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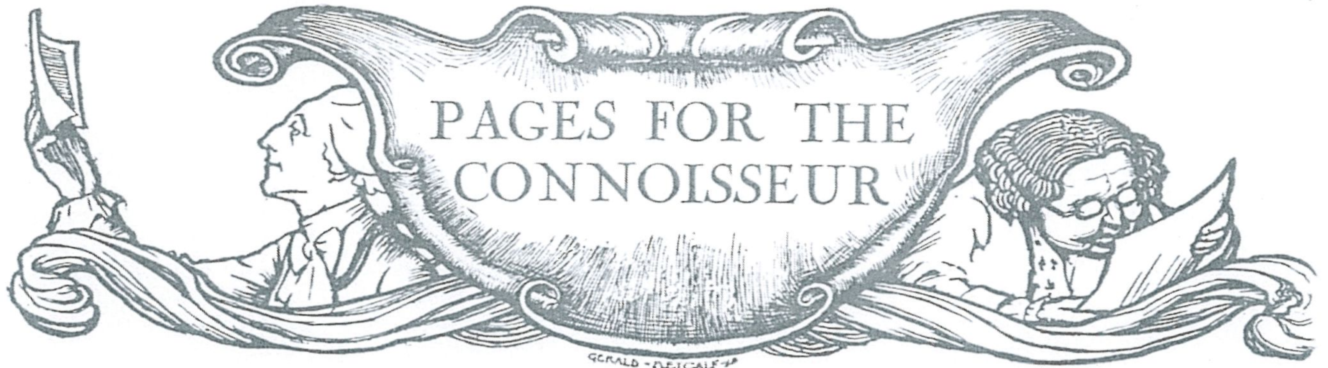


II.—THE ECCLESIASTICAL USE OF PEWTER

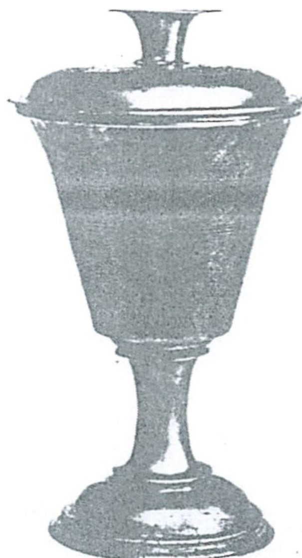
BY ANTONIO DE NAVARRO, F.S.A.

AFTER the discarding of the glass chalice because of its brittleness, the wooden cup for the reason of its porous nature, and the brass, lead and bronze vessels on account of their tendency to oxidise and nauseate the communicant (vomitum provocant), pewter alone remained as a recognised alternative to the gold or silver chalice. From earliest times it was specially distinguished for use at the altar. In France the use of the pewter chalice, which was general during the middle ages, continued to a modified degree until the Revolution. In England, on the contrary, its employment at the altar was discontinued in the ninth century. The reason for this variance is to be found in the decrees of the different councils which legislated upon the rubrics of the mass. Whereas the use of pewter church vessels was repeatedly prohibited in England, notably at Westminster in 1075, several of the French councils, beginning with that of Rheims in the ninth century, expressly permitted the use of the pewter chalice in cases of necessity. A confirmation of this measure may be found in an ordinance of the French Pewterers' Company (always rigidly enforced) forbidding the gilding of base metal except when used for ecclesiastical vessels. What to the lay mind might seem a violation of synodical decrees in England is the mention of pewter cruets in late pre-Reformation church inventories. The explanation of this seeming disregard of authority is that, the contents of these little vessels being always in an unconsecrated state, precious metal receptacles were not considered necessary. But the Church was none the less extremely careful of their proper custody. A late fourteenth century inventory in the treasury of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Paris contains not only the mention of a pair of pewter cruets, but minute instructions for their special care: "The dish shall be cleaned and rubbed each day; if of pewter, it must be washed every three months in hot water and soap-suds, rubbed with oats or other grain with husks, or with powdered egg-shells, after which it shall be washed again in clear water, and dried and polished with a piece of clean linen." It is obvious that these scrupulous directions were more especially intended for the cruets themselves—vessels composed of a metal which demanded careful cleaning, and of a size that rendered purification an awkward operation. The use of pewter ampullæ for holding the holy oils in bulk, and of chrismatories, for small quantities, is a further proof that precious metals were only required for eucharistic vessels.

