



NO. I. THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST :
VERSAILLES.



NO. 2. THE ASCENSION : VERSAILLES.

SOME UNPUBLISHED ENGLISH MEDIEVAL ALABASTER CARVINGS.

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

In the Library in Versailles are two remarkable panels, viz.: The birth of St. John Baptist and the Ascension, the former of which is almost unique and is as follows (plate 1, 1):

Beneath an embattled and canted cornice, from either side of which depend curtains and from the centre a cresset, is a bed on which reclines St. Elizabeth, whose hooded head rests upon two tasselled cushions. Behind her are two female attendants, one of whom, who is hooded, holds in her arms St. John Baptist wrapped in swaddling clothes. In the left lower corner a maid is preparing food in a pan, resting upon a movable tripod hearth, which she stirs with a spoon held in her right hand. Opposite to her is the elderly figure of Zacharias, seated upon an obstetrical chair, and holding across his knees a long scroll, on which he inscribes the child's name, John.¹

The second panel, the Ascension (plate 1, 2), is unusual since it represents our Lord as nimbed on the mount, prior to the ascent, standing clad in the loin-cloth and winding sheet, His hands upraised. On each side are six figures with hands raised in prayer, among whom the Virgin and St. John may be recognised.

The only other examples known to me are those in the seven-panel Virgin reredos in the church of St. Michel at Bordeaux, that figured in *The Antiquaries' Journal*, vol. i, p. 226, fig. 1, and that in the Virgin triptych in the Marienkirche, Danzig, illustrated in *Arch. Journ.* vol. lxxvi, p. 139.

The elaborate St. John's Head, formerly in the collection of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas and now in the possession of Mr. W. Burrell, is remarkable in that it is still contained

¹ St. Luke i. 59-63.

in its original polychrome case (plate II). The head panel measures $10\frac{1}{4}$ in. by $7\frac{1}{2}$ in., the canopy is $4\frac{1}{4}$ in. in height, whilst the wooden case, about 4 in. deep, is $16\frac{1}{2}$ in. high by 10 in. in width when closed, and the doors are $5\frac{5}{8}$ in. wide, this slight increase being rendered necessary owing to the forward projection of the centre.

The panel is unique in that on either side of the central head are three saintly figures, which are arranged as follows :

Upon the left are St. Peter, holding two keys in his right hand and a closed book in his left, St. Catherine, crowned, holding in her right hand a sword and in her left a wheel, and St. James Major, wearing a palmer's hat, carrying in his right hand a bourdon and in his left a closed book. Upon the right are St. William of York, mitred, holding a closed book in his right hand, whilst in his left he supports his archiepiscopal cross-staff, St. Margaret, crowned, holding in her right hand a closed book and in her left a cross-staff, whilst above is the headless figure of St. Anthony.

The centrally placed head of the Baptist upon the discus has the hair and beard much curled and treated in a manner timetrically symmetrical, the wound inflicted by Herodias being shown by an incision over the left eye. The eyelids, which are open, are expressed by the chisel. Above is the soul of the Baptist, with folded hands, within a rayed ellipse supported by angels, whilst beneath is our Lord's Pity, with hands folded across the body.

The ground is green, dotted with flowers having five white petals and red centres, in addition to which sprays of leafwork also appear. This style of leafwork occurs on the St. John's Head panel preserved at Ampport church¹ and on that illustrated in *Arch. Journ.* vol. lxxi, 1914, p. 162, and also on the fragment in the collection of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas (plate VII, 2), whilst we also find the same occurring on the Annunciation in my collection² and also on the Swansea Annunciation in the reredos in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

It is thus evident that the firm in Nottingham which made this magnificent carving produced, not only the most elaborate and simplest St. John's Heads, but also turned out Virgin reredoses in addition.

¹ *Archaeologia*, vol. 52.

² *Arch. Journ.* vol. lxxi, 1914, p. 162.



ST. JOHN'S HEAD

(IN THE POSSESSION OF MR. W. BURRELL).



NO. 1. ST. PETER.



NO. 2. ST. ANDREW.



NO. 3. ST. JAMES MAJOR.



NO. 4. ST. JOHN THE DIVINE.

THE TWELVE APOSTLES.

