

TO OBLIVION AND BACK

DR BARGRAVE'S MUSEUM OF RARITIES

By JOHN HARRIS

CATHEDRAL libraries are notorious as repositories of the mislaid and the unknown. How long would Dr John Bargrave have escaped the attention of modern scholars had not Christopher Gibbs been asked for advice in repairing a table at Biffonsbury, to be confronted and amazed by two magnificently decorated, mislaid Roman octagonal slabs set in English mid-17th-century frames? One, with the story of Ovid, is inscribed *Per il Signor Giovanni Bargrave A Roma 1660*, and can be identified with the "great octagonal round marble table that standeth in my dining-room," mentioned in Bargrave's will. The other was given to the cathedral by Dean George Stanhope who died in 1748, but was made for Philip, Lord Stanhope to whom Bargrave was tutor on his Grand Tour in 1650.

It is extraordinary that one of the earliest surviving musical collections in England, preceded only by the *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, should have been published in 1867, yet lain hidden; but then volumes of the Camden Society are not compelling



1—MATTIO BOLOGNINI'S PORTRAIT OF ALEXANDER CHAPMAN, JOHN BARGRAVE AND JOHN RAYMOND IN SIENNA, 1647. Bargrave travelled in Europe and North Africa for 17 years collecting the "medals, antiquities, rareties and coynes" he bequeathed to Canterbury Cathedral in 1680



