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DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
RECENTLY DISCOVERED  
*ROMAN VILLA*  
AT BRADING,  
ISLE OF WIGHT.

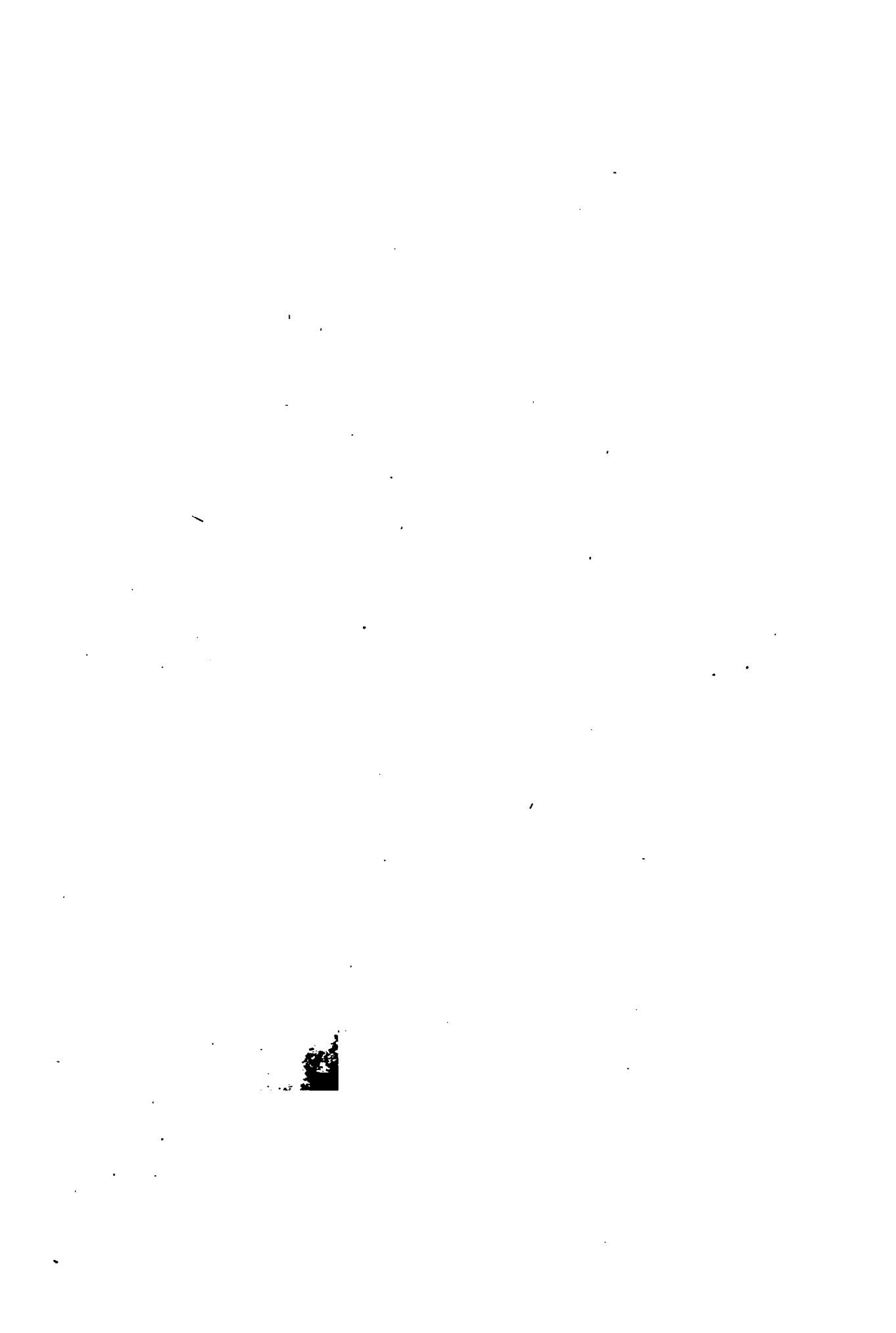
