

A PILGRIMAGE
TO THE
SHRINE OF ST. MELOR.



ASSOCIATIONS WITH
AMESBURY.

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TO
MONSIEUR L'ABBÉ
J. B. ROZEC

IN
EVER GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE
OF
JUNE 29TH, 1927.

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DEL

E. RHYS JONES,
FLEET,
HANTS.



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Every student of the lore and legends of Amesbury knows something of the story of little Prince Melor, part Patron Saint of its interesting and ancient Church; how a wicked uncle, *e.g.*, bent on securing for himself the throne to which the boy was heir, first murdered the boy's father and then tried to poison his son; how St. Melor made the holy sign of the Cross over the food offered to him and thus discovered the poison concealed in it; how the uncle, foiled in this dastardly act, did another, and induced a villain to attack the boy and cut off his right hand and left foot, that he might be rejected from being King through inability to perform the martial and manly exploits which in those days were a *sine qua non* of kingship; how St. Melor miraculously, or otherwise, had the lost limbs replaced by a hand of silver and a foot of brass, which he found himself able to use as deftly as the limbs of flesh which he had lost; how the uncle finally succeeded in assassinating his little nephew; and how St. Melor, triumphing in

his death, was acclaimed by his people as a martyr, was buried with the honours of a saint, and had a glorious Church given to him, dedicated to his memory and named with his name, to be his tomb.

So much by way of introduction to what follows. My wife and I spent most of last June in Brittany, and we had vowed a vow that our time there should include a visit to the little saint's shrine in Lanmeur. We performed the vow on the festival of St. Peter and St. Paul, June 29th, the day of the invisible total eclipse of the sun in England. We started that morning from Morlaix, one of the most picturesque old towns in Brittany, by a quaint little train which brought us to Lanmeur (a ten miles journey) in a little over an hour. We arrived at our destination about eleven, and walked to the village, and entered the Church. This at first gave us a sense of disappointment, for it is quite new, having been built (in three years) only some 25 years ago. Part of the old Church still existed down to 1902, when it was rased to the ground as being past repair, and the new Church built. But there were compensations; for the Church is an extraordinarily fine one, very spacious and lofty, full of beautiful things, and certainly the most cared for and well-kept Church we have so far met with in our Brittany experiences. It is built over the very ancient and interesting crypt, of which more anon.

As we entered the Church we found the altar candles being lighted for a wedding and a Nuptial Mass (Low Mass with music from a large harmonium. An organ is the only accessory to dignified worship which the Church does not possess.) We witnessed the ceremony, which lasted about half-an-hour—a very picturesque one; and when the registers had been signed in the Sacristy, and the little procession had passed out of the Church, I introduced myself to the Vicaire, Monsieur L'Abbé J. B. Rozec, a very pleasant and cultured priest, and explained my interest in the Church, &c., in the best French and Latin I could muster, and found him able to contribute a few words of English to the conversation. These preliminary courtesies over, the Vicaire lighted again the two candles which had been used for the bride and bridegroom, and put one of the candlesticks into my hand, and himself took the other, and we descended with him into the Tenth (?) Century crypt, where St. Melor is believed to have been buried, and where we saw the fountain connected with his legend. The crypt is quite a large one, divided into three aisles or naves by two rows of four columns each; two of these pillars, facing one another, are thicker than the others, and have some very interesting primitive carving on them in the form of leaves, &c. Near these two pillars are four narrow piercings in the wall, obviously windows when this building was above the ground; and it is believed that

St. Melor's tomb, under the altar, was placed between these pillars; for the four windows, as the Vicaire pointed out to us, were pierced towards this spot, as if to serve as openings through which people outside could see and venerate the tomb. The crypt is described by a learned Breton Church historian as "the most ancient monument of Christian architecture in all Brittany"; and in a massive volume of lives of the Breton saints, arranged in the order in which they come in the Church kalendar, there is a very good drawing of the interior of the crypt, as a historic imagination may help us to see it, in the days when the crypt was above the ground. The drawing is inserted as a "cul-de-lampe" in this volume, at the end of the month of October. (By the way, St. Melor's Day falls on October 3rd, and not on October 1st, as Mrs. Windley asserts in her attractive little book on Amesbury.) At the head of the staircase, leading down to the crypt, we saw some exceedingly old painted wooden statues—one of St. Melor with the left foot of brass, and the right hand of silver holding the severed hand of flesh.

The Vicaire presented us with interesting souvenirs in the way of leaflets about the Church and the legend which it commemorates, and a pamphlet about the very ancient Priory Chapel of Kernitron, some five minutes' walk from the Church.

Our delightful interview over, we wandered round the Church to study details, &c. The fine modern wooden pulpit has four scenes from St. Melor's life carved upon it: (1) St. Melor discovering the poison in his food by making the sign of the Cross over it; (2) his right hand and his left foot cut off; (3) he mounts a horse "malgré son pied d'airain et sa main d'argent"; (4) "Justin tranche la tete au jeune Martyr at le présent à son pere Kioltanus."