The canopy, which is enriched with gold, consists of three four-light windows with a quatrefoil between two triangular lights in the traceries, under crocketed gables and four buttresses, the whole surmounted by an embattled top, whilst upon the red coving beneath is painted groining in yellow, such as we find on the canopy illustrated in *Arch. Journ.* vol. lxxi, 1914, p. 164. This canopy is very similar to the central canopy of the reredos at Montréal, illustrated in *Arch. Journ.* vol. lxxvii, 1910, pl. i, p. 66, but in that case it is flat, not bayed, as is the case in that under consideration.

The case is painted in black, red and white, and exhibits, on each door, the rose and sun of York, each of which is surrounded by gesso knobs, whilst in the spaces between are the names of the four upper saints, there being two on each door, separated by scroll-work :

Sanctu' Iacobi'
Sancta caterina

Sanctu' antonii'
Sancta margaret

In each case the S is retrograde.

I would suggest, from the presence of the Yorkist badges and the relationship of this panel to the Swansea reredos, which I have dated as of 1492, that this piece must be of about the year 1485. From the resemblance of the case to that of the example at Leicester Museum, it is evident that both came from the same workshop.

Mr. Grosvenor Thomas is the fortunate possessor of a fine series of figures representing the twelve Apostles, all of whom bear scrolls and all save St. Matthias carry their appropriate emblems (plates III, IV, V). Of these figures all wear cloaks and robes ; the cloaks pass across the bodies from right to left in nos. 1, 2, 4 and 6 ; from left to right in nos. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12, whilst in nos. 3 and 5 the cloaks fall vertically. The scrolls are held in the left hand and read from below in nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, whilst they are held in the right hand and read downwards in nos. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. These figures may have formed part of a reredos, as at Saint-Avit-les-Guespieres, or more probably the decoration of the two long sides of a tomb, such as we find at Abergavenny and Tong. These figures are carved in high relief on oblong

panels measuring 16 in. by $4\frac{1}{2}$ in., and no doubt were originally surmounted by detached canopies.

The figures, which are all nimbed, have the backgrounds gilt adorned with gesso knobs, whilst the foregrounds are of green, strewn with the usual flowers, having six white petals with a red centre.

The scrolls all bear traces of the various sections of the Apostles' Creed, and all the figures are bearded save St. John and St. Philip. The figures are as follows:—

1. St. Peter, held in his right hand a key and in his left a scroll inscribed; **'Credo in Deum patrem omnipotentem, creatorem coeli et terrae.'**

2. St. Andrew, holds in his right hand a saltire cross and in his left a scroll inscribed: **'Et in Jesum Christum, filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum.'**

3. St. James Major, has upon his mitre-like cap an escallop shell, and has upon his right side a scrip; he holds in his right hand a bourdon and in his left a scroll inscribed: **'Qui conceptus est de Spiritu sancto, natus ex Maria virgine.'**

4. St. John the Divine, holds in his right hand a palm branch and in his left a scroll inscribed: **'Passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus et sepultus est.'**

5. St. Thomas, holds in his right hand a spear and in his left a scroll inscribed: **'Descendit ad infernos, tertia die resurrexit a mortuis.'**

6. St. James Minor, holds in his right hand a fuller's bat and in his left a scroll inscribed: **'Ascendit ad coelos, sedet ad dextram Dei Patris omnipotentis.'** This is the section more usually assigned to St. Bartholomew.

7. St. Philip, holds in his left hand a chalice¹ and in his right a scroll inscribed: **'Eude venturus est, judicare vivos et mortuos.'** Over his left arm hangs a narrow cloth, which may be intended for a 'houceling cloth.'

8. St. Bartholomew, carries in his left hand a large knife and in his right a scroll inscribed: **'Credo in Spiritum sanctum.'**

9. St. Matthew, holds in his left hand an axe and in his right a scroll inscribed: **'Sanctam Ecclesiam Catholicam, sanctorum communionem.'** This section

¹ He usually holds three loaves.



NO. 5. ST. THOMAS.



NO. 6. ST. JAMES MINOR.



NO. 7. ST. PHILIP.



NO. 8. ST. MATTHEW.

THE TWELVE APOSTLES.



NO. 9. ST. BARTHOLOMEW.



NO. IO. ST. SIMON.



NO. II.

THE TWELVE APOSTLES.

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PLATE V.



NO. 12. ST. MATTHIAS.



