

THE WARWICK SIGNET-RING

BY PHILIP NELSON, PH.D., F.R.S.E.

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PROBABLY the most important fifteenth-century gold signet-ring is that known as "The Warwick ring", now in the collection of the writer.

Upon the death of Richard Neville, the king-maker, at Barnet, 14 April 1471, there were found on his body his seal-matrix and signet-ring, which would then pass into the hands of the victor, Edward IV. This ring remained in the possession of the crown, save for the inter-regnum, 1649-1660, until the reign of George IV, by whom it was given to Miss Craven. It later passed successively into the collections of Sir John Evans, Sir Arthur Evans, F. Harman Oates and H. Gordon Bois, and from the last collection into that of the present owner.

This massive gold signet-ring,⁽¹⁾ which weighs 555 grains, may be thus described. On the bezel is the Warwick badge, "The Bear and Ragged-staff", above which, on a scroll, is **Soulement une** whilst round the shank, formerly enamelled white, is the earl's favourite oath:

be goddis faire foot

the words being separated by leafy sprigs, preceded and followed by single leaves, doubtless also once enamelled.

Oaths, involving parts of the Divine Body, came into use as early as the reign of William Rufus, who, it is said, was wont to swear "By God's Eyes", and Richard I "By God's Legs", and persisted down to the time of Mary Tudor, since we find, "Sir Edward (Hastings) would swear great oaths", "especially by The Lord's foot."⁽²⁾

Among various articles prepared for the use of Edward III, for Christmas-day 1348, were a tunic and shield, bearing the King's word:

"**hāy hāy the wythe swan; by godes soule I am thy man.**"⁽³⁾

In regard to such oaths, in the fourteenth century we find them frequently mentioned in *The Canterbury Tales*. Thus in *The Miller's Tale*:

"By Christe's foot what will ye don therewith?"

⁽¹⁾ D. of hoop, 1·12 ins. and of bezel, ·4 ins.

⁽²⁾ Harl. MS. 425. *Underhill's Narrative*. Froude, *History of England*, 1860, Vol. VI, p. 56 n.

⁽³⁾ *Wardrobe Accounts A.D. 1345-1348*.



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In *The Pardoner's Tale*:

"Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable
 That it is grisly for to here hem swere:
 Our blissed Lorde's body thet to-tere;
 Hem thoughte Jewes rente him noight y-nough:
 And eche of hem at others sinne lough."

and

"That of his othes is outrageous."

"By Goddes precious herte, and by his nailes"

and

"By Goddes armes, if thou falsely pleye."

In *The Shipman's Prologue* we find:

"Sire parish preest, quod he, for Goddes bones."

Of about the year 1400 is a painting on the north wall of the nave of Broughton Church, Bucks., "*A warning to swearers*", depicted thus:—In the centre is a *Pieta*, surrounded by nine figures, of whom the one in the right lower corner holds in his right hand a severed foot, whilst others hold various portions of Our Lord's body. We may note also that at the time of the Lollard persecution the following passage occurs:—

"Now in Engeland it is a comun protectioun ayens persecutioun—if a man is customable to swere nedeles and fals and unavised, by the bones, nailes, and sides and other membres of Christ."⁽¹⁾

Finally we may conclude by referring to the fifteenth-century glass preserved in a window on the north side of Heydon Church, Norfolk,⁽²⁾ in which are figures holding scrolls, inscribed:—

"Be the body of God I wyl go to towne."
 "Be the sydes of God the dyes (dice) arn here."
 "Be the nie (eye) of God this was good ale."
 "Be Goddys feet no, me thowt it but smale."

⁽¹⁾ Harl. MS. 1668.

⁽²⁾ Bloomfield, *Norfolk* (1769), Vol. III, p. 573; Clive E. Rouse, *Arch. Journal*, Vol. 100, pp. 59-60. Nelson, *Ancient Painted Glass in England*, p. 150.

