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The Dymock Curse

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the hair and ears and reaches to the point of the chin. Indeed, were it not for the position of the ring this secondary figure might well have formed the principal motif, for the grotesque appears to be an embellishment to the head-dress.

At the top of the escutcheon is a group of stylized foliage raised on a stem. A similar, and perhaps originally smaller, group of foliage is placed at the bottom of the escutcheon, but this has been much battered and broken by the action of the ring.

The bronze was cast as a single piece by the *cire perdue* method—a very considerable technical achievement. Its design is curious and would repay further study, but it is probably a purely fanciful creation of the medieval craftsman, comparable with those half-human, half-animal creatures to be found in illuminated MSS of the 13th and 14th centuries.

The naturalistic foliage at the top and bottom of the escutcheon has been compared with that on the Warwick gittern, now in the British Museum, which has in turn been dated from the foliage on the capitals in the chapter-house of Southwell Minster, built *c.* 1290–5. On this evidence the date of the closing ring is considered to be either very late 13th or more probably first quarter of the 14th century.

Considering its importance this piece has received singularly little attention. The earliest illustration so far traced appears to be a rather crude engraving in *Specimens of the Ancient Sculpture and Painting now remaining in England . . .* by Dawson Turner (1780–7). It is described, not particularly accurately, and illustrated in the *Journal* of the British Archaeological Association, XVIII (1912), 161, and there are passing references to it in the *Transactions* of our Society (XIV, 131, and XXIII, 119–20).

I am indebted to Mr M. R. Taylor, formerly Assistant Keeper in the British Museum Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, for information regarding the dating of this piece.

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'THE DYMOCK CURSE'

On display in the Folk Museum at Gloucester is a small lead tablet, measuring $3\frac{1}{4}$ by $3\frac{1}{8}$ ins, engraved with symbols of the occult, an imprecation 'to Banish away from this place and country' and the name, written backwards, of Sarah Ellis. The Museum has dated the tablet to the second half of the 17th century, after the publication in 1651 of a popular English translation by J. Freake of a well-known 16th-century work, Henry Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. The tablet was discovered by Canon R. Horton at Wilton Place, Dymock, in 1892, and acquired by the Museum at the Wilton Place sale in 1947. It is briefly described and illustrated as 'The Dymock Curse' in J. E. Gethyn-Jones, *Dymock down the ages* (2nd edn, 1966), 104–5.¹

Canon Horton carried out 'a great deal of investigation' in attempts to identify Sarah Ellis without success, but there is a local legend that the curse so affected the woman that she committed suicide and was buried at the cross roads still called Ellis's Cross near Four Oaks.² One would not expect Sarah's burial to be recorded in a parish register, but no other member of the Ellis family occurs in the Dymock parish registers.³

Ellis's Cross is actually situated on the parish boundary between Dymock and Oxenhall, and an adjoining field in Oxenhall is named Elliss Close on an estate map of 1775.⁴ The Oxenhall parish registers were destroyed in a fire at the vicarage in 1664, but the earliest surviving volume contains two entries relating to an Ellis family.⁵ Jane, daughter of Anthony Ellis was baptized on 7 September

1. A longer description of the tablet and its discovery is given in E. S. Hartland, 'On an inscribed leaden tablet found at Dymock, in Gloucestershire', *The Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist*, III, no. 3 (July 1897), 140–50.

2. Gloucester City Museum, letter from H. Trubshaw to Mrs Thackwell, 9 Nov. 1929.

3. I. Gray and J. E. Gethyn-Jones, *The registers of the church of St. Mary, Dymock, 1538–1790* (B.G.A.S., 1960).

4. Gloucestershire Records Office, Photocopy 5.

5. Glos. R.O., P241/IN 1/1.

1667, and Anthony was buried on 19 February 1668/9. The absence of the Ellis family from other records, and there are several 17th-century estate rentals and surveys for Oxenhall, indicates that they did not live in the parish for long, and that the curse evidently succeeded in its aim. Whether Sarah was Anthony Ellis's wife, and whether they lived near Four Oaks, a small and poor hamlet built on encroachments of manorial waste at the limits of the parish, are matters that must remain conjectural. The Oxenhall registers at least suggest that Sarah Ellis came from Oxenhall and not Dymock, and confirm the tentative dating of the tablet by the Museum.

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