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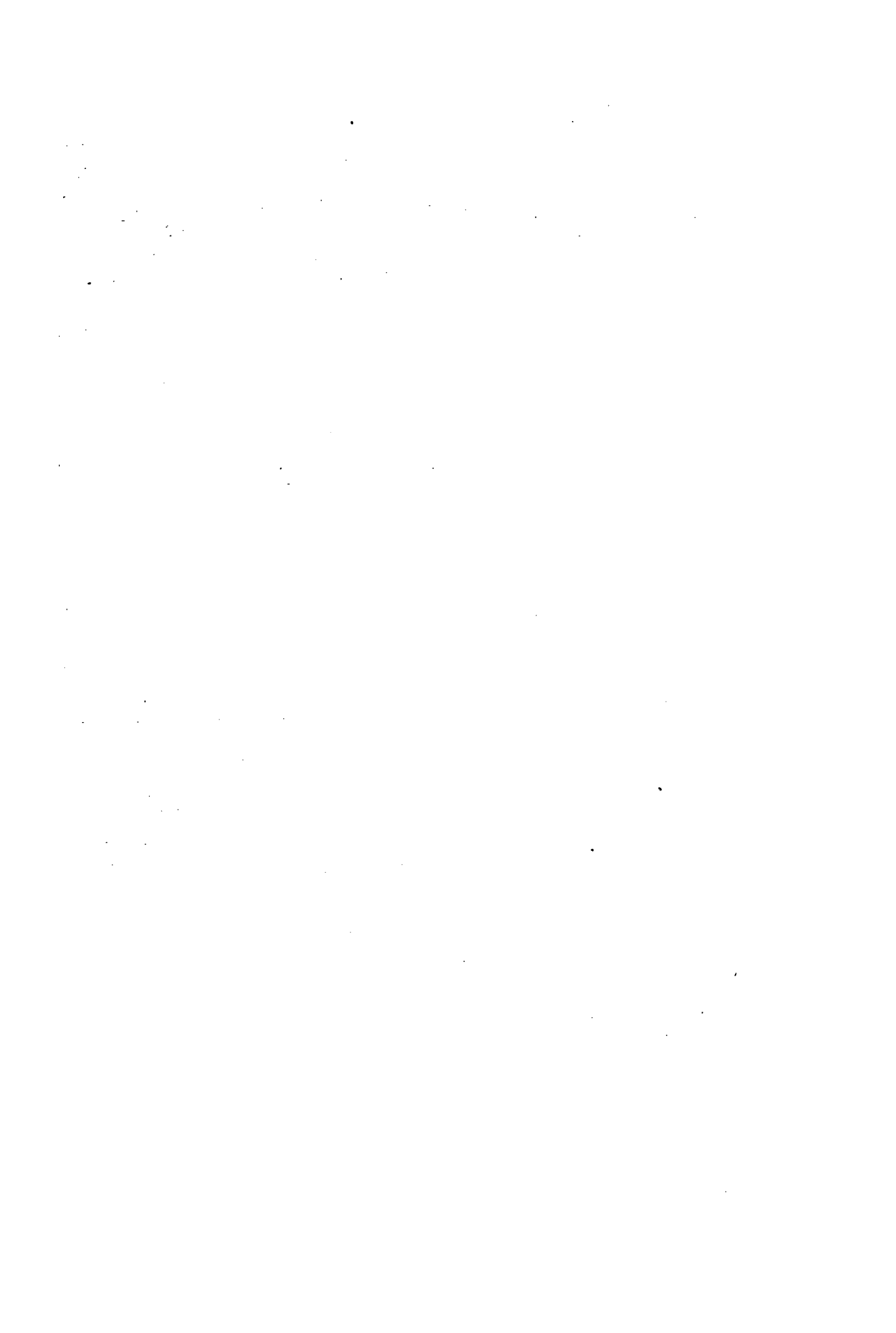
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A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
ROMAN VILLA NEAR BRADING,  
ISLE OF WIGHT..