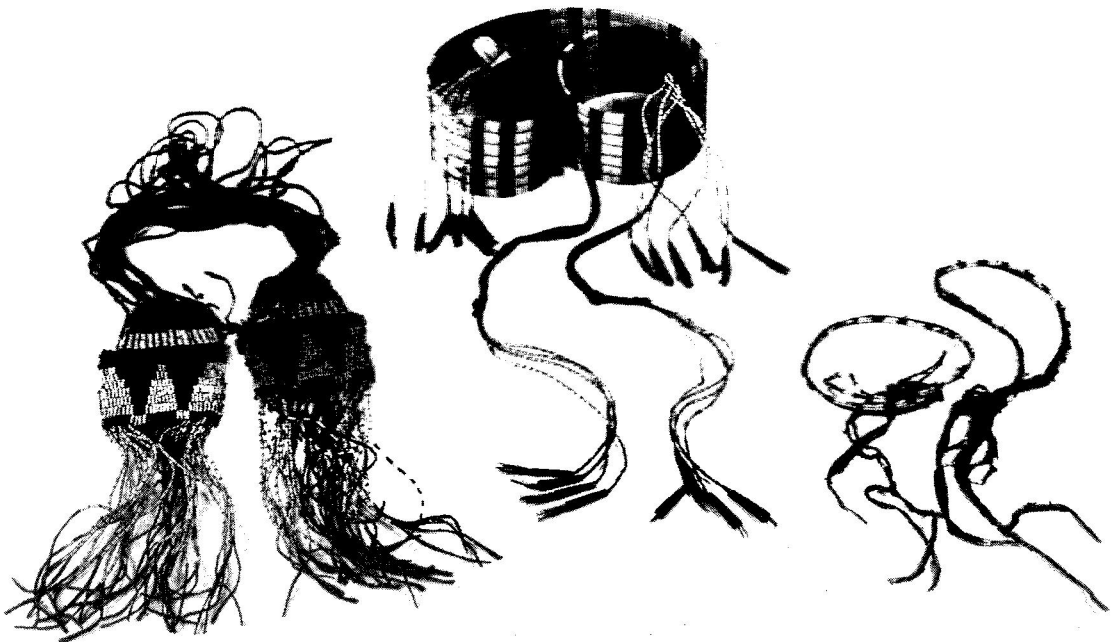
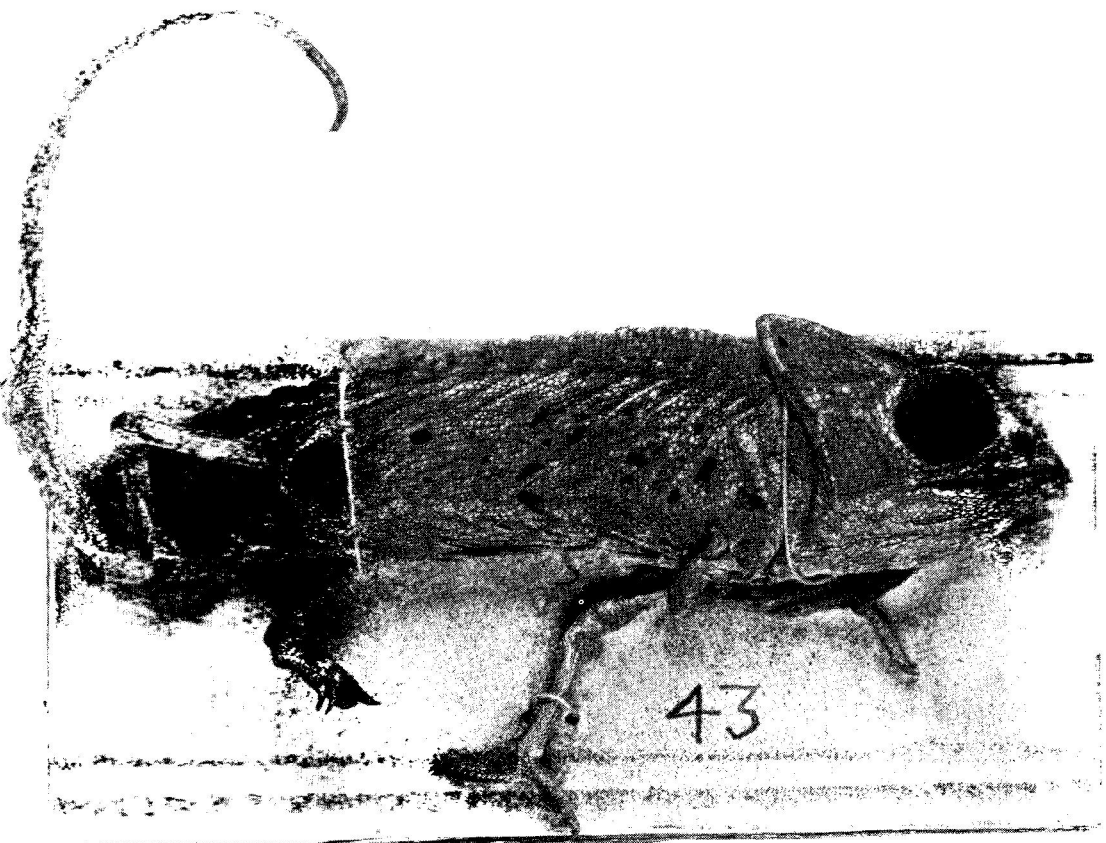
reading. It might, too, have taken some persuasion to turn beyond the title page of Bargrave's *Pope Alexander the Seventh and the College of Cardinals* to find an admirable account of Bargrave's own life and the edited transcription of his manuscript *Roma Antiqua, Et Numismata Bargraviana*, or "Catalogue of Dr Bargrave's Museum", listing the "cabinet of medals, antiquities, rareties, and coynes" that he bequeathed to Canterbury Cathedral in 1680.

The Bargrave story is one of the rise of the yeoman farmer to county gentry status, with a house as handsome as Biffons, in Kent, where John was to be born about 1610. John senior's coat-of-arms included an unsheathed sword and three gold coins, testifying to his trade as merchant and adventurer. He and his brothers were pioneer settlers and traders in Virginia. There was another brother, Isaac, who travelled extensively in Europe and became chaplain to Sir Henry Wotton's Embassy in Venice, eventually succeeding Dr Boys as Dean of Canterbury in 1625. Merchant adventuring was in the family blood, and Dean Bargrave's son, Robert, was articled to a Levantine merchant, exploring the Mediterranean littoral and farther inland to remoter parts.

A place such as Biffons was thus not so isolated from world events, and for these peripatetic Bargraves was a staging-post on their travels. It was surely not serendipity that at the King's School, Canterbury, a fellow pupil of John's was John Tradescant, the younger, whose celebrated and much-travelled father was then gardener to Lord Wotton, Sir Henry's brother, at nearby St. Augustine's. It is not unreasonable to suggest that some of the early Tradescant's North American and Virginian introductions and curiosities might have been acquired through the intersection of the Bargraves. In this light Bargrave's Museum of Rarities belongs to the mainstream of North European Renaissance cabinets of curiosities.

