

EARLIEST TYPE OF ENGLISH ALABASTER PANEL
CARVINGS.

By PHILIP NELSON, M.D. F.S.A.

The earliest examples of English alabaster panels are rectangular in form, the scenes being carved in low relief on a sunk background, and the sides of the tables are carefully finished on all sides with a hollow moulding, except the long horizontal *Adorations*, the bases of which are plain. The gilded backgrounds were adorned with gesso knobs.

It has been suggested¹ that the London school of carvers was responsible for the production of this class of relief, and it would appear that it was actively engaged in their output as early as 1345, and probably so continued till the end of the third quarter of the fourteenth century, at which time the second or 'embattled' variety displaced it in popular esteem. The close resemblances in the handling of the draperies on works of the London school, e.g. the weepers on the tomb of the lord John of Eltham, circa 1340, to that on the Kettlebaston panels and the presence of roses on the corners of the cushions in the Adoration of the Magi at Long Melford and Treslothan, such as we find on tombs of London origin, must, I think, confirm the correctness of this attribution.

The examples which have survived fall into two main groups, according to whether they were employed in the formation of a reredos or whether they were, on the other hand, intended to be used singly for individual adoration. We will first consider those panels which, used in series, constituted the primitive form of alabaster reredos, a type of altar ornament which was destined to develop so considerably in the course of the succeeding century.

The alabaster reredoses of this, the earliest, type are of two varieties, viz.: one in honour of the Blessed Virgin, from the altar of our Lady; the other in honour of our Lord, from the Jesus altar.

¹ Prior and Gardner, *Medieval Figure Sculpture in England*, p. 471.



[A. Gardner, phot.]

NO. I. THE ANNUNCIATION (B.M.).



[A. Gardner, phot.]

NO. 2. CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN (B.M.).

Reproduced by permission from Prior and Gardner's *Mediaeval Figure Sculpture in England*.

No complete reredos of either subject is now known to exist *in situ*, but it would appear from the subjects remaining and from analogy that they must, like those of the succeeding 'embattled' type, have been arranged in sets with terminal figures of saints.

As shown by the presence of latten wire loops on the backs of the various panels, these were attached to a wooden frame by means of wooden pegs. More rarely we find latten bands employed, which, being splayed out, held the carvings in position. Now as the panels have four carefully moulded sides, it is possible that the wooden frame might be perfectly flat and omit the wooden stiles which were such a feature in the later examples. The boards would be painted and no doubt would have ornamental work between the panels, whilst beneath would be a band of inscriptions in abbreviated Latin, descriptive of the scenes above, the capitals being in Lombardic, the remainder in Gothic characters.

It is, however, more than likely that the panels would be placed within chamfered stiles and rails, adorned with blocks of gold and colour, whilst the entire reredos, taking the form of a triptych, would be surmounted by such an oak cresting as occurs on the later example at Copenhagen.¹

Of the following 'embattled' type, we find Five Joys of the Virgin, shown in the triptych preserved in the National Museum at Copenhagen, formerly in the church at Munkathveraa, Iceland, which are as follows: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Coronation of the Virgin. In the Virgin triptych at Danzig we have, the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Resurrection, the Ascension and the Coronation of the Virgin, and all these scenes occur of the earliest type, though as yet no example of the Adoration of the Magi is known, treated in a vertical manner.

In 1882 there were discovered in the walls of the church at Kettlebaston, Suffolk, fragments of three upright panels, which from the pre-excellence of their carving may justly be regarded as among the finest examples of alabaster work which have come down to us. These three panels evidently

¹ *Archaeological Journal*, vol. lxxv, p. 313, plate 1.

formed part of a Virgin or Christmas reredos, and depicted the following incidents: the Annunciation, the Ascension, and the Coronation of the Virgin, which are now preserved in the British Museum.

i. The Annunciation (plate 1, 1). Here we find the Blessed Virgin, seated upon the right of the panel, facing the spectator, having beside her upon a desk an open book. Her left hand rests upon her lap, and her right hand, now missing, was raised, whilst she turned to regard the archangel, who no doubt was upon the left side of the scene. The robe of the Virgin, the folds of which are admirably treated, was edged within and without with gold, her feet resting on a green ground adorned with flowers, having red centres and white petals. Beneath is a recessed gilt background, formerly enriched with diagonal rows of gesso knobs. This measures $9\frac{3}{4}$ in. by 10 in.