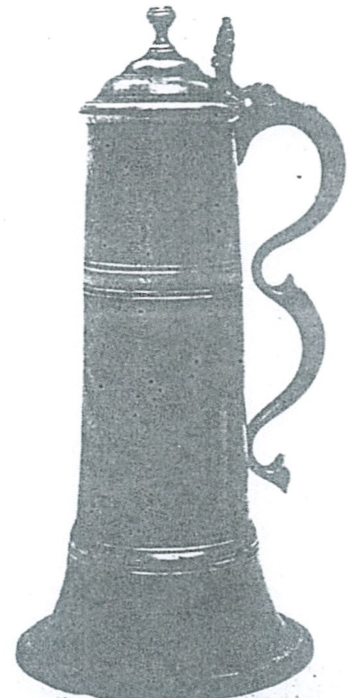
The law of the English Corporation, also forbidding the gilding of pewter, contained no exception in favour of sacred vessels. The first mention of this ordinance in the records of the Company occurs in the years 1621-22. It should be remembered, however, that the dogma of Transubstantiation had undergone a material change in the Reformed Church by virtue of the Act of Parliament of January 15th, 1549. Relieved thus of all ecclesiastical reasons for suppressing what seems to have been but an occasional practice, it still remains a fact that the English guilds in early days were jealous, truculent in mutual intercourse, and that this very antagonism would have made it impossible for a humble though powerful company to gild its lesser importance with the lustre of a more aristocratic rival.

It may be stated, therefore, that while the use of the pewter chalice in pre-Reformation times had to do with financial embarrassment, the change of belief in the dogma of Transubstantiation during the reign of Edward VI, which removed automatically the stigma from the base-metal vessel, added a further justification of its ritualistic adoption. Relieved of its more profound sacramental nature, the pewter chalice took on then an extended use in reformed districts. A number of

SCOTCH CHURCH FLAGON, XVIII CENTURY



ELIZABETHAN CHALICE, 1570-71.



ENGLISH FLAGON, XVIII CENTURY.

The property of A. de N.

these still minister to celebrant and communicant: a practice due more to the convention of earlier years than to the *force majeure* of poverty. But in none of these cases is the cup lined with gold, and for the reason already stated.

The rarest "finds" in pewter are gilded pieces, domestic or ecclesiastical. This is due not only to the rigid laws against the practice, but to the fact that at the time of clandestine gilding the "searches" of the London and provincial companies were in full activity, and the discovery of any gilded piece was followed by confiscation and destruction. I have only come across one specimen during twenty alert years: a small plate, which was found in the moat of a friend's house in Northamptonshire. Considering the nature and antiquity of its place of burial, it should have proved a piece of unique importance; but on careful examination the applied surface proved to be the result of electro-gilding—an unwelcome revelation. This discovery fixed its date at (*circa*) 1840, and premature enthusiasm faded into the limbo of deferred hopes. The early mode of gilding consisted in applying a solution of gold and mercury to the piece, and then firing it. The result was an evaporation of the mercury and the adhesion of the gold, which was afterwards burnished by diligent rubbing. The gilding of this particular plate was badly done: a modern attempt, inviting sepulture in the waters of a seventeenth century moat.

During the sixteenth century (and probably before) the Scottish Church employed pewter for a number of its altar pieces. Few specimens, however, survive to provide ocular proof of the fact. Mr. Ingleby Wood tells us that a year previous to the upheaval of the Reformation two pewter candlesticks formed a part of the furnishing of the high altar in the Church of St. Giles at Edinburgh. That the base metal should have been so highly honoured is obvious proof of the esteem in which it was held at a time when the Reformation was hammering at the door of Rome. And a fair deduction, in decreasing importance, would seem to be that, if principal candlesticks in pewter were countenanced by the Church, how much more probable the use of the metal for other altar appanage that had not to do with eucharistic ministration.