This article might never have been written had it not been for the haughty High Church conservatism of Dean Bargrave and his unpopularity in general, from the gunpowder in the cathedral crypt, John's two sons have followed a placid course after the war, made a Fellow of Peterhouse in 1627, the year when the Civil War first broke, and now at Biffons and its national museum, one of the few survivors of the war and with the firm government and constitution

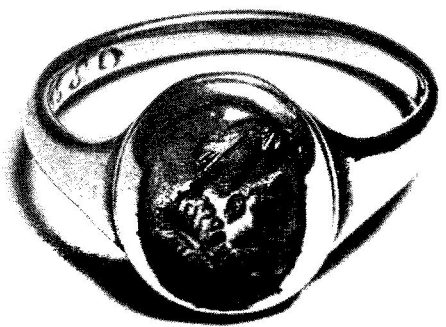
2—ROMAN OCTAGONAL SLABS SET INTO ENGLISH FRAMES



1 Peterhouse in 1643 was inevitable. He returned to Kent and joined his exile, not so difficult for a member of a family with so many living contacts. In 1646 began the first of four tours that would last 17 years.

Travelling in the company of his nephew John Raymond (the author of *An Itinerary Contayning a Voyage through Italy, in the Yeare 1646, 1647 in 1648*) and Alexander Capman, also of Kentish gentry, the party made Sienna the first stop, "to get some knowledge and practice of the vulgar tongue". In 1647 the party commemorated the death of Lodovico il Moro in oil on copper, poring over a map of Italy. Their arrival in Rome coincided with young Robert Boyle's travels in the retinue of Thomas Bendysh's embassy to Constantinople, and at Leghorn

(Above left) 3—MUMMIFIED FINGER, FROM TOULOUSE. (Top) 4—DRIED CHAMELEON, "PERFUMED AND STUFFED". (Above) 5—RARE INDIAN CEREMONIAL HEADWARE



...to make for Siena...
...of musick...
...curious fruits and delicate...
...Then all went on to...
...rarities rather to be named yn...
...such in number and quality as the...
...much less exceed".

Bargrave's travels can be reconstructed from comments in his *Rara*. If any place was a starting point it was Leyden, where he was "having retired" in 1650 when he was asked by the Countess of Chesterfield, then in The Hague, to be travelling tutor to her son Lord Stanhope.

Bargrave was buying prints in Paris, collecting odd mussel shells in La Rochelle, adding Roman periwinkles to his collection from the Loire at Doué, near Saumur, and from Toulouse revelling in desiccated corpses, in particular describing how he played with the corpse of a French soldier who had been stabbed in the chest: "I pulled the hand away several times, and the nerves and tendons were so strong that the hand returned with a lusty clap upon the wound." He declined the offer of a dried baby, but took instead a finger. Optical instruments were his quest in Nuremberg, Augsburg and Vienna, and in Venice he bought "of a High Dutch Turner" a "very artificial anatomy of a human eye, with all its films or turnicles, by way of turnery in ivory or horn: together with the optick nerve which runneth into the brain".

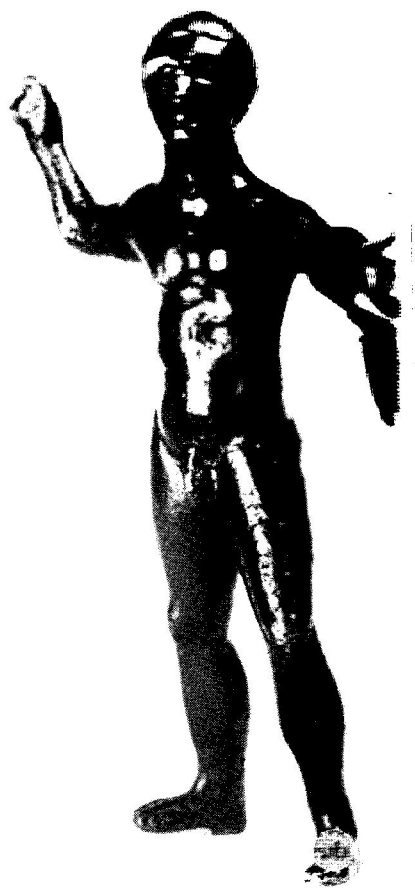
In September 1656 he was in Prague to see the coronation of the Emperor Leopold, King of Bohemia, and in November in Innsbruck to witness the reception of Christina of Sweden into the Roman Church: "but her carriage in the church was very scandalous—laughing and giggling, and curling and trimming her locks and