DAPHNIS WITH PANDEAN PIPE AND TERPSICHORE WITH THE TAMBOURINE

Photographed by Messrs. Bridden, Ventrone.



A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
ROMAN VILLA NEAR BRADING,  
*ISLE OF WIGHT.*

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REPRINTED FROM THE "ANTIQUARY."

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BY  
CORNELIUS NICHOLSON, F.G.S., F.S.A.,  
AUTHOR OF "THE ANNALS OF KENDAL," "THE ROMANS IN WESTMORLAND," ETC.

“Shall we go seek the reliques of this Isle?”

SHAKSPEARE.

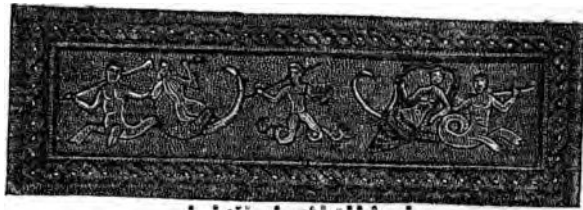


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*Britons and Herodotus*

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BRITONS AND HERODOTUS

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## DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF THE ROMAN VILLA NEAR BRADING.

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### INTRODUCTION.

NOTHING could be further from the facts now patent than the opinions held by the early historians of the Isle of Wight, regarding the traces of the first inhabitants and immigrants in the island. These topographers could find only very few vestiges of antiquity, and no Roman remains! Englefield dogmatically asserts, "Of the Romans there is not a vestige in this island."\* What is now revealed, however, completely reverses that judgment. The island is replete with archeological interest; peppered, it may be said, with antiquarian reliques. On its material surface it presents a chart of the early history of Britain, occupied as the island is by those evidences shown to have been, in succession, by every tribe of settlers that have marked the several epochs, and contributed to the pages of our history. The first settlers, 360 B.C., were Belgic or Gaulish Celts—afterwards called Britons. According to Diodorus Siculus, they were instrumental in the traffic of the first article of British commerce, *tin*, which was worked in Cornwall and traded in by the Phenicians, two hundred and fifty years before the Christian era. At that time the Solent was, at its narrowest point, fordable at low water, and the tin was carted across the island, embarked at Puckaster for Marseilles, and thence shipped to Phenice. Puckaster is thought to be a corruption of Portus-caster (a fortified port). The Celts have left unmistakable evidences of their living and dying on the island. Several British

\* Sir H. Englefield's "Description of the Isle of Wight."

villages and British barrows are still extant, notably one called Gallibury (Gaulish village), about five miles south-west of Newport. The Britons lived, died, and were buried in the same excavated wigwams, round and oval pits covered with wattels. The Jutes effected a landing here, according to the authority of Bede ; but it is uncertain how long they held their footing. There is nothing left to distinguish them. The Saxon occupation began in A.D. 530, by the unquestionable testimony of the Saxon Chronicle, and was prolonged until the native and invading races commingled in the generations of the Anglo-Saxon. Whether the northern marauders, the Danes and Norwegians, effected a landing in the island is doubtful. There is something cognate to the "Scandinavian" in the syllables which make up Appuldurcombe and one or two other place-names ; but the vernacular tongue of the common peasantry here contains no traces of the Scandinavian dialects, as is the case in the northern counties of England. St. Boniface, "the ablest of missionary priests," left his patronymic, in the seventh century, on one of our prominent hills, and his potent blessing on its wells. (Bonchurch is St. Boniface's church.) The early Norman period is authentically represented. Domesday Book tells how the Conqueror richly rewarded one of his favourite barons, William Fitz-Osborne, with all the territorial rights and perquisites, lands and villeins, of the island. Not long after this, several undoubtedly early Norman churches sprang up here ; sacred edifices, with the venerable and venerated features of eleventh and twelfth century structures. Such are Brading church, Arreton church, Whitwell church (twice dedicated), God's-hill church, &c., when Christian culture began happily to spread among the people. Heathen deities, Roman and Saxon alike, are now both out of sight and out of mind ; and the Day-spring from on high is beaming on the island. Lastly, coming down to more recent times in the era of England, we recognise the huge castle-prison of Charles I., associated with a transaction, "the treaty of Newport," on which "the eyes of the nation were riveted," and which snapped one of the links in the chain of our succession of monarchs.

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## ROMAN OCCUPATION.

Vespasian is supposed to have occupied the Isle of Wight in the year A.D. 43, when the first colony in Britain (Camolodunum) was founded under the Emperor Claudius. Carisbrooke tells, by its Celtic name "Caer-is-byrg," and its elevated position, that it would be the first point seized by the Roman invader, and be held for central control, as the Capitolium of the island. Within one hundred yards of that fortress, a Roman villa was discovered in 1858, whose features are already well-known. But that villa is dwarfed into insignificance by the one near Brading, now under consideration. The utmost dimensions of the former are one hundred and eighteen feet by forty-nine feet, and its tessellated floors represent merely chequered work and ordinary patterns, with guilloche borders. The only other remark I need make about the Carisbrooke Villa is, that coins of Gallienus and Tetricus have been found there, and coins of Gallienus are turning up at Brading, a circumstance which, with other considerations, may lead to the inference that these structures belong to the reign of Gallienus, about A.D. 250—260.

