



NO. I. THE PHILOSOPHERS BURNT BY ORDER OF
THE EMPEROR MAXIMIN.



NO. 2. ST. CATHERINE SAVED FROM THE WHEELS
BY ANGELS.

SOME EXAMPLES OF NOTTINGHAM ALABASTER-WORK OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY.¹

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

The marked interest which is now shown in English mediaeval sculpture has encouraged me to draw attention to several examples of the marbler's work of the Nottingham school which have come under my notice within recent times. They include, among others, various Nottingham alabaster-works preserved at Lydiate, Lancashire, depicting the martyrdom of St. Catherine, which probably formed the retable of the church of St. Catherine at Lydiate, built about 1485. After the reformation, they were happily preserved at Lydiate hall, whence they were removed to their present situation, when the new church was erected in 1854.

Four panels depicting events from the martyrdom of St. Catherine and a figure of St. Cuthbert are built into the modern stone pulpit of the Roman Catholic chapel. They are in fine condition, and show traces of the original polychrome decoration, and in two instances the original canopy-tops still exist, in addition to which there are preserved, in the priest's house, a figure of St. Catherine and a panel of the Visitation. All these carvings, which are of the fifteenth century, are characteristic of the work executed in Chellaston alabaster by sculptors of the Nottingham school.

Judging from the example preserved in the church of Sta Caterina at Venice, these four Lydiate panels must at one time have formed part of a retable, illustrating the martyrdom of St. Catherine, though the scenes represented would originally number five in all; and from this also doubtless came the figure of the saint, to be described later.

The subjects, which in style and execution resemble

¹ Read before the Institute, 7th May, 1913.

closely the panels in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of London, are as follows :

(1) St. Catherine argues the merits of Christianity before the emperor Maximin, from whose crown proceeds a dragon's head (the devil). In the foreground are the converted Alexandrian philosophers being burnt by the command of the emperor, whilst three executioners are respectively employed in stirring the flames with a two-pronged fork, thrusting in the victims, and blowing the fire with bellows. This panel, which measures 20 by 10½ inches, contains sixteen figures (plate I, no. 1).

(2) This panel, which is unfortunately missing, would doubtless represent the saint in prison being visited by the empress Faustina and Porphyry, whom she converts to the true faith; this episode also occurs in a panel belonging to the Society of Antiquaries (plate III, no. 2).

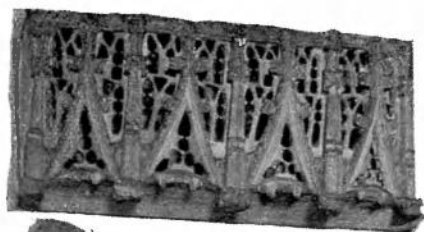
(3) The saint, delivered from death, stands erect beneath the Almighty, whilst on either hand the executioners fall dead, slain by the flying fragments of the wheels, which have been shattered by angels. This panel, 18 by 11½ inches in size, shows us ten figures (plate I, no. 2).

(4) St. Catherine, accompanied by four female attendants and guarded by a man carrying a halberd, is about to be beheaded; the saint kneels with hands clasped, and gazes heavenwards. Size 17 by 11 inches, canopy 10½ by 5½ inches (plate II, no. 1).

(5) The body of St. Catherine is borne to Mount Sinai by seven angels and there buried, whilst from the side of the tomb spout two streams of oil, which are being received into vases. Size 18 by 11 inches, canopy 10½ by 5½ inches (plate II, no. 2).

Examples of these five subjects occur in the church of Sta Caterina at Venice, whilst somewhat similar panels, though differently treated, exist of no. 1 in the museum at Rouen, of no. 2 as exhibit no. 62 in the exhibition of alabaster formed by the Society of Antiquaries in 1910 (plate III, no. 2), and of no. 4 in the museum of the Architectural Association.

(6) St. Cuthbert enthroned giving the benediction with his right hand, and holding his crozier in his left (plate III, no. 1). The figure is mitred and wears an alb,



NO. 1.

ST. CATHERINE ABOUT TO BE BEHEADED.



NO. 2.