memory of her death, and body was so bad that I heard some Italians that were near me say *Diavola per Dio*. "By God she is mad". He spent "several summers" in Lyon in a pension on the "Pal Mal", attracted, one suspects, by a "very handsome" and wanton lady abbess, who in 1658 was ready to "leap through the grates for joy" at seeing him.

Bargrave's most memorable voyage, and his only entry into international politics, was made in 1662 at the command of Charles II, or the archdioceses of Canterbury and York, to carry to Algiers £10,000 ransom money raised by the Church to bargain for the release of 300 British slaves captured on the sea by North African pirates. He was forced to bid for them slave by slave "as one buyeth horses in Smithfield", and succeeded in saving 162 at great danger to himself and his companion Dr Selleck.

In Canterbury this perilous voyage is remembered in the cathedral accounts when Bargrave was treasurer, for under 1669-70 is: "To a poore man that had his tounge cut out at Argiers. . . 1.0." In the display cases is "The picture in little of Shaban Agaa. . . the King of Argeers. . . [by a] poor painter, and Italian slave", and the dried chameleon "perfumed and stuffed" that was "given me Alive in Africa [but] for want of flies it died" on the way home. There is more than this, for not only has the North African footwear survived, but also the rare Indian ceremonial headwear of a member of the Cree tribe from Hudson Bay, given to Bargrave by Timothy Couley, one of the merchants he rescued, as a mark of gratitude.

The museum that Bargrave must have assembled in his house in the 1660s cannot be isolated from what he saw in the rest of Europe during his travels—and this must also be said of Tradescant's collections. In Italy alone there were more than 250 *musei naturali* by the end of



8—BRONZE HERCULES. One of Renaissance "Antiquities" Bargrave acquired



CABINET MADE IN THE 1660s FOR BARGRAVE'S COLLECTION

the 17th century; but even so, Bargrave's collection is surely an epitome of the *Museo Tradescantianum*. In our modern age of specialisation and classification, with museums given over to special subjects, it is easy to think that, before 1700, paintings, drawings, sculpture, bronzes, medals, coins, gems, natural history and anatomical specimens, optical instruments, were kept one to the other.

Had the Bargrave collection not been bequeathed to Canterbury in 1685, and handed over in 1685, and so consigned to oblivion, would most likely have been dispersed. It is a sadness that the optical instruments have been lost, and serious thought must be given as to whether the cathedral is ultimately the right proper custodian of this precious museum, unless the present vitrines are a permanent display. The Roman tables (largely of the 1st century) cannot be extolled as great, if judged by individual items, only the Egyptian gems stand out as remarkable. Otherwise the collection is intensely personal and curious, its full effect in Bargrave's tower in his Bargrave House in the Cathedral Close cannot be reconstructed in the mind.

Today we can smile at the offerings picked up: the bronze and wooden "Hercules Mingsens, a bronze "dagger" (this is the "dagger of the Tyber") and his "two fragments of iron being notes or offerings of that absurd deity"—absurd, perhaps, but Bargrave had several. There is the "Order of the Holy Conception" (the Tyber grave), and the "large brass-stall or mushroom" (a grave in the Tyber), which is not a mushroom at all, but grew always a stone, and was found at Armentium at Venice).

A visit to see most of these in Canterbury is worth while, and if the eye does not see, the Frenchman's dried fingers, the animal of the dried chameleon, let it see the medals or gold coins, and the rest of the collection made to hand. There is a "very artificial anatomy of a human eye, with all its films or turnicles, by way of turnery in ivory or horn: together with the optick nerve which runneth into the brain".