ii. The Ascension (plate 11, 1). This shows us the lower portions of five apostolic figures, the treatment of whose robes is very restrained. The ground beneath shows the usual floral enhancement. This measures 7 in. by $11\frac{1}{2}$ in.

iii. The Coronation of the Virgin (plate 1, 2). Here the Virgin, whose arms are uplifted, is represented on the left of the panel kneeling on a lower level than our Lord, who, seated upon a throne, has His feet resting upon the flower-strewn ground. The treatment of the robes of the Virgin resembles that in the Ascension, whilst our Lord's garments more closely resemble those of the Virgin in the Annunciation. This measures $9\frac{3}{4}$ in. by $11\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Of the Ascension, a somewhat similar, though more elaborate and later, example is in private possession (plate 11, 2). In this, six figures occur in the foreground, the six behind being separated into two groups by the presence of the mount. Of the figures in the foreground, in addition to the Virgin, who of course wears shoes, four others can be identified by the emblems they bear, viz.: St. Andrew by his saltire cross, St. John by his palm, St. Peter by his key, and St. Bartholomew by his knife. This panel measures $10\frac{1}{2}$ in. in width.

The next scene to be noticed is the Resurrection, which, since it may have formed the centrepiece of a Virgin reredos, must be considered here, though it might equally well have formed the final scene in a Passion retable or



NO. I. THE ASCENSION (B.M.). [A. Gardner, phot.]



NO. 2. THE ASCENSION: FISON COLLECTION.
Reproduced by permission of Soc. Antiq. from *Alabaster Exhibition Catalogue*.



NO. I. RESURRECTION : CROFT-LYONS COLLECTION.

Reproduced by permission of Soc. Antiq. from *Alabaster Exhibition Catalogue*.



[A. Gardner, phot.]

NO. 2. RESURRECTION.

Reproduced by permission from Prior & Gardner's *Mediaeval Figure Sculpture in England*.

have been used as an isolated subject for individual adoration.

Of the Resurrection only two examples are known, which differ both as regards the number and disposition of the soldiery and also in respect to the position of our Lord's right hand.

i. This example (plate III, 1), the earlier, is in the collection of Lt.-Col. G. B. Croft-Lyons, F.S.A. It shows our Lord with the winding-sheet draped across the front of His body, He has His right hand raised in blessing, the elbow being pressed closely to the side; and this attitude is remarkable in that it did not come into universal use until nearly a century later. In His left hand is the Resurrection cross, and on His head the torse. Only three soldiers appear, who wear rounded bascinets,¹ circa 1350, and *camailles*, whilst over their plate armour they have *jupons* and *baldricks*. The figure in the foreground, who is armed with a poleaxe, is lying prone. It measures 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. by 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

ii. This example, which is in the British Museum (plate III, 2), shows our Lord wearing the loin-cloth,² and nimbed, with His right arm outstretched bestowing His blessing. Around the tomb are four soldiers, a mode of treatment which was the rule during the succeeding periods. Two of the soldiers have poleaxes and another a spear, who in addition supports a square shield, bearing *gu. three chevrons sa*. They all have sharply pointed bascinets, which points to a slightly later date than the preceding example, 1370. The background of gold has a pattern of gesso knobs very similar to that on the Betrayal at Hawkley church, Hants (plate VII, 1). The armour of the period is well described in the 'Knight's Tale' in Chaucer (*Cant. Tales* A, 2119-2124):

Som wol ben armed in an habergeoun,
 In a brest-plat and in a light gipoun ;
 And somme woln have a peyre plates large ;
 And somme woln have a Puce sheld, or a targe ;
 Somme woln ben armed on hir legges weel,
 And have an ax, and somme a mace of steel.

¹ Compare the monument of Hugh Despenser in Tewkesbury abbey, circa 1350.

² The veil of the Virgin, girt about our Lord prior to the nailing to the cross.

The tomb from which our Lord steps with His right leg is much tilted, which doubtless suggests the effect of the earthquake at the ninth hour.

The reverse of this panel has been smoothly chiselled away by the sculptor in two places at the thickest parts, no doubt with a view to reducing its weight. It is provided with latten strips for its attachment and measures 17 ins. by 11½ ins. (plate ix).

It is probable that the Nativity would be employed to complete the series of 'Joys.'

