

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

OCTOBER 28, 1889, TO MAY 19, 1890.

WITH

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XXXII.

BEING No. 2 OF THE SEVENTH VOLUME.

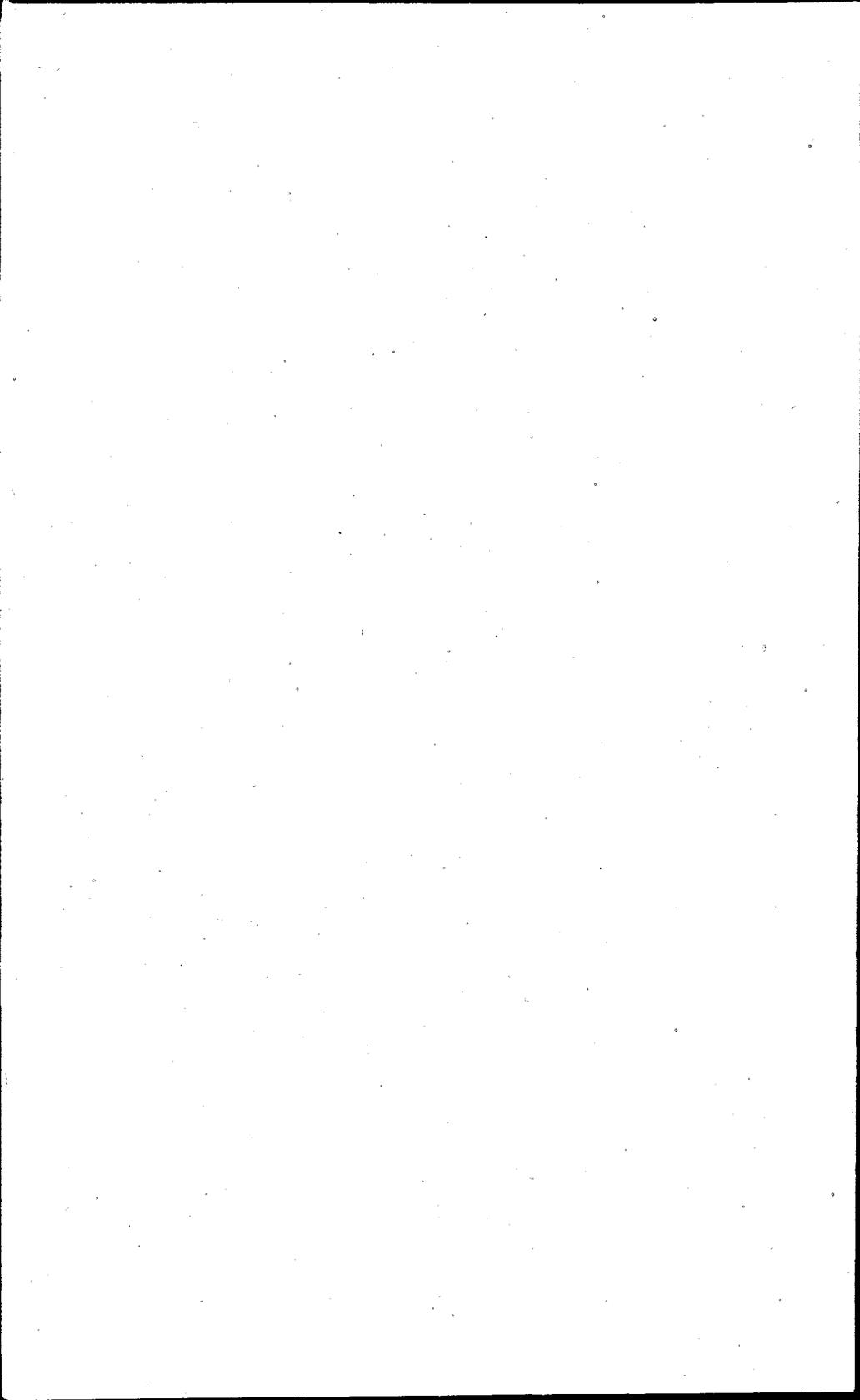
Cambridge:

DEIGHTON BELL & CO.; MACMILLAN & BOWES.

LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS,

1891.

Price 8s. 6d.



Professor MIDDLETON made the following communication :

ON FRAGMENTS OF ALABASTER RETABLES FROM MILTON,
AND WHITTLESFORD, CAMBRIDGE¹.