There are many beautiful new statues in the Church: among them a very good one of the singularly attractive Breton saint, St. Yves, "the poor man's lawyer," as he has been rather aptly called. But the most beautiful of all the statues is one of the little saint whom the people of Lanmeur love to speak of as "Melarik Kez," "le cher petit Mélar." The statue stands high on the left wall of the chancel, a really exquisite work of modern Christian art. The saint is clad in a blue tunic, with a red cloak over it, and his face is "as the face of an angel." The silver hand holds the severed hand of flesh, as in the old wooden statue. A thing of beauty, in form and colour, not to be forgotten. Alas, no photograph or picture postcard of the statue was to be obtained.

We adjourned to the primitive little Hotel des Voyageurs, and had an excellent simple lunch there. After that we went to see the Priory Chapel of Kernitron. A most beautiful

old building, full of deeply interesting things. Bits of the exterior of the building, quite a large one, with a central tower and squat spire, reminded us rather curiously of Amesbury Church, as did also its beautiful entourage of fine beech trees. On reference to the little book about this venerable building which had been given us, I discovered a very strange link between this old Church and Amesbury. For there is an Arthurian legend woven round it—not the legend of Arthur and Guinevere—but the legend of Arthur and Tryphene. The story, too long to tell here in full, is said to have caused more tears to flow than any other Breton legend, and it used to be acted as a mystery play in days of old all over Brittany; and took two whole days to act, and drew a larger "house" than any other drama of those times. Very long ago, says the legend, there lived at Lanmeur a king named Arthur, who had for wife Tryphene, a beautiful princess of Ireland, "a saint, if ever there was one on the earth." And she had a brother, Kervoura, who was a man "with a heart blacker than a winter's night, who had taken Satan for his guardian angel, and who hated his sister with exceeding fierceness." And envious of the happiness of Arthur and Tryphene, this evil man slandered his sister to her husband, and accused her of the foulest crimes. And, being a clever rogue, he succeeded in convincing the weak king of the truth of his charges, and inducing Arthur to sentence Tryphene to

death. Whereupon she fled for her life to Orleans, where, concealing her name and rank from everyone, she became a swine herd in the service of a rich lady of that city who took pity on her. Convinced too late of Kervoura's wicked treachery, Arthur searched for his wife for six long weary years, and found her at last among her swine, and brought her home again, only to distrust her again and almost lose her again. At last all was cleared up between them, and the castle at Lanmeur, where they lived with a beloved son, who plays a great part in the story, became a proverb on men's lips for an ideal human home. But the poor lady had suffered so deeply and learnt so bitterly the nothingness of this world's joys and hopes, that she turned her thoughts more and more "towards Heaven, towards the Friend who alone never betrays, towards the Holy Virgin who had protected her"; and she had a costly Church built near her house, where every day for hours together she would be absorbed in prayer and meditation, so that people fell into the way of calling this Church "*Ker-an-Itroun, le lieu de la Dame*," the place that the Lady made her home. A beautiful legend, but no more than that. The Church obviously owes its name to the "*Lady*" par excellence, the Blessed Mother of our Lord; and one of the great Pardons, for which Brittany is so famous, is held here on August 15th, the Festival of the Assumption.

Lanmeur is picturesquely situated among woods and moorlands, full of heather, gorse and broom. It is rather larger than Amesbury, having about 2500 inhabitants. But it must be a scattered parish, for the village does not appear to be as large as Amesbury. We left it in the late afternoon, full of gratitude for the memorable and varied experiences which our visit had brought.

I must own that I have returned home convinced that St. Melor's story belongs solely to Brittany. There is no mention of any connection with Cornwall in any Breton literature about him that I have had access to. It must be remembered that a district of Brittany is still called Cornouaille; and it is probable enough that this similarity of name may have led to parts of St. Melor's short life being assigned to Cornwall in our insular versions of his story (cf. in this connection the Tristan legend, with the two Isoldes in it). And I am inclined to think—where, of course, all is uncertain—that Amesbury's link with St. Melor comes entirely through Elfrida, who built her Saxon Church and Nunnery at Amesbury in expiation for her crime at Corfe Castle, and who dedicated that Church (here we are dealing with authentic history) to St. Melor. A very natural thing for her to have done, with the legend of the poor boy, done to death under circumstances so similar to those of the "martyrdom" of St. Edward,

King of the West Saxons, still fresh and green in men's memories. And I hazard the guess* that any relics of St. Melor that may quite possibly have come to Amesbury in ancient times came in that way. Elfrida, having given her Church in Amesbury such a dedication, would ask for some relic of the saint which might sanctify a Church that bore his name, and, according to the custom and procedure of those times, might reasonably expect to get one. Her position as a Queen, moreover, would have considerably helped her to get what she wanted.

E. RHYS JONES,
Vicar of Amesbury, 1919—1926.

* The guess is confirmed by a comment in the annotated edition, published in 1901, of Albert le Grand's "Les Vies des Saints de la Bretagne Armorique."

"Plusieurs reliques de Saint M  lar, pass  rent    diff  rentes Eglises qui les demand  rent; Orleans, Meaux (chez les chanoines r  guliers de Notre-Dame de Ch  yes), *Ambresbury en Angleterre* (dans un Monastere de religieuses), etc." The same authority refers to "l'  v  que de *Cornouaille*" (in Brittany) as "tuteur d  vou   de Saint M  lar."