The Adoration of the Magi. Of this scene seven examples are known, all oblong in form, which are preserved in the churches at Long Melford, Suffolk; at Treslothan, Cornwall; at Bottenbroich, at Paderborn, and at Zuchau, in Germany; at St. Lawrence's church, Reading; and at Stonyhurst college. It is probable that these were devotional panels, rather than parts of retables, as was the case with the Cologne 'Annunciation.'

i. The panel at Long Melford (plate iv, 1), which measures 26 ins. by 15 ins., was found buried in the church in 1790. The subject depicts our Lady, whose head is nimbed and rests upon rose-studded cushions, reclining on a draped couch, holding in her hands the standing figure of the Child. Our Lord's hands rest upon a chalice of gold, presented to him by Melchior, who stands behind the couch in the act of raising his crown with his right hand. Beside Melchior stand Balthazar and Gaspar, likewise crowned, who bear respectively an oblong box and a circular pyx.¹ At the foot of the Virgin is seated the figure of St. Joseph in an attitude of fatigue, whose hooded head rests upon his cross-staff. Behind our Lady stands a midwife, who with her right hand adjusts the lower cushions and at whose feet may be seen the heads of the ox and the ass. The ox was brought by St. Joseph to provide for the payment of the tribute, whilst the ass acted as a steed for our Lady.²

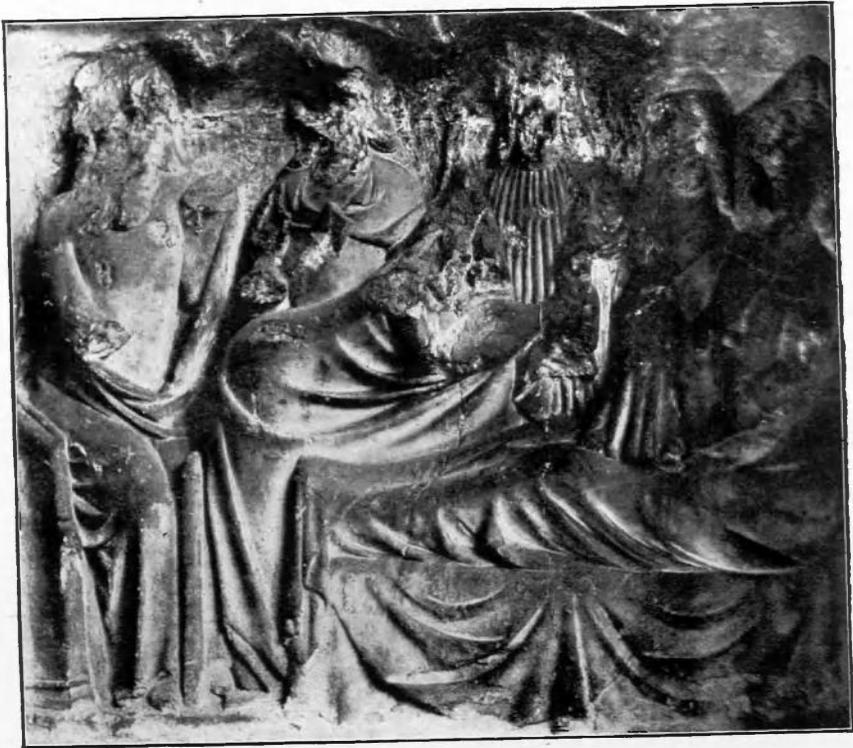
¹ Bede, *De Collectaneis*, says of the three Magi: 'Primus dicitur fuisse Melchior, qui senex et canus, barba prolixa et capillis, aurum obtulit regi Domino. Secundus, nomine Gaspar, juvenis imberbis, rubicundus, thure, quasi Deo oblatione digna, Deum

honoravit. Tertius fuscus, integre barbatus, Baltassar nomine, per myrrham filium hominis moriturum professus.'

² Isaiah i, 3: 'The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib.'



NO. 1. ADORATION OF THE MAGI: LONG MELFORD CHURCH, SUFFOLK.
Reproduced by permission of Soc. Antiq. from *Alabaster Exhibition Catalogue*.



NO. 2. ADORATION OF THE MAGI: ST. LAWRENCE CHURCH, READING.



ADORATION OF THE MAGI: TRESLOTHAN CHURCH, CORNWALL.



