



THE BEHEADING STONE, STIRLING.

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BY JOHN DREW, M.D.

THE visitor, having found his way to the Heading or Mote Hill, the northernmost spur of the Gowan Hills, overlooking the fertile valley of the winding Forth, sees in the distance the noble Grampian range of mountains obscuring the horizon; and nearer the spot on which he stands, beholds the massive Ochils and the Abbey Craig with its imposing Wallace Tower, which serve to complete the outline of a picture of natural beauty difficult to surpass.

This eminence was once the scene of Roman fortification, and on careful inspection of the mound, evidence of broken-down mason work, at present overgrown with grass, is visible. Probably, a rare antiquarian find will reward excavation here. Subsequent to the Roman occupation it became a place for the administration of justice, and judicial execution, and hence was known as the Mote, and also as the Heading Hill.

On searching the records of history on the subject of the executions conducted here, we find that the official documents have been destroyed which might have given reliable information, but we are warranted to some extent at least in inferring that the executions were carried out on a block of wood resting on the stone, which has come to be known as the Heading Stone. As will be observed, it is now enclosed in a circular iron cage, and rests on a round pedestal of concrete. On the 23rd of September, 1887, this ancient relic of feudal law was formally handed over to the custody of the municipal authorities by the local Archæological Society. It is somewhat round in shape, and measures 31 in. by 31 in. At one end it has a thickness of 10 in., which gradually rises to a height of 15 in. at the opposite extremity. Over all it is highly polished by the action of natural forces; and in its upper and lower sides a number of holes have been made by the tools of man. These holes would enable a wooden block to be fixed to the stone. One of its sides is hollowed out in its extreme length, measuring 18 in. by 2 in. Conjecture has assigned this part as the place on which would rest the breast of the victim, when on kneeling he placed his head on the block. There may also be observed on the upper surface a number of marks running diagonally across the stone.

Tradition is very strong in supporting the assertion that the stone was used to support a wooden block for conducting executions, and when we come to examine history on the subject, we find that many executions actually did take place on this historic spot. It was here that the noble family of Albany was made to

suffer death on the block. This tragic event happened in the time of James I. of Scotland. The monarch had just returned from prolonged captivity in England. Born of strong character, he had acquired much experience of men and affairs, and was well qualified to govern in a time of unrest throughout the State. In accordance with hereditary right, Murdoch, Duke of Albany, the late governor of the kingdom, placed the King in the royal seat on being crowned at Scone. Alexander Stewart, the younger son of the Duke of Albany, was knighted on the occasion. The King, shortly afterwards, convoked his first Parliament. It was found that unbridled licentiousness and contempt for the laws were only too common under the government of Albany and his son, and the knowledge of this state of anarchy and rapine had such an effect on the King that he exclaimed, "Let God but grant me life, and there shall not be a spot in my dominions where the key shall not keep the castle, and the furze bush the cow, though I myself should lead the life of a dog to accomplish it."

The power of the Crown was soon made manifest to the nation. At a second Parliament held at Perth, Duke Murdoch and Lord Alexander Stewart were arrested, along with twenty-six of the principal nobles and barons. Walter Stewart, Albany's eldest son, and the Earl of Lennox, and also Sir Robert Graham, had by this time been lodged in prison; and even the wife of Albany was made a prisoner. On the 24th day of May, 1424, the trial of the chief prisoners began. The Court was held in the Palace of Stirling, and the King in due form presided as supreme judge of his people. The jury was composed of twenty-one of the principal nobles and barons, and the proceedings were conducted with great solemnity and pomp. Walter Stewart was found guilty on a charge of robbery, and condemned to death. His execution was carried out on the Heading Hill on the same day of his trial. On the following day, the Duke of Albany, his second son, Alexander, and his father-in-law, the Earl of Lennox, were tried before the same jury. Albany was found guilty of treason, and sentenced to death by execution. The nature of the charge made against Alexander Stewart and the Earl of Lennox is unknown; but on them also the capital sentence was enforced. The condemned noblemen, immediately after trial, were taken under a strong guard to the Heading Hill, and on that fatal spot were put to death by the axe of the executioner.

The immense estates belonging to Albany and the Earl of Lennox were forfeited to the Crown. Sir James Stewart, the youngest son of the Duke of Albany, managed to avoid arrest, and ultimately found an asylum in Ireland. It has also been asserted that Sir Robert Graham and some of his associates in the murder of the King, were executed in 1436 on the same spot.