THE ENTOMBMENT OF ST. CATHERINE.



NO. I. ST. CUTHBERT.



NO. 2.



ST. CATHERINE IN THE TOWER.



NO. 3. ST. CATHERINE.

PLATE III.

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dalmatic, chasuble, shoes and gloves, from which depend tassels. At his left foot is an otter, and this figure, which may have been brought from the neighbouring church at Halsall, dedicated in honour of St. Cuthbert, measures 30 by 13 inches.

In addition to the five items mentioned above we must now consider the figure of St. Catherine and a panel of the Visitation.

The figure of St. Catherine is carved in high relief. The back is flat and shows the original latten wire staples by which it was held in position (plate III, no. 3). It measures 2 feet 5 inches high by 9½ inches wide, and exhibits remains of the original colour scheme, the gown being of gold over which is a blue cloak lined with red. The crown which once surmounted the head was evidently made of a separate piece of alabaster, the line of junction between the two being smoothly worked. The ground beneath the figure is of green, strewn with daisies having five yellow petals and a red centre. Round the sword, which she supports with her right hand, is wound a belt with the buckle at the upper end. In her left hand the saint apparently carried a palm; her peculiar emblem, the wheel, being curiously omitted. The lower part of the right-hand side of the figure is broken away, and may have originally shown the head of Maximin, such as occurs in painted glass of the same period at West Wickham, Kent.

A somewhat similar figure of the saint, though in this case carrying the wheel in her right hand and the sword reversed in her left, occurs in alabaster at Evreux.

The panel representing the Visitation (17 by 10 inches) is unfortunately somewhat weathered, and it is therefore very doubtful whether it came originally from the same source as the pieces described above.

This represents the visit of the Virgin to St. Elizabeth. The former is crowned and nimbed and both wear veils and cloaks and bear labels, whilst around are six angels bearing scrolls. Above are some architectural details, upon which are slight traces of colour (plate IV, no. 1). A somewhat similar example occurs in Brittany.¹

¹This incident is treated almost identically in glass in the north window of the north transept of Malvern priory (1502).

My best thanks are due to the Rev. J. Hanly for permission to reproduce the Lydiate alabasters.

The panels in the Liverpool City Museum represent two scenes from a retable depicting incidents from the life of the Virgin and show respectively the Annunciation and the Assumption, both differing as regards their details from any other examples with which I am acquainted.

In the Annunciation (plate iv, no. 2) the archangel bears an inscribed scroll twined about the lily, above which is the figure of a censing angel. The head of the Virgin is somewhat retouched, whilst the folds of her robe are carried sharply to one side. The pillar of the reading desk on the left-hand side of the panel is unusual, in that it is bent midway at right angles. The figures of the Almighty and the sacred Dove are broken away.

The panel of the Assumption (plate v, no. 1) is divided into two sections by an embattled band which crosses the scene at the upper part. In the upper portion is the Almighty nimbed and giving the benediction, between two angels who are playing on portable organs. In the lower part is the Virgin within a rayed pointed oval, lifted up by four angels; at the left lower corner is the kneeling figure of St. Thomas the apostle, who bears in his hands the girdle of the Virgin, represented as just slipping from her waist. This detail refers to the well-known legend of the incredulity of St. Thomas as to the actual occurrence of the Assumption, at which he was not present. In general the arrangement of this scene resembles the panel at Montreal, whilst the elaborate carving of the pointed oval encircling the Virgin is closely allied to that surrounding the Almighty, in the panel in the possession of the Leeds Philosophical Society. I must here express my thanks to the committee of the Liverpool Museum for permission to illustrate these pieces.

The last panel to which I would direct attention is one which belongs to the Rev. P. J. Shaw, by whose courtesy I am enabled to illustrate it. This represents the Resurrection, again differing in detail from such others as I know, both as regards the attitude of the soldiers, as also from the fact that all are armed with pole-axes (plate v, no. 2).



NO. I. THE VISITATION.



NO. 2. THE ANNUNCIATION.



NO. I. THE ASSUMPTION.

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NO. 2. THE RESURRECTION.

PLATE V.