ADORATION OF THE MAGI: STONYHURST COLLEGE.

Reproduced by permission of Soc. Antiq. from *Alabaster Exhibition Catalogue*.

ii. This example, which is preserved in the vestry of the church of St. John the Evangelist, at Treslothan, Cornwall, measures 22 in. by $15\frac{1}{2}$ in., and is very similar to the preceding panel: in fact the attitudes of the various figures are almost identical; the animals are, however, relegated to the top right-hand corner. The Virgin is unnimbed (plate v).

iii. In the parish church at Bottenbroich,¹ near Cologne, is a panel measuring $22\frac{3}{4}$ in. by $17\frac{1}{2}$ in., which is very similar to the Treslothan carving. In this a midwife, a diminutive figure, covers the feet of the Virgin, being replaced at the head of the couch by an angel playing a lute. The right hand of St. Joseph has, however, been restored and now holds a modern halter.

iv. This panel (plate vi), which is now at Stonyhurst college, measures $26\frac{1}{2}$ in. by $17\frac{1}{2}$ in., and is very similar to the previous examples; in this case, however, the Virgin is represented as crowned. Our Lord, who is seated on His mother's lap, stretches out His left hand to the chalice of gold, which Melchior, who is kneeling, presents with his left hand, whilst on his right arm is his crown. Behind Melchior are Balthazar and Gaspar,² crowned, who bear respectively a ridged box and a chalice, whilst above Melchior is a moulded trough from which the ox and the ass are feeding. At the head and foot of the elaborately-draped couch are the two midwives, Salome and Zelomi, whose head-dresses resemble that of the Virgin of the Melford panel. At the foot of the bed is the hooded and seated figure of St. Joseph, who holds before him his cross-staff with both hands.

v. In Paderborn cathedral³ is a carving which measures $25\frac{1}{2}$ in. by 18 in. This, which is very similar to, but later than, the Stonyhurst example, is surmounted by a straight embattled canopy. The Virgin, behind whom is a widwife, is veiled and upon her lap stands the Child, who receives from the hands of the bending Melchior a chalice of gold. Beyond him stand Balthazar and Gaspar, crowned, who bear respectively on their left hands a navette and a horn.

¹ P. Clemen, *Die Kunstdenkmäler der Rheinprovinz, Kreis Bergheim*, Dusseldorf, 1899, plate opposite p. 48.

and unbearded; he wears a curiously pleated robe.

³ A. Ludorff, *Die Bau- und Kunstdenkmäler des Kreises Paderborn*, Munster i. W., 1899, plate xlv.

² Gaspar is, as usual, represented as young

Above our Lord are the ox¹ and the ass, feeding from a moulded trough.

vi. At Zuchau, in the parish church,² is an oblong panel, seemingly incomplete on the right side, since it omits St. Joseph. The Virgin, whose pillow is supported by a midwife, holds on her lap the Child, to whom Melchior, bending, presents a chalice of gold. In the background are Balthazar and Gaspar, crowned, who carry on their left hands a navette and a horn, whilst the latter with his right hand indicates the star.

vii. The panel at St. Lawrence's church, Reading, was found during the restoration of the church in 1860; it measures 21½ in. by 16½ in. (plate iv, 2).

It is remarkable in that it is the only reversed example in which the figure of our Lady occurs on the right-hand side of the panel. It may be thus described: The Holy Mother is seated upon a couch with her head resting upon an hexagonal cushion, clad in a long robe, over which is a cloak, drawn together across the chest by a short tasselled cord.³ Upon her lap stands the Divine Child, who turns to receive the chalice of gold from Melchior, who bends before Him. Behind the couch stand crowned figures of Balthazar and Gaspar, both of whom are bearded and bear gifts; the former has his cloak clasped by a morse, whilst the latter wears a much fluted robe which we have previously noted. Behind our Lord stands a midwife, whilst at the foot of the couch is St. Joseph, seated in a fine buttressed chair, clasping his cross-staff with both hands. The ox and the ass are curiously enough omitted, and the whole scene is surmounted by a series of four shallow arches separated by small buttresses. Traces of gold and scarlet still remain in places.

