

A STATUE OF CHRIST FROM THE RUINS OF MERCERS' HALL

By JOAN EVANS AND NORMAN COOK

On April 30, 1954, workmen clearing the bombed site of Mercers' Hall discovered a recumbent statue and its plinth 5 ft. below the floor of the Chapel, against the east wall of the middle vault, just south of the central line of the building.¹ The slab, 6 ft. 5½ ins. long and 2 ft. 3 in. wide, was lying on its side, with the head to the north. It had suffered some damage, but not enough to destroy its significance or, indeed, its beauty; further search on the site and in the spoil from it has failed to discover any of the missing parts. It is of oolitic stone; the Director of the geological survey describes it as a sandy limestone with a good deal of glauconite, and suggests the possibility that it may come from a bed of Jurassic age in Wiltshire. The records of the early 16th century record various stones from England, notably Reigate and Beer, and stone from Caen, Bernay, Brabant and Liège, as used in the decoration of contemporary buildings.² So far it has not been possible to identify the stone of the Mercers' statue more narrowly.

It is now on view in the new galleries of Guildhall Museum in the Royal Exchange.³

The Chapel of St. Thomas of Acon,⁴ long associated with the Mercers' Company, was originally that of the house of the Knights of the Military Order of St. Thomas of Acre, a branch of the Templars that survived the parent tree. Their Hospital of St. Thomas in Cheapside was founded by Agnes, sister of St. Thomas Becket, about the year 1190. St. Thomas Becket's father appears to have been a mercer, and the Chapel was used by the Fraternity of the Mercers even before they became a Company.

The Chapel was remodelled about 1340. Many mercers were buried in it, and it was notably rich in obits and chantries. By 1424 it had a Chapel of the Holy Cross, with an image of 'the Rood of Lukes'—that is, a version of the famous crucifix of Lucca.

Between 1518 and 1522 the Mercers built themselves a chapel of their own contiguous to St. Thomas's, under William Thorne, freemason, with twenty workmen who were exempted from the King's work. On February 29, 1523, at a General Court of the Mercers' Company, it was agreed that the Company should adorn the altar.⁵

'Where as Maister Wardens moved unto the said assemble for the

¹ A brief and provisional account of the find was published in the *Times* on May 19, 1954. We should like to express our warm thanks to the Master and Court of the Mercers' Company for their permission to publish the statue, and to them, the Clerk and the staff for the friendly interest they have taken in our work.

² We owe this information to the kindness of Mr. John Harvey.

³ When the Chapel of Mercers' Hall is rebuilt

it is hoped that it will return there.

⁴ See Sir John Watney, F.S.A., *Some Account of the Hospital of St. Thomas of Acon, in the Cheap, London, and of the Plate of the Mercers' Company*, privately printed, 1872, second edition 1906.

⁵ L. Lyell and F. D. Watney, *Acts of Court of the Mercers' Company 1453-1527*, Cambridge, 1936, p. 673.

makyng of the Aulter in oure said Chapell which stondith nowe naked. In consideracion wherof was shewed a platt devised and drawn by oon Walter Vandale of Andewerp¹ karver, whiche parson was brought hyther by Thomas Keyle and other of the said Company for thentent aforesaid. Wheruppon a Platt therof was shewed unto the said assemble with the which they were well content'.

Vandale asked £90 Flemish, 'and under that Somme he can not lyve'. 'Than Maister Wardens shewed to the said assemble that the somme aforesaid can not be payde nor borne without a benevolens graunted and by the said Company levied and paide . . .' John Alleyn, alderman, then offered to take 'the grete place in Stebbenhuth' for his life rent free and in return to pay Vandale 'for the full fynyssing of the said Aulter to be sett in oure said Chapell according to the Platt . . .' This offer was accepted.

It is not always easy in the documents of the time to distinguish between the Mercers' own Chapel and St. Thomas's, since the Company seems to have used both and they were contiguous. They were soon to be yet more closely united. The Chapel of St. Thomas of Acon early got into trouble with the King's Commissioners² because its stained glass windows showed Henry II doing penance for the murder of St. Thomas Becket. The hospital and its Chapel were suppressed in 1538, and the Chapel was handed over to the Company in April, 1541, for a very considerable payment. It had an aisled nave, a high choir with two side Chapels, and at least six other Chapels.

The combined Mercers' Chapels were again set open on the eve of St. Michael in 1541.³ They were considerably embellished then and in the succeeding years with new altar cloths and stained glass and a new image of St. Peter. In September, 1542