The mythological groups hereinafter noticed, of Orpheus and other divinities, transferred from ancient Greece to Rome, seem to proclaim the era of the prevalence of the Orphic creeds in Italy, and correspond chronologically with the evidence of the coins, which (at present) range from A.D. 250 to 330. But, with reference to coins, it must be said, that in several places on the island, and in two remarkable instances, currency coins have been found in heaps or "hutches," in one place as many as would fill a gallon vessel—which suggests the idea that in the waning power of the Roman province, and towards the end of their stay here, the Romans had been disturbed in possession.

The Brading Villa is situated on the lower slope of a chalk hill, which runs from E. to W., having a southern sunny aspect, overlooking an arm or inlet of the Solent, called "Brading Harbour," where the Roman galleys could ride and anchor in perfect safety, at the mouth of the *Yar*, which might then be navigable up to Street End. It is on lands belonging to Lady Oglander and Mrs. Munns, some of the apartments being on one farm and some on the other. I must abstain, at present, from designating any of its halls and chambers.

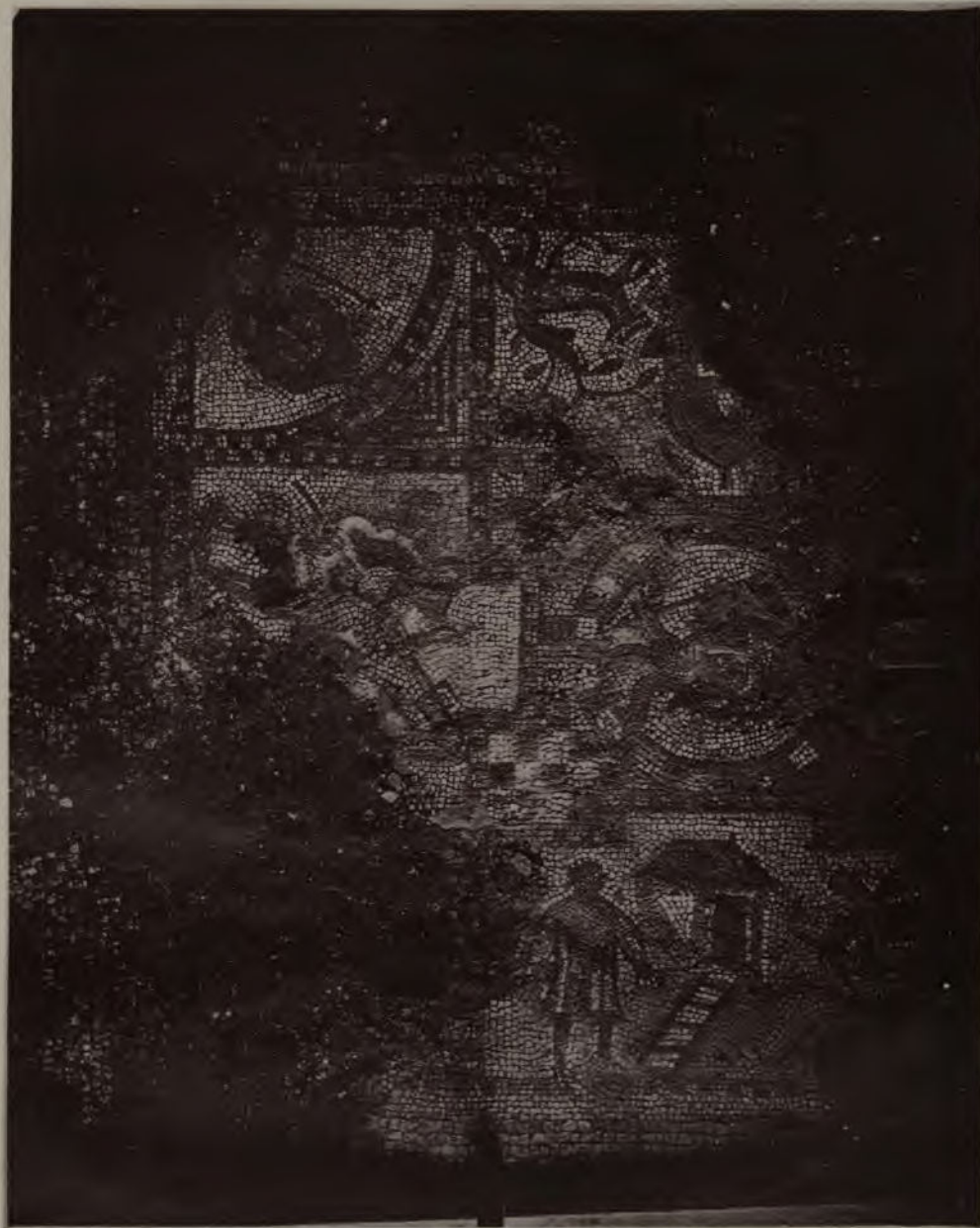
Only the principal apartments are yet brought to light, and the Porta, or main entrance, the key which may unlock the arrangements of the rooms, is not yet discovered. A dozen entertaining-rooms are disclosed in one suite of the buildings. One of these—it may have been a corridor, or colonnade—is sixty feet long. The grand double room, with most highly decorated floor, is forty feet long by eighteen wide. This one block measures fifty-two feet from east to west; and from south to north continuous walls run out to the hypocaust and furnace, to the extent of two hundred feet. Several outer apartments, remote from the principal chambers, are partially disclosed. Some of these, as the walls, even there, were stuccoed and painted, may have been appropriated to the female portion of the family, as was the custom at Pompeii (Gell's "Pompeiana," p. 101). Beyond these again, eastward, are the walls of several rooms where the numerous retainers, servants, and slaves (the *familia rustica*) connected with the establishment, dwelt apart from the proud Patrician. These rooms may exceed in number all that are yet exposed to view, judging by the partially developed walls.