The second type of reredos, viz. that in honour of the Passion of our Lord, is preserved to us in three scenes—the Betrayal, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and it is not

¹ Joseph
now sith yt may none other be,
Mary, sister, now hye wee
an oxe I will take with me,
that there shall be sould.
The silver of hym—so mot I thee—
shall finde us in this City,
and pay tribute for thee and me,
for thereto we bene holde.

Chester Plays vi, *The Nativity*, lines 433
seq. E.E.T.S. Ex. Series, vol. lxii, pt. i.

² H. Kehrer, *Die heiligen drei Konige
in Literatur und Kunst*, Leipzig, 1909,
fig. 258.

³ Compare the second king over the west
door of Lincoln cathedral, circa 1370.



NO. I. THE BETRAYAL: HAWKLEY CHURCH, HANTS.



NO. 2. THE CRUCIFIXION.

improbable that these were all the subjects employed in this early type, though of course it would not be matter for surprise if panels of the Flagellation and the Entombment or the Harrowing of Hell were yet to come to light, as we find all these subjects in the reredos of the second or 'embattled' type.¹ These Passion or Easter panels are as follows :

The Betrayal. There is preserved at Hawkley, Hants, in the modern church which replaces an ancient building, a remarkable and unique carving depicting the Betrayal (plate VII, 1). This panel, which measures 17½ in. by 11½ in., still retains traces of its original colouring, and in many points resembles the Resurrection in the British Museum (plate III, 2).

In the centre, facing the spectator, is our Lord, behind whose head is a dark nimbus, clad in a long robe and ample cloak, His hair and beard, which is bifid and curly, are golden. He holds both His hands in front of Him, and with the right bestows His healing power on Malchus who lies beneath at the foot of the panel.

Behind is St. Peter, also robed and wearing a cloak, who holds in his left hand a golden key, whilst with his right he supports a large scimitar, point downwards. His beard, which is forked, and his hair are golden, and the latter exhibits the tonsure. Upon the extreme left is a man holding in his right hand a tall halberd, dressed in a jupon, girt about with a belt from which depends a short anlace adorned with bands of black and gold. His hair and short beard are black and his feet are shod with long shoes. In the background is a man having a square-cut brown beard, whose hair is also brown, who holds in his left hand an octagonal lantern which is gilded.

Upon the left of the panel stands Judas, who, like our Lord and St. Peter, has bare feet and is similarly habited. He lays his left hand upon the chest of Christ. He has a long pointed, flowing beard and long dark hair.

Behind Judas are two soldiers wearing pointed bascinets and golden camailles, short jupons, girt with baldricks of gold, and upon their feet long pointed shoes. The first soldier grasps the cloak of our Lord with his left hand and the second supports with his left hand a long spear.

¹ *Archaeological Journal*, vol. lxxv, p. 326, plate xv, 1 and 3.

At the foot of the panel, in the recess beneath the ground upon which the previously described figures stand, is the figure of Malchus, who is lying down supporting his weight upon his right elbow. He is also clad in a short jupon and baldrick, and holds in front of his body a short staff, which he grasps in his left hand. His right leg is extended, the foot missing; his left leg is drawn up towards the body. He has short hair and no beard, whilst his lips show traces of scarlet.

The background of this panel was originally gilded and enriched with gesso knobs arranged in the same style as those on the Resurrection panel in the British Museum (plate III, 2). The design is indicated in the accompanying illustration (fig. 1).

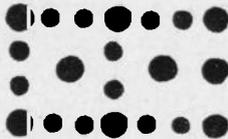


FIG. I.

i. The Crucifixion. This panel (plate VII, 2), which is in the collection of the writer, measures $16\frac{5}{8}$ in. by $11\frac{1}{2}$ in., and was no doubt formerly the centrepiece of an Easter reredos.

