in the house and some things are missing, which were stole away, before the justice would come. What remaynes (as well as money as goods) shall be delivered unto me and an in-inventory taken’.⁴ The account of a Mr. Lawrence Chambers, who was staying at the inn where Ascham was murdered, is similar to Fisher’s.⁵ In the circumstances, therefore, it is remarkable, not that the medal should have come to light on Ascham’s murder, but that it should have been saved from grasping hands to be recorded for posterity.

In ‘Memorials of the English Affairs’, Whitelock states, contrary to Fisher’s hopes, that ‘Mr. Ascham’s papers and goods were secured by the Spanish Secretary of State’ and Hyde refers to the ‘plate of silver which is now in his Majestie’s keeping.’ This would explain how Hierro came to know of the medal and how drawings came to be made for inclusion in the

¹ The censure in the form of a letter headed ‘Dr. Sanderson to N. N. on the obedience to be paid to an usurped authority’, is among Archbishop Sancroft’s MS. collection of letters of Eminent Persons and is printed in D’Oyly’s Life of Sancroft, vol. 2.
² Liber Communarum, vols. xxviii et seq.
³ Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 23rd June 1647.
⁴ Thurloe State Papers. Letter dated Madrid, 9th June 1650. Also in Rymer’s Foedera, vol. xx. Fisher derived his information from Griffin, Ascham’s servant, to whom the murderers offered no violence. He was the only surviving witness of the murder except for the murderers themselves.
⁵ Thurloe State Papers. The account ‘Indorsed by President Bradshaw. Delivered me by hands of Mr. Chambers’ is dated 27th March 1652.
News Sheet and in a letter from Cottington and Hyde to the King. As far as I can ascertain, there is no record of the inventory referred to by Fisher, neither can I find out what the Secretary of State representing the King eventually did with Ascham’s belongings.

In conclusion. That the Ascham medal once existed there is no doubt. We know from written evidence that Ascham did carry about his person a medal or talisman. Although the contemporary drawings and descriptions may not be entirely accurate, all the evidence points to the fact that it was a shilling siege piece of Newark, altered by tooling into a Parliamentary emblem. But was it unique?—the isolated example of a man’s fanatical devotion to the Parliamentarian cause, or were there several and the one discovered on Ascham an example. If the latter is true, who owned them and maybe wore them? Do similar ones exist in museums or in private collections, the owners being unaware of their historical interest?

If it was not worn chiefly by Ascham as a parliamentary badge, was it a charm or talisman for his journey to Spain? The Spaniards at the time were unsure of its significance. We do not know how long it had been in Ascham’s possession. It must have meant something special to him, for he did not carry it about in his luggage or even in his pockets but wore it ‘next his skinn and nearest his heart.’ This concealment in itself has an air of secrecy about it.

In 1937, W. H. Kynaston, Canon of Lincoln, referring to the reprint of the Madrid News Sheet drawing in his ‘Catalogue of Foreign Books in the Library of Lincoln Cathedral’, wrote the following—‘The illustration is reproduced in the hope that some clue to its meaning may be forthcoming.’

My thanks are due to the Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral for permission to reprint the Madrid News Sheet drawing; to the Department of Western MSS, Bodleian library, Oxford, for all their help and for allowing me to reproduce the Carte drawing; to the Provost and Fellows of King’s College, Cambridge for enabling me to consult relevant documents in the library and to quote from college manuscripts; to the staff of the University library, Cambridge and Newark library for their assistance and lastly but by no means least to Dr. J. P. C. Kent, F.S.A., of the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, for all his advice and helpful comments.