ST. JUDE.



ADORATION OF THE VIRGIN
(COLLECTION OF MR. GROSVENOR THOMAS).

of the Creed is that usually assigned to St. James Minor.

10. St. Simon, holds in his left hand a ship and in his right a scroll inscribed : '**Remissionem peccatorum.**'

11. St. Jude, holds in his left hand an oar and in his right a scroll inscribed : '**Carnis resurrectionem.**'

12. St. Matthias, holds in his right hand an inscribed scroll to which he points with his left hand. The scroll bears the following and final section : '**Et vitam aeternam.**'

The date of this series of figures would appear to be circa 1455.¹

The Adoration of the Virgin (plate vi, 1). This panel, which came from Spain, is unique and measures 16 in. by 10 in. ; it is now in the collection of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas. In the centre is the seated figure of the Virgin, having a rayed nimbus and a large elaborate crown. She wears a long robe and a cloak brought together upon the chest by a double cord ; her hands are raised, whilst her feet rest upon a book closed with seven clasps,² supported by two kneeling angels. Above are the three persons of the Trinity, each of whom is nimbed and holds in the left hand an orb, whilst with the right He gives the Benediction. Below, issuing from clouds, are four angels : the two on the left are playing a citole and a harp. Of those on the right, one plays a shawm, whilst the second holds an inscribed scroll. Beneath upon the left is a figure holding a cross-staff, and upon the right is a censuring angel whose wings have spines upon their inner surfaces. This panel, in which the eyelids are indicated in the carving, dates from circa 1490.

The Coronation of the Virgin. This panel, which presents unusual features, measures 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. and is in the possession of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas. In the centre is the figure of the Virgin, having a blue nimbus, wearing a triple gown of gold and blue, clad in a white robe edged with gold, over which is a white cloak edged

¹ These, which were found in Spain in 1919, are now the property of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

² Revelation v, 1 ; Isaiah xxix, 11.

with gold and lined with ermine, whilst upon her feet are red shoes.

Of the three Persons of the Trinity all are identical in appearance and costume and are depicted with closely curling beards. The two lateral figures are seated upon brackets and have already placed the crown upon the Virgin's head, and they and the third Person are bestowing the Benediction. Their robes are of white edged with gold, as are also their cloaks, those of the left and central figures being lined with red, that of the right with blue. At the feet of the Virgin are two angels clad in golden feathers¹ and exhibiting four wings, the upper showing spines upon their inner surface. They are playing musical instruments, that on the left a citole, that upon the right a harp, now missing.

At the top of the panel are two angels in girdled albes, with uplifted hands, emerging from blue clouds. The background is of gold studded with gesso knobs.

The figure slab of St. John Baptist (plate VII, 1), in the collection of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas, measures 28 inches in height by 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in width, and is a remarkably fine example of fifteenth-century work.

The saint is clad in a voluminous cloak lined with scarlet, over a brown camel's skin, showing the head and hoofs. The eyes of the saint are indicated by carving and the hair both of his head and beard is treated in long spiral curls. Upon his left arm, resting upon a closed book, is the Agnus Dei, behind which is the Resurrection flag.

The foreground is strewn with the usual flowers upon green, whilst the background shows traces of the same colour.

'The Washing of Feet' (plate VIII). This panel, which measures 19 in. by 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., in the collection of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas, dates from the earlier years of the sixteenth century and with the exception of the example at Compiègne is the only specimen known to me.

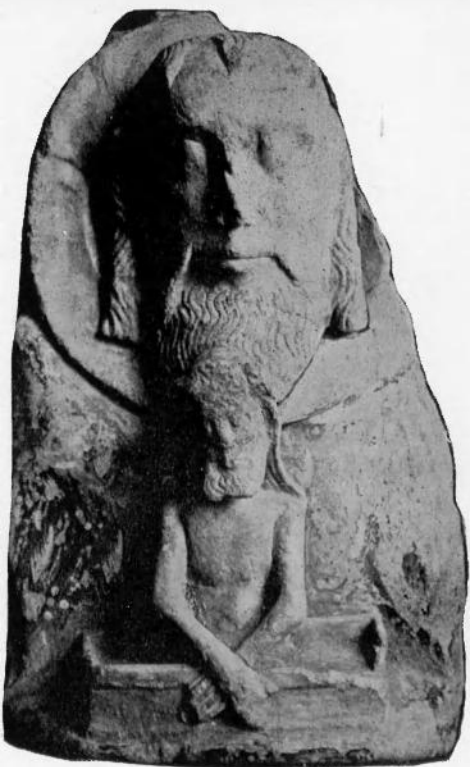
In the left lower corner is St. Peter, with hands upraised, clad in a rope-girt robe, seated with both his feet

¹ The feathered tights as worn by the performers in the mystery plays.