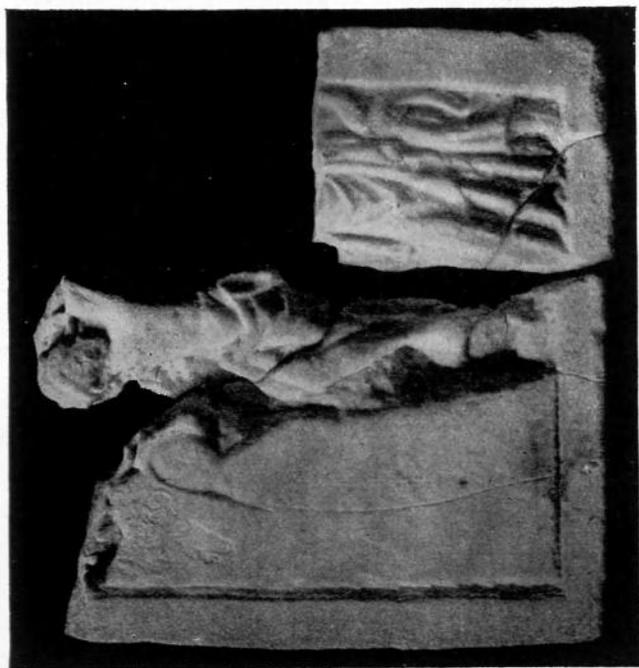
In the centre upon the cross is the dead figure of our Lord, His side pierced by the lance, wearing the torse and the loin-cloth. His hands have, and no doubt His feet had, dowel-holes from whence formerly proceeded streams of blood. Below His hands and feet are winged angels holding large deep bowls dowelled to receive the sacred blood. To the left of the cross is the fainting Virgin supported by St. Mary Magdalene and St. John the Divine, and upon the right are three bearded figures clad in long robes.¹ The centurion holds in his left hand a descending scroll inscribed, **¶hs nazarenus rex iudeorum filius dei vere**, whilst with his right gloved hand he points to our Lord. Upon his head is a hat, as also is the case with the last figure, who holds a long sword in both hands, the point of which rests upon the earth. The robes of all the figures were edged within

¹ Compare the weepers on an alabaster tomb at Earl's Colne, Essex, c. 1375. This, a work of the London school of carvers, is

illustrated by Prior and Gardner, *Medieval Figure Sculpture in England*, fig. 517.

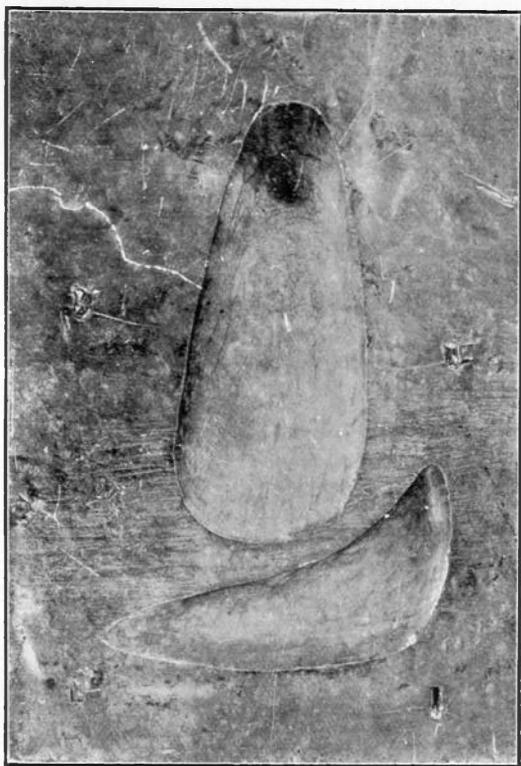


NO. 2. ST. JUDE.



NO. 1. THE CRUCIFIXION.

Reproduced by permission of Soc. Antiq. from *Alabaster Exhibition Catalogue*.



REVERSE OF RESURRECTION (B.M.).

and without with gold. The background of gold exhibited formerly large gesso knobs.

ii. The Crucifixion. In the museum of the Society of Antiquaries is the lower part of an alabaster slab, the carving of which is unfinished and which is said to have been found in St. Peter's church in the Isle of Thanet. This panel measures $12\frac{1}{2}$ in. by 14 in., and shows us our Lord upon the cross, between our Lady, whose outline is merely incised upon the left-hand side of the panel, and St. John the Divine, behind whom is the Centurion, who holds a descending scroll.

This panel is of extreme interest as showing the method of production employed by the *alabasterers*, the design being first incised with a stylus on the flat surface of the stone, whilst the surrounding parts were then cut away to the necessary depth in order to afford the requisite relief (plate VIII, 1).

The Resurrection. This subject has already been considered when we described the reredos in honour of the Virgin.