But the striking distinction of this villa, next to its ample dimensions, consists in the number and elegance of its mosaic pavements. There is nothing like this grouping, in England, if elsewhere. What we will, at present, call the State apartment, forty feet long by eighteen feet wide, presents, from end to end, the features of a horizontal picture-gallery, a tessellated Pinacotheca. It is a double room, divided by an inlet of solid masonry, constructed apparently for the support of an architrave from which a curtain or screen depended. Broken pieces of stucco, painted in imitation of veined marble, show that dadoes of fresco ran round this and other chambers.

I must here attempt a brief description of the several pictorial groups as they stand arranged; but these designations must be taken as suggestive, not as authoritative. It cannot be wondered at that many are mutilated beyond recognition, and some are wholly effaced.

In the centre of the long sixty-foot room, which may have been a corridor or colonnade, is a circular medallion four feet in diameter, representing Orpheus seated with his golden lyre, having by fascination brought to his side a monkey, a fox, a peacock and a chough, which are seen "dancing to the lute's fantastic law."

The eastern portion of the State apartment aforementioned—the Medusa end—contains a square of striking groups of figures. In the centre is a circular



THE ENIGMATICAL GROUP OF THE MAN-COCK.

Photographed by Mess<sup>rs</sup> Briddon, Ventnor.





medallion, representing a fine head of Medusa, with her usual nimbus of snakes.\* Radiating from this centre are four medallions, containing two figures each, a male and female. 1. Depicts Ceres, the goddess of harvests, offering to Triptolemus, (the inventor of the plough) some seeds or corns of wheat. He receives the seeds with one hand, and with the other he holds a primitive single-shared plough. 2. These are supposed to be Arethusa and the river god Alpheus. She is in the act of fleeing from the god in terror, with her flowing garments torn almost entirely from her back. 3. Apparently intended for Hercules and Omphale, Queen of Lydia. He is, agreeably to the legend, giving the double-headed axe, which he had taken from the Amazons, to Omphale. 4. Male and female. The male in this group is conjectured to be Daphnis, with his Phrygian cap on, who holds in one hand the Pandean pipe which Pan taught him, and in the other hand a shepherd's crook, denoting the pastoral occupations which are ascribed to him. The female is most like Terpsichore, though she was little associated with Daphnis. The figure may be that of Piplea, a pastoral Nymph. She is exercised in dancing, and flourishes a tympanum or tambourine. Placed opposite to each other, in this square, are four heads of Mercury, each with his winged cap. Two of these are blowing a buccina or conch, and two are blowing straight trumpets.