NO. I. ST. JOHN BAPTIST
(COLLECTION OF MR. GROSVENOR THOMAS).

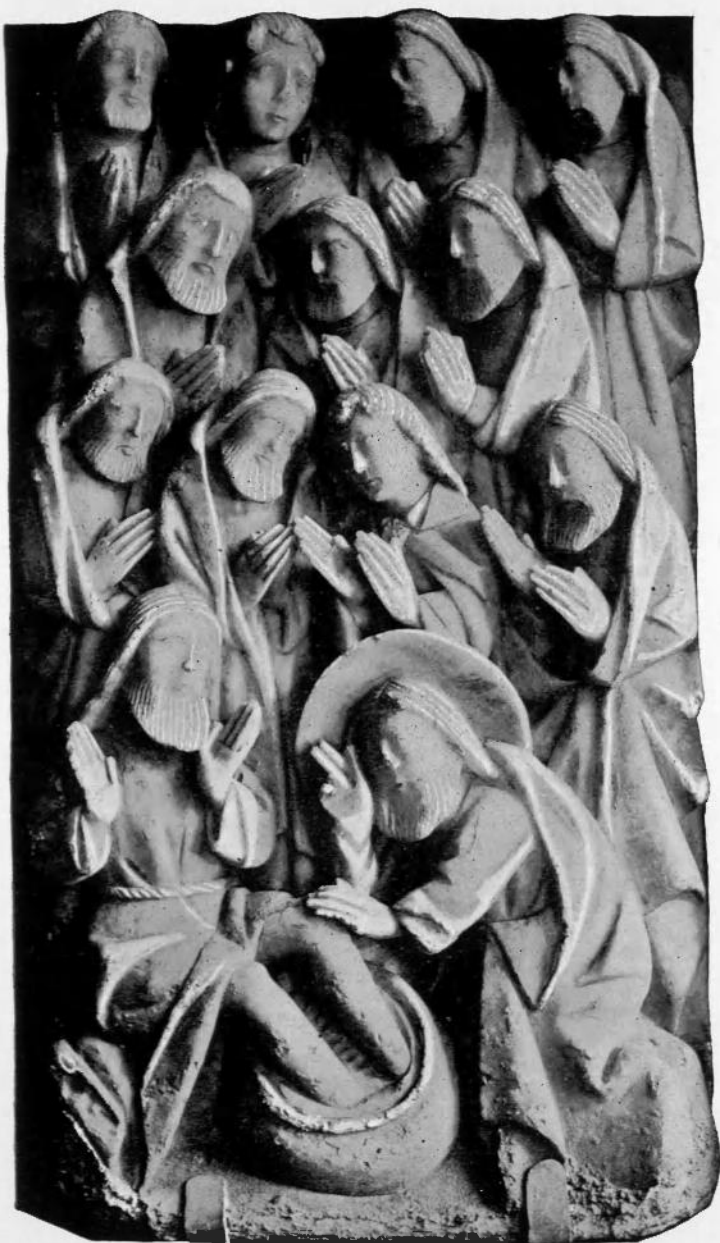
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NO. 2. ST. JOHN'S HEAD

(COLLECTION OF MR. GROSVENOR THOMAS).

PLATE VII.



THE WASHING OF FEET
(COLLECTION OF MR. GROSVENOR THOMAS).



PENTECOST.



THE ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN.

in a globular water vessel, in front of which kneels our Lord, who is nimbed and is clad in a robe and cloak. Above are the remaining disciples in three rows in attitudes of prayer, all of whom have long hair and are bearded, save St. John and St. Thomas. This panel, which came from Spain, retains but little trace of its original colouring.

St. John's Head (plate vii, 2). This example, which measures 7 in. by 4 in., is in the collection of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas. In the foreground is our Lord's Pity, with hands crossed in front of the tomb. Above is the head of the saint upon the discus, the hair over the forehead is arranged in three points, whilst the rest of the hair and also the beard are lightly incised.