DURING the xvth century a great many churches in various parts of England seem to have purchased for one or more of their altars a retable made of the beautiful cream-white Derbyshire alabaster, which, when free from yellow stains, is now very scarce and only attainable in very small pieces. Nottingham appears to have been one of the chief centres of the manufacture of these alabaster reliefs, as has been pointed out by Mr St John Hope in *Proceed. Soc. Ant.* 1890, p. 131, and *Archaeologia*, Vol. 53, 1891. A considerable number of these retables in a more or less fragmentary state still exist, and they form very common items in ecclesiastical inventories of the xvth and early part of xvith centuries, under various names, such as "Alabaster tables, tabuls, or tabylls," "*tabulae de alabastro*," "tablementes," "retables," and "alabaster tabernacles with images." From their great uniformity of style it is evident that in most cases they have been produced by one school of carvers; and a large number have clearly come out of the same Nottingham workshop.

This strong uniformity of design is to be seen, not only in the style of the faces and the lines of the drapery, but also in the minuter details, such as the methods of distinguishing each saint by his special symbol.

The same similarity of treatment is to be seen in the application of gold and colour with which they are all decorated—especially the patterns on the dresses, the "powderings" on the

¹ See Plates xxx—xxxiii.

backgrounds, and the manner of representing the ground in open air scenes with conventionally treated groups of flowers in red, white, and yellow on a rich green background, which seems intended to suggest a grassy sward.

The gilding is very rich and effective; much thicker leaf being used than is now the custom; and it is very freely used for the hair of saints and angels, for borders of drapery, for angels' wings, and other ornamental purposes. If a whole background of a relief is gilt the surface is relieved (in most cases) by being sprinkled with a series of little round bosses, modelled in the very delicate *gesso* or plaster, mixed with white of egg, which formed the "mordant" for the gold leaf. This fine plaster is a pure sulphate of lime, obtained by burning waste fragments of the same alabaster of which the reliefs themselves were made: an exceptionally pure variety of what is now called "plaster of Paris." The pigments used for the painting are very rich and harmonious in tone. *Ochre* colours are used for the quieter reds, yellows and browns; *mercury* vermilion for the brilliant red; and a magnificent *smalto* blue, made of a powdered vitreous enamel, coloured with a copper oxide—exactly the same as the jewel-like blue (*κίανος*), which was used by the early painters of Egypt and Greece. It is interesting to find that the Monk Theophilus, who wrote in the XIIth century (or earlier) a treatise on painting and other arts (*Diversarum Artium. Schedula*), advises the painter who wants to get a specially fine blue to collect *tesserae* of deep blue glass from some ancient Roman building, and then to grind these *tesserae* into powder, which will make, he says, the best possible blue pigment.

In general design these retables seem usually to have consisted of a large central figure, such as that of the Madonna and Child in the Whittlesford example; with, at the sides, single figures of saints of a medium size, placed between reliefs of subjects with figures very minute in scale.

The relief is usually very high (*alto-relievo*); in many cases the figures are so much undercut as to be almost "in the round" or detached from the ground.

One of the fragments exhibited to-night is that of an Angel supporting a standing figure of the Virgin in a *vesica*-shaped aureole (*mandorla*). Part of this aureole with gilded rays and a bit of the brilliant blue robe of the Virgin is all that remains of the principal figure in the panel.

In design this panel must have resembled the relief carved over the doorway on the south side of the Presbytery of King's College Chapel—the only non-heraldic piece of sculpture in the Chapel, very beautiful in design, though sadly injured by Puritan iconoclasts.

The colouring on this fragment, which is said to have come from Milton Church, is exceptionally well preserved, especially the flower-sown sward on which the Angel stands, and the crimson of the Angel's wing. The gold leaf on the hair and the borders of the drapery is also very brilliant, owing to the extreme purity of the gold.

Other fragments from Milton, evidently parts of the same retable, are preserved in the Archaeological Museum, and are here exhibited by the kindness of the Baron von Hügel. These fragments (like those of the Whittlesford retable) were fastened to their place by small loops of copper wire, fixed in the back of each slab of alabaster by melted lead. In some cases these retables were framed in elaborately moulded wood-work, gilt and painted like the alabaster; they were frequently fitted with two wooden doors, thus forming a *triptych*, which during Lent could be closed, in accordance with the Canon which required all pictures, reliefs, or statues of saints to be concealed from view throughout the whole of Lent. When there were no doors, this was done by coverings of linen or silk, on which symbols of the Passion were sometimes painted.

"Steyned clothes for Lent," as these were called, are very

common items in old Church inventories. In wealthy Churches each important image had its own set of "steined clothes"; the most important of all being that which was used to cover the great *Rood* on the Choir-screen¹.