Intermediately between the two quadrangles, east and west, seated all alone on an oblong panel, is the figure of a bearded astronomer, evidently meant for Hipparchus, "the father of astronomy and trigonometry." He has placed by his side the instruments of astronomy which constitute the foundation of his fame, namely a sun-dial raised on a tall pillar (an Analemma ?); a terrestrial sphere, to which he is pointing with a wand in his right hand, as if triumphing over the determination of the latitudes and longitudes of the earth. A bason-shaped instrument is shown on the left, with a staff, pike, or finger in the middle, supposed to be a planisphere, gnomon, or horologium.† It will be noted that this historical personage is exceptionally placed among mythic subjects.

The pictorial square of the western half of this State apartment is less perfect than the eastern portion, but the hand and skill of the same artist are

\* The general design of this quadrangle had its parallel in one of the tessellated floors of the Roman Villa at Bramdean in Hampshire, figured and described in Mr. Roach Smith's popular "Collectanea Antiqua," vol. ii., Plate 32; but the groups are absent there.

† See Horologium, in Smith's "Roman and Greek Antiquities."

here, both in design and execution. Four heads are placed at the four angles of this square, appropriately adorned, representing the seasons of the year; and what is noticeable as showing the nice observation of the designer, is the fact that winter is placed (as near as may be) on the north; summer to the south; spring to the east; and autumn to the west. Here, also, is a group of two figures, male and female, Perseus and Andromeda. Perseus holding at arm's length his trophy of the head of Medusa; and Andromeda by his side, chained to the rock.

At the eastern and western extremities of this State apartment are two corresponding ornamented margins. The one at the east end represents a number of sea tritons and mermaids; the other at the west exhibits in inch cones, all white, the Swashtika of the Buddhists, or Greek archaic cross.

In a smaller room, between the fine apartment and the Hypocaust, there is a half-circle pit (shaped thus  $\cap$ ), sunk below the present floor-line, the sides of which are lined with stucco. This object has given rise to much speculation. It has been thought by some a sacrarium or temple and by others a fountain; but my friend, Mr. C. Roach Smith (excellent authority), has declared it to be a bath, and this designation is supported by similar shaped and similar sized baths at Hartlip and at Carisbrooke. It is seven feet ten inches long, four feet broad at the swell; and two feet deep at present, but has been deeper, as the walls certify. At Carisbrooke the pillars of the hypocaust are seen beneath the broken floor of the bath, and the same feature may be disclosed at Brading when this bath is further excavated.

Beyond the range of apartments heretofore alluded to is the hypocaust or heating chamber, with the arch of the furnace. It contains fifty-four upright pillars of flat tiles, eight inches square and two and a half feet high. The floor by which these pillars were supported is quite gone, but there is on one side a verticle flue *in situ*, which carried off the heated air into the adjoining apartments.

We return once more to the suite of entertaining-rooms to notice the groups and figures in a square apartment, being the first that was discovered. Originally there were nine medallions on this floor, but four of these have perished—destroyed, one may believe they were, by the immigrants who succeeded the Roman occupation, for fires had been wantonly kindled on this and another adjacent floor. 1. The central figure here displays the head and face of a Bacchante, the face encircled with flowing curls that hang down to the neck.

2. An oblong medallion represents the Fox and Grapes. A vine, bearing four bunches of grapes, is trellised above the reach of the fox, and alongside is a dome-shaped building, supposed to be a wine-press. 3. The next—a square—exhibits a figure which has been designated a Bacchus, the staff, with a cross at the top of it, being mistaken perhaps for a thyrsus. He holds in his right hand (indicative of sovereignty) a sceptrum, such as was assigned to Jupiter, "The King of the Gods," and other kings in power.\* By this emblem we take the figure to be intended for Jupiter. 4. A gladiator, triumphing over a crouching figure. He handles a long pole, which is armed with a three-pronged spear (a tridens), and from which a net is suspended ready to entrap his prey. 5. Another and most striking medallion—oblong square—exhibiting what we must call the *enigmatical* group. This consists of a composite creature, part man and part cock. It has a man's body, draped in a tunic, man's arms, hands and legs, with the crested head of a cock, and cock's claws armed with two long straight spurs. A building (house or temple?) is placed near, with a scala or movable staircase leading up to it. On the right of these are two winged griffins (vigilans), in juxtaposition.