The foreground of green is dotted with the usual flowers with the addition of double sprigs.

Pentecost (plate ix). This panel, which I am able to illustrate from a photograph kindly supplied by M. Demotte, measures $19\frac{3}{4}$ in. by 13 in.

In the foreground are the Blessed Virgin, crowned, behind whom is St. James Major, holding a book in his left hand and a bourdon and scrip in his right, whilst in front are St. John, holding a palm branch, and St. Andrew, with a book in his right hand and a saltire cross in his left.

Arranged above are the other apostles, in equal groups to right and left of the Divine Dove, which descends from between two angels, bearing in its beak the sacred wafer, from which proceed rays of light.

In the centre of the background is a shield bearing three fleurs-de-lys.

The Assumption of the Virgin (plate x). This tall panel, which measures $24\frac{1}{2}$ in. by 10 in., was formerly at Hornby Castle, Yorks., in the possession of the Duke of Leeds, and is now in the collection of the writer.

In the centre is the Virgin, clad in a long robe and an ample cloak with pendant cords, surrounded by a rayed ellipse supported by six angels in girded albes, whose wings display a carved spine. Above is the Deity, between two angels—one playing upon a harp, the other on a citole with a plectrum. Immediately beneath the Virgin is

St. Thomas, kneeling on his left knee, facing to the left, and receiving the girdle which falls from her waist. On each side of the saint is a kneeling ecclesiastic, *vis à vis*, each of whom has over his shoulder his hood, and holds in his hands an inscribed invocatory scroll. The background is of gold adorned with gesso knobs, whilst the foreground is of green bearing the usual flowers.

The Crucifixion (plate XIII, 2). This tall central panel from an Easter reredos measures $21\frac{3}{4}$ in. by $10\frac{3}{4}$ in. and is in the Nelson collection.

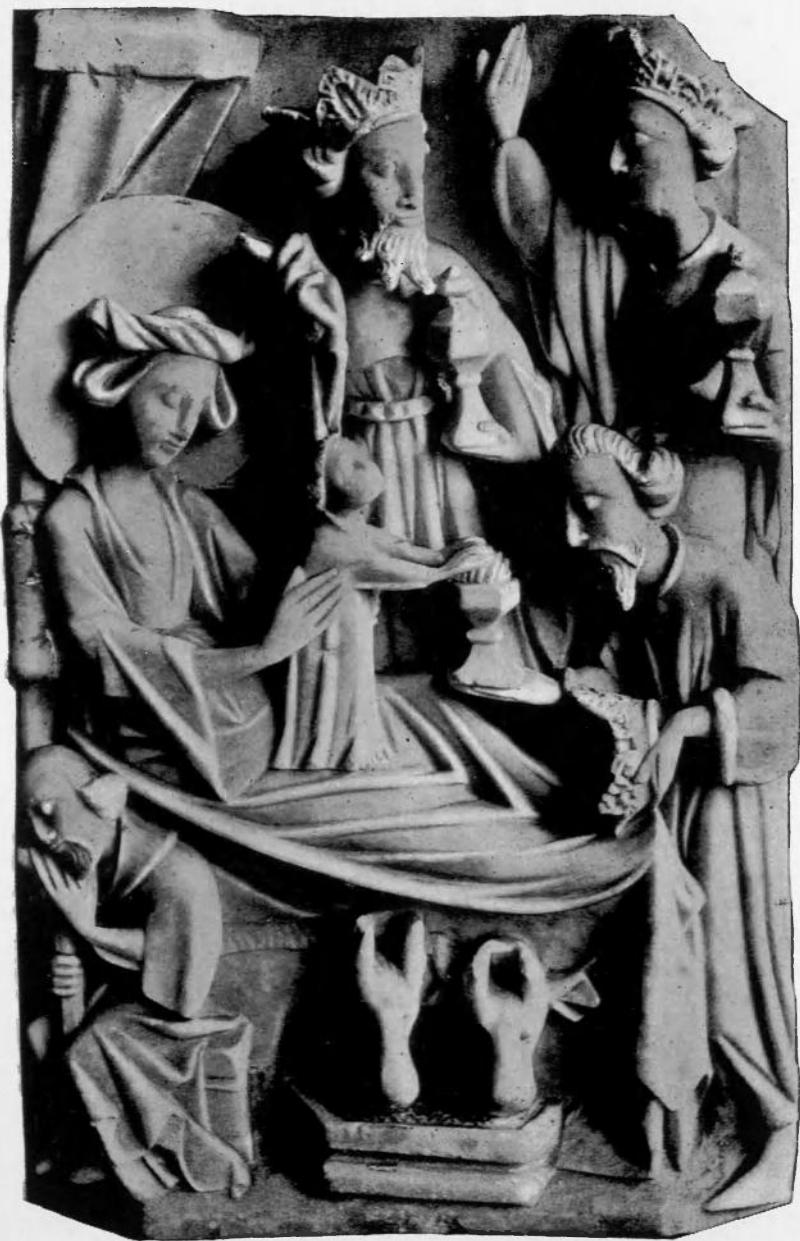
In the centre is the cross, supporting the dead figure of Christ, from whose side, hands and feet proceeded streams of blood affixed to dowel-holes. On each side is a crucified thief, whose soul in each case is borne away by an angel and a black fiend represented as horned, whilst two angels holding chalices also appear.