In spite of this white, translucent, alabaster being so beautiful a substance, and so easy to work, it does not appear to have come into use in England at a very early date. Almost, if not quite, the earliest example of its use for any important purpose is to be seen in Westminster Abbey—the tomb of Prince John of Eltham, second son of Edward II., and created Earl of Cornwall—who died in 1334, on the south side of the Sanctuary, in St Edmund's Chapel. The monument consists of a very fine portrait-figure of the Prince, lying on an elaborate altar-tomb. The effigy itself and the small figures of mourners in the panels of the base are all of the purest white alabaster: originally gilt and painted.

With regard to the date of these retables, it should be noticed that the costumes and armour are very frequently *archaisitic* in style, and cannot be taken as a proof of the time at which the reliefs were executed. When a mediaeval artist represented a scene from ancient history he usually introduced costume of a century or so older than his own time, to shew that the scene was not a modern one. Thus in paintings of the time of Henry III. and Edward I., executed in the Palace of Westminster, the soldiers in the various Biblical Scenes were represented in the armour of about the year 1100.

In the same way in these Milton and Whittlesford retables, executed probably about the middle of the 15th century, we see armour and dresses of the time of Edward III.

¹ In addition to these coverings over the retables, the whole east end of the Sanctuary was concealed by a curtain called the Lenten Veil, which hung from wall to wall of the Sanctuary a few feet to the west of the High Altar. In many places the iron hooks which supported this curtain may still be seen in the north and south walls.

Among the fragments of the retable from Whittlesford Church the following subjects are illustrated on Plates xxx to xxxiii.

- (1) Fragment of a male Saint, including the chest and the left arm.
- (2) Representation of the Trinity, treated in the usual conventional manner, with God the Father holding a Crucifix.
- (3) Fragment of the lower part of a relief with many figures. The principal part of this fragment consists of a male secular figure standing on a green flower-sprinkled hillock.
- (4) Possibly a fragment of a relief representing the Nativity.
- (5) Fragment of a waggon drawn by oxen.
- (6) Fragment with portions of recumbent figures in plate armour.
- (7) Group of Apostles, probably from a relief of the Ascension.
- (8) Standing figure of an Evangelist.
- (9) Fragment with a hand holding a model of a church.
- (9a) Head of a bishop or Abbot; probably part of the same relief to which No. 9 belongs.
- (10) Large fragment of a statue of the Virgin and Child. The hand of the Child remains on the Virgin's breast.
- (11) Fragment with two bound captives lying on the green sward.
- (12) Fragment of a minutely worked canopy.
- (13) Fragment of a female Saint holding in her right hand some circular object from which a small pendent hangs. A bunch of keys and a rosary or "pair of paternosters" hangs from her girdle.
- (14) Fragment of a relief of St Paul holding a sword.
- (15) Small figure of an angel holding a censer. This figure stands on a little octagonal bracket.
- (16) Fragment of two figures; the larger one in secular dress; the smaller one, in the garb of a monk, holds some object in his hand.
- (17) Fragment of a figure holding a staff; possibly from a scene of the Resurrection.
- (18) The Coronation of the Virgin; a very graceful design with finely designed draperies. Most of the upper part is missing.
- (19) Lower part of a large relief representing S. Anna teaching the Virgin to read. The child stands at her mother's knee reading from a book set on a tall lectern.

In addition to these there are several fragments which are too much broken for their subject to be recognised. Mr M. R. JAMES has, however, pointed out that the two figures of bound prisoners (Plate xxxi, fig. 11) probably belong to the scene of St Nicholas liberating some condemned criminals.

This class of alabaster retable, from the Nottingham workshops, was not only widely popular in Britain, but many examples were exported for use in a large number of Continental Churches, especially in France and Germany. Even in Italy and Spain they were not uncommonly introduced during the 15th and early part of the 16th centuries: and specimens still exist in both these countries which in every detail of form and colouring are identical in style with those at Milton and Whittlesford.

Even the loops of copper wire, run with lead, and let into the back, for the suspension or other sort of fixing of the reliefs, exist alike in the examples in England and abroad. Their great popularity probably arose from the delicate tint and pleasant texture of the alabaster, which sets off and enhances the decorative effect of the gold and brilliant colouring which was so lavishly applied to the reliefs. The softness of the alabaster, especially when it is freshly quarried, made them easy to work, and consequently they were sold at very low prices.

A communication by Mr E. HAILSTONE was read upon some fragments of the above, which had been found imbedded in the walls of Whittlesford Church during the restoration in 1876. They were exhibited by the kindness of Archdeacon Glover, the present Vicar, and were—in Mr Hailstone's view—connected with the episcopate of Thomas de Arundel, who was consecrated in 1374.

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