The next panel to be considered (plate VIII, 2) is that depicting St. Jude, which measures $5\frac{5}{8}$ in. in width, and is in the writer's collection. This came from Brittany, and was no doubt formerly a terminal figure from a Passion reredos.¹ The saint is represented as seated, clad in a long tight-fitting robe over which is a full cloak edged with gold and lined with scarlet. He holds in his left hand a staff, which, since the upper part is missing, may have been either an oar or a boat-hook, whilst in his right hand is an anchor, having, as was the rule in the middle ages, a ring at each end. The bare feet of the saint rest upon a green ground, enriched with the usual white and red flowers, beneath which is a sunk oblong recess. The upper part of the panel is a restoration, and the original upper part of the background would almost certainly have been rectangular in outline, not arched, as is at present the case.

There is, in the Kunstgewerbe Museum at Cologne, a remarkable alabaster fragment, which includes two distinct subjects.²

¹ The corresponding figure at the other end of the reredos would probably be St. Simon or St. James Minor.

² For the knowledge of this carving I am indebted to Dr. W. L. Hildburgh, F.S.A. : an illustration of it, with notes from his pen, will appear in the course of 1923.

This carving, which is incomplete at the top, is moulded on three sides and would originally measure about 20 in. in height. There is also preserved its wooden case which has two crested doors, upon the inner sides of which are painted the Blessed Virgin and St. Julian with a chained devil and St. John the Evangelist with St. Ursula holding a book and two arrows. In the lower section of the panel is the Annunciation. Upon the right is the Blessed Virgin clad in a long robe girt about the waist and an ample cloak edged with gold. She wears a round headdress¹ and kneels, with hands upraised, upon a cushion, before a desk, the side of which is cusped and upon which rests an open book. She turns her head to regard the angelic visitant. Behind the head is a large nimbus the edge of which has gesso dots² and the centre is painted with rays of light, straight and curved. The Archangel, who wears a robe and cloak and upon whose head is a headdress similar to that of the Virgin, holds in both hands a long scroll inscribed with the salutation which twines about the tall green stem of the lily which emerging from the water-vessel passes up the centre of the panel. The wings of St. Gabriel exhibit a spine on the outer edge, whilst the inner edge is serrated to indicate the *primaries*.³ The ground beneath is green and the background is of gold adorned with knobs of gesso arranged in a pattern very similar to the panels of the Betrayal at Hawkley and the Resurrection in the British Museum.

In the upper part, seated upon a large throne surrounded above and on each side by a double row of gesso knobs and whose feet rest upon the ground, is the Almighty wearing a long robe and cloak edged with gold. He holds in front of Him the Crucified Christ wearing the torse and loin cloth, behind whose head and hands were three flowers of the lily and whose crossed feet are attached to the stem.

This is the only example of this subject introducing the Father known to the writer in English art, but Christ crucified upon a lily in the Annunciation does occur both in painted glass⁴ and in alabaster on the tomb of

¹ Compare this with that of the midwife in the 'Adoration' at Stonyhurst.

² These also appear in the Resurrection in the British Museum.

³ Compare the Crucifixion (plate VII, 2).

⁴ Medieval glass depicting this may be seen in York Minster, St. Michael's church at Oxford and at Westwood, Wilts.

John de Tannesley, *ob.* 1414, in St. Mary's Church, Nottingham.

I would suggest that this was a devotional panel and never formed part of a reredos.

That there was in early times a close association between the Annunciation and the Crucifixion is evidenced by the wording of the collect for Lady Day, which reads thus :

'Gratiam tuam, quaesumus, Domine, mentibus nostris infunde : ut qui angelo nuntiante Christi Filii tui incarnationem cognovimus, per passionem ejus et crucem ad resurrectionis gloriam perducamur. Per eundem.'¹

In conclusion, I must express my gratitude to Mr. Arthur Gardner, F.S.A., for the use of his photographs, as also to the Society of Antiquaries for permission to use plate II, 2 ; plate III, 1 ; plate IV, 1 ; plate VI ; plate VIII, 1 ; and to the Cambridge University Press for permission to use plate I, 2 and plate III, 2 from Prior and Gardner's *Medieval Figure Sculpture in England*. My thanks are also due to Lt.-Col. G. B. Croft-Lyons, F.S.A., for his kind permission to illustrate his Resurrection, and to Dr. W. L. Hildburgh, F.S.A., for information relative to the Cologne 'Annunciation,' and the 'Adoration' panels in Germany.

¹ Salisbury use. Greg. super Oblata. Ann. Angeli ad B. Mariam.