To the left are the Blessed Virgin, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Martha, St. John with a palm, and Longinus, who holds the spear. To the right are two soldiers in armour and the centurion, in a red hat and long white robe girt about the waist, who holds a scroll, no doubt formerly inscribed **Vere Filius Dei erat iste.**¹ At the foot of the cross is a kneeling angel holding a chalice.

The Adoration of the Magi (plate XI) in the writer's collection measures $15\frac{1}{2}$ in. by 9 in. The Virgin, who wears a turban-like headdress, is nimbed and reclines upon a couch beneath a curtained celure. Behind her is a large cushion and upon her lap stands our Lord, clad in a long robe, who stretches out both His hands laying them upon a chalice containing a rouleau of gold coins, which Melchior bends forward to present to Him. The king is clad in a fur-edged robe, and holds his gift in his right hand, whilst in his left he holds his crown. Behind the couch are standing figures of Balthazar and Jaspas, the former of whom is bearded; both are crowned and girt with golden belts and hold in their left hands covered cups, whilst with their right hands they point above, doubtless to indicate the star. The former wears a tippet

¹ St. Matthew xxvii, 54.

² Prior & Gardner, *English Figure Sculpture*, fig. 551, p. 479.



ADORATION OF THE MAGI.

over his loose robe, the latter a tight-fitting jupon with full sleeves.

In the foreground is St. Joseph, seated upon a low stool, resting his head upon his cross-staff, which he holds with both hands between his knees: behind him are the ox and the ass, feeding from a moulded trough. The treatment of the hair in large masses covering the ears, and the type of the crowns, would suggest a date circa 1430 as the period of this panel, which may be compared with that at Preston in Holderness.

The Ascension (plate XII). This panel, which measures 16½ in. by 10 in. is in the possession of Mr. Grosvenor Thomas, and came from Spain.

In front of the mount are St. James Major with his scrip, the Blessed Virgin, St. John the Divine, holding in his left hand a palm branch, and St. Jude, who holds on his left arm a ship. On either side of the mount are groups of four apostles among whom St. Peter, St. Bartholomew holding a knife, and St. Thomas with a spear, may be recognised, whilst in the centre our Lord disappears into the clouds. The background is of gold, the mount is red, whilst the foreground was of green, strewn with the usual white and red flowers.

This panel may be compared with that in the New York Museum and dates from 1420.

The Crucifixion (fig. 1). This panel, which measures 17 in. by 12¾ in. is in the Nelson collection: it dates from the middle of the fourteenth century and may be compared with the work on the font at Burford (Prior and Gardner *op. cit.* fig. 498). Upon a stepped cross is the nimbed figure of Christ, girt with the loin-cloth, His side pierced by the spear. To the left and right are the Blessed Virgin and St. John the Divine in attitudes of mourning. Each is clad in a long robe and full cloak, lined with scarlet and edged with gold, and stands upon an architectural bracket. The whole is enclosed within a frame having a hollow moulding, whilst the background appears to have originally been painted scarlet. The panel has straight sides, which are chamfered behind, except the base, but has

never been fitted with wire loops for support ; and it is thus probable that it was originally built into a tomb rather than fitted into a retable.