Of post-Reformation pewter Scotland possesses a bountiful supply. This may be partly explained by the fact that in the many changes from the Presbyterian to the Episcopalian cult, and *vice versa*, and to the many confiscations and alterations of church plate which marked the variations of ritual, it was the silver vessels that were promptly seized, the base-metal ones surviving by reason of their unimportance. The culminating note of protest in many of these changes of worship seems to have been a revolution in the shape of the chalice: from the Episcopalian vessel, which at times suggested the pre-Reformation type, to the Presbyterian cup, which represented a determined effort to repudiate the Roman *calix missa*. A triumphant departure is the evangelised beaker, originally a domestic vessel imported from the Low Countries to the East Coast of Scotland.

It is obvious that while all attention and antagonism were centred upon silver church plate the pewter vessels secured for themselves an immunity from change or destruction. What undoubtedly increased their number was the Act of Parliament of 1617 which enjoined upon all parishes, rich and poor, to provide the necessary church plate for the proper ministration of the Sacrament. A reason for a further increase was the melting down of the Church's silver vessels to provide funds for the Covenanters of 1638. These pieces had to be replaced, and the use of precious metal being, for the time, beyond the resources of the protesting body, a base-metal substitute was the only alternative.

POCKET COMMUNION SET WITH HAND-CARVED CASE.
Purchased in Iceland by Mr. Lewis Clapperton.

Chalices, patens, flagons, lavers, baptismal bowls, survive in numbers and are still used in many districts. Perhaps the most numerous, and certainly the most interesting, are the communion cups, which existed in pairs and in sets of four, six, eight and twelve, with a relative number of flagons for supplying the necessary wine. Large congregations were responsible for the increased number of cups, also the practice of the Episcopalian Church of administering communion only on two Sundays during the year—Christmas and Easter. According to the practice of the Presbyterian Church, the communicants sat at a long table, covered with a white cloth, and were served with bread and wine by the Elders. It is possible that a greater number of cups were used at these conventional functions than under the Episcopalian rule of only administering the Sacrament at the altar-rail.

The Presbyterian ritual recalls the little Saxon church at Deerhurst, in Gloucestershire, where "The Lord's Board" of Puritan days still remains. Flanked by an oak dado, three stationary benches, or seats, surround the shallow chancel, and a balustraded altar-rail completes the sombre quadrangle. "The Lord's Board" was situated within the enclosure. Under Puritan influence this was moved about, for the purpose of dissociating it from the Roman altar which demanded rigid orientation. (In Holland the "table" for communion is still movable.) It is obvious that the bread and wine must have been served to each seated communicant in this enclosure, the slanting angle of the desks indicating their purpose: a rest for books, a support for elbows in prayer.

Under Laudian influence the peripatetic altar, which in some cases had with determined purpose been moved to different parts of the church, found its way back again to its original place and orientation.

Among church pieces the Scotch laver is, perhaps, unique. Originally a domestic vessel, as its name and early records indicate, it was probably introduced into the Church of Scotland during the first Episcopalian Establishment which required all congregations to provide a laver and basin for the sacrament of baptism. It will be remembered that fonts were banished from all the Scotch churches at the Reformation, because of their Roman character and origin. The laver and basin were prescribed as substitutes for the exiled reservatory.

In England, flagons and plates are to be found in greatest numbers. This is not remarkable, considering that the former served the wine to numerous communicants, and that plates were not only used as alms-dishes, but were placed under the flagon "on the Communion Table to preserve the Cloth and Carpett from spillings of wine." After consulting a personal inventory of the pewter church plate of sixteen different counties, I find that in most cases where the alms-dish is missing one or more pewter plates are to be found, and *vice versa*. But if the flagon, because of its sturdy composition, survives in numbers, its sacramental companion, the pewter chalice, is to-day the rarest of church pieces. Delicacy of constitution must go a long way to explain the fact that in the same county lists there are but seven and twenty specimens—against well-nigh seven hundred flagons. It is true that a certain number have found their way into the hands of collectors, but they would not increase materially the number of those still in sanctuary.

Rarer even than cups or chalices are candlesticks. Wiltshire, Worcestershire, Somersetshire, Bangor, all possess a pair. In the other counties, as far as my search has led me, none survives.