Who can rightly decipher this incongruous man-cock and its surroundings? It has given rise to many conjectures, and is calculated to create many differences of opinion. If I put forth two hypotheses, not yet broached, it is done with great reserve, and only in obedience to what some may hold to be an obligation upon me, as introducing the subject to public discussion. Is anything serious really intended by this group? or is it merely a piece of grotesquerie, the sport of an artist's prolific imagination? If it be entirely without meaning, it stands alone as meaningless. I can find no satisfactory interpretation in classical history, or legend, or heathen mythology; and I must therefore have recourse to symbolism, to which Roman artists frequently reverted. The Pagans openly ridiculed and insulted, by pen and pencil, the Christian religion after its introduction into Italy. The late President of the Society of Antiquaries, the Earl of Stanhope, drew attention to this practice in a paper recorded in "Archeologia," vol. xliv. p. 4, commenting there on a passage in Juvenal's "Satires," and referring pointedly, by way of illustration, to a satirical caricature

\* This sceptrum, surmounted with a cross, is illustrated in Rich's Dictionary, copied from the Virgil of the Vatican.

by an etching, or *graffito*, which was, and still is, exhibited on the plastered face of a wall in a military guard-house on the Palatine Hill. It represents the figure of a man with the head of an ass, fastened to a cross, there being no doubt that it is designed for Christ, and the Cross of Calvary; whilst a person stands before it in the act of adoration, the inscription "Alexamenos worships God" clearly describing the scene. De Rossi mentions other *graffiti* in Rome, designed, like this, to throw ridicule on Christianity, and refers them to the second or third century.\* Following the lines of these caricatures, mocking the new religion, I venture to suggest that this incongruous human-cock may have been intended as a symbol of Christianity, the "new doctrine," as the heathens called it at the time; or, perhaps, may have been designed to represent St. Peter, personally symbolising the "new doctrine," the spurs being intended to show antagonism to the Pagan worship, which Paganism is represented by the elevated temple alongside. If this be the true interpretation of the symbols, it may at least be said of it that the satire is more delicately conveyed than in the blasphemous caricature on the Palatine.

But I may assume that the aforesaid theory will be regarded by some as inadmissible. In that case let me offer another suggestion. It is conceivable that the proprietor of this villa, ordering its decorations, may have been a discontented Roman, or auxiliar of Rome, and chose to caricature the then reigning Emperor, Gallienus, at a safe distance, by a pictorial pun and emblem of his name? Fosbroke says symbols of names, both Grecian and Roman, by punning figures as well as emblems of professions, were quite common. If this Gallic hypothesis have any cogency, the decorations of the floors at Brading were probably executed towards the disastrous end of Gallienus, when he had become so justly and generally unpopular. He met his violent death, be it remembered, in Gallicia, which makes the cock proclaim a second pun. It has been suggested that this may be a transformation scene—*Alectryon* transformed into a cock; and this hypothesis deserves consideration, especially as it proceeds from a celebrated authoress, Miss Frances Power Cobbe. Mr. Roach Smith also favours a transformation—he thinks it may be a paraphrase of *Anubis*.

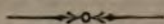
There would certainly be a supply of water for the occupants at no

\* Vide "Roma Sotteranea," in the Appendix.

great distance from this villa, and so it is found. There is a fine spring of water issuing out of the tertiary rocks, and filtered through beds of fine sharp diluvial sand and shingle, about one hundred yards on the north side of the villa.

There was also certainly a road communicating between the station or villa at Carisbrooke and this at Brading. I have traced the route of this Vicinal Way, by place-names, and disjointed portions of a bridle-road which is still called, on excellent authority, "the old road." It commenced south-east of the villa, in a field pertinently named *Street End*, a point which, there is no doubt, the tidal river Yar then reached, and where there might be a wharf or quay. It then proceeds under the slope of the continuous downs, by Adgestone (Agger-stone), Arreton Street, Standen, and Gatcombe to Carisbrooke. Standen implies a portion of paved road; and Gatecombe an opening through the valley. At Standen, moreover, the ordnance surveyors discovered and defined *tumuli*; which may be of either British or Saxon origin. If British, then the Romans adopted a road in that locality, formed by their predecessors; a circumstance by no means singular.

Some lathe-modelled pottery, a few coins, and one or two domestic utensils, articles of the toilet and antique glass have turned up in the excavations; but these are fewer and of less importance than might have been expected. Further exploration ought to reveal a greater number of valuable reliques.



#### OWNER AND OCCUPIER OF THE VILLA.

The intelligent visitor, inspecting the remains of this magnificent villa, will ask himself, Who in all probability designed and constructed for his abode such a luxurious residence? That he was a person of more than ordinary rank and importance is certain, and that is about all that is quite certain. Whether he held military rank, and was in command of the legionaries; or civil rank—another Diomede—holding the scales of justice, can only be a matter of conjecture. Against the supposition of his being in military command here, is the neutral fact that there is not a vestige of garrison works, neither vallum nor fosse, in the neighbourhood; and garrison works are not, like the substructure of a villa, concealed beneath the vegetable earth.\* There are faint traces,

\* The escarpments on Bembridge Point are modern.

becoming fainter year by year, of a *castrum exploratorium* on the edge of a cliff by the old church at Bonchurch ; but this was doubtless an observatory of the Channel—a coast-guard station—and is more likely to have been connected with the fortress at Carisbrooke than with the Brading Villa. A military encampment there would undoubtedly be at Carisbrooke, on the site of the medieval castle, the foundations of which castle have usurped the lines of the Roman escarpment. But the Roman station there is without “a name.” Neither Antonine’s “Itinerary” nor the “Notitia” contains a station allotted to the Isle of Wight. And there is no external trace, so far, and no place-name which tells the tale of any military engagement. Hence it may be assumed that the Romans, in taking possession, found little resistance from the aboriginal inhabitants ; but quietly settled themselves down, and tranquilly abode for nearly four hundred years, until their thinned ranks were met by some opposition at the moment of their exodus. They would not be long in discovering the difference between the genial climate of the island, and the rigorous cold of the north of England and Scotland. The Roman tombstones in North Britain show how many of them fell victims to the severity of the climate there ; and for that reason, valetudinarians and others sought out Bath (*Aqua Solis*), and resorted also to Vectis (Isle of Wight), which resembles still more than Bath the sunny clime of Italy. Here all those of the patrician order especially rusticated and luxuriated, using the placid shores of the Isle of Wight for relaxation and sea-bathing, as the senators of Rome at that very time used the shores of the Bay of Baïæ. The Brading Villa, then, in such circumstances, may have been the *villa rustica* of some noble, a pro-consul, or it might be the pro-præter of the province himself. In addition to his rank and riches—evidenced by the style and decorations of his villa—he was also a person of great intelligence, acquainted with classical story and the sciences, and obviously a lover of the arts. He has left the impress of these attributes behind him at Brading, however long or short may have been his stay here. Without further inquiring into his history, we may feel intensely interested in his foot-prints.

What strikes almost all observers, now that a vista of the substructure of such extensive apartments lies before them, is the circumstance that these remains should have lain concealed “under the ribs of death” for sixteen centuries, within ten inches of the top soil, without being discovered. The ploughshare

has gone over them thousand of times without disturbing their repose. And the probability is that there are other similar remains in the neighbourhood, and possibly in other parts of the island, which would yield to the axe and spade a rich archeological harvest. What is revealed, however, is an encouragement to future investigators, and it is only by such efforts that we can find how the proud conquerors of the world lived in the distant provinces subject to their sway.\*

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#### DISCOVERY AND PRESERVATION OF THE REMAINS.

The first and minor portion of this villa was revealed by Captain Thorp and Mr. W. Munns, of Brading, in April, 1880; the major portion has been excavated under the superintendence of Mr. J. E. Price, and Mr. F. G. H. Price. They and I conjointly formed ourselves into a committee to solicit subscriptions, and try to preserve the remains. The public responded liberally, and the expenditure is pretty well covered up to the close of the first campaign. But the villa and its appendages exceed, in extent and importance, anything we could have anticipated. So that the provisional committee gives place to a larger body of antiquaries and architects, under the patronage of the Society of Antiquaries, and the British Architects, on a basis more commensurate with what now assumes the character of a national undertaking. The daily Press has already hailed it as a national object, and if ever the wisdom of Parliament can be persuaded to legalise Sir John Lubbock's Bill for the Preservation of our Ancient Monuments, this villa should be included in its scheduled treasures. The iconoclastic peers, with a 'noble' indifference to the science of archeology, have twice rejected that bill, and left the preservation or destruction of historical monuments to private caprice. Even a Bourbon despot, or one of the Popes, whilst the temporalities remained with him, would have come to the rescue of a monument like this; but the Parliament of the United Kingdom, ruling dominions on which the sun never sets, cares for none of these things.

\* At the time of the invasion of Britain, the Roman dominion extended over ninety degrees of longitude and forty-five degrees of latitude.







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