The figure group of the Virgin and Child (plate XIII, 1), which measures 16 inches in height, is an admirable example of the work of the Nottingham school, circa 1380, and may



FIG. 1. CRUCIFIXION.

perchance be from the atelier of Peter Mason of St. Mary's street, Nottingham, who we know was in active employment about that time.

This group is very similar to that at Cadillac-sur-Garonne (plate XIII, 3) and to that at Bordeaux, in the church of St. Seurin, though these are of course on a larger scale. These latter, as was the case with the sculpture under con-



NO. 1. VIRGIN AND CHILD.



NO. 2. CRUCIFIXION.

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PLATE XIII.

NO. 3. VIRGIN AND CHILD :
CADILLAC.

sideration, were doubtless exported to France at the time of their production, as will be apparent from the following record of the year 1390.

'Suppliant tres humblement Henry Mayn et William Mayn, son friere, Marchauntz de Dertemouthe, qe come le disme jour d'Augst, l'an du regne nostre seignur le Roy Richard q'or'est quatorszisme (1390) en temps de peas,



FIG. 2. ST. KATHERINE IN PRISON.

mesmez lez suppliantz, chargerent vne nief a Dertemouthe, appellee le George, oue draps de layne de diuersez colours, ymagez d'alabastre et autres marchandizes, al value de mille liures, pvr auoir passee le meer enuers les partiez de Cyuyile graunt (Seville).'¹

¹ *Select Cases in Chancery 1364-1471* (Selden Society vol. x) p. 45.

The carving is as follows :—

The Virgin, who wears a remarkably elaborate crown, holds in her left hand a large sceptre¹ and on her right arm the infant Jesus, is clad in a long white robe edged with gold, over which is an ample cloak of white edged with gold and lined with scarlet. Upon her feet are red shoes.

Our Lord, who wears a white robe edged with gold over which is a full white cloak edged with gold, holds in both hands a large bird.²

The two panels described beneath came from a retable of circa 1480, in honour of St. Katherine, which formerly adorned an altar in the church at Roscoff, Brittany. These are as follows :—

1. St. Katherine in prison (fig. 2). Within the prison and visible through the unguarded windows is the crowned figure of St. Katherine, whose hands are raised in adoration and on either side of whom is an angel. Above are three angels and the 'whyte dowve whiche fedde her with mete celestyall.' On the left are kneeling the empress Faustina, crowned and Porphyry, on whose shoulder is his hood,³ the long liripipe of which descends in front of his tunic. Both these figures support scrolls, as also does St. Katherine. On the right is the nimbed figure of the Saviour, clad in the loin-cloth and shroud, who bestows His benediction with His right hand, whilst with His left He supports the Resurrection cross. On each side, in the upper corners is an angel, holding a long taper.

2. The Decollation of St. Katherine (fig. 3). In the foreground kneels the saint, crowned and blindfolded with a cloth, her left hand resting upon the ground, whilst with her right she groped for the block before her. Behind her is her jailer in front of the city gateway, who urges St. Katherine into position with his right foot and his key-staff. Above stands the executioner, his tunic tucked through his belt, with his left foot on the saint's shoulders, his falchion, which is held in both hands, poised above his head.

¹ 'The sceptre of thy kingdom is a right sceptre.' Psalm xlv. 6.

land. See Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, chap. iv.

² Perhaps one of the clay sparrows, a popular incident which reached even Ice-

³ Vide another panel in the British Museum.

Upon the right is the emperor Maxentius, who holds in his right hand a sword and behind whom stands a judge wearing a red robe and white coif. In the upper part of the panel are two angels, who between them carry away the soul of St. Katherine.

These panels, which are cut through the thickness of



FIG. 3. DECOLLATION OF ST. KATHERINE.

the alabaster, behind St. Katherine in 1, and behind the jailer in 2, measure about 16 in. by 10 in.

I desire to thank the following gentlemen for kindly providing me with photographs from which illustrations have been made: The Director of the Versailles Library, plates 1, 1 and 2; Mr. Eric Maclagan, C.B.E., F.S.A., plates III, IV and V; Mr. R. Grosvenor Thomas, plates II, VI and VII; Mr. Lionel Harris, plates VIII and XII; and M. Brutails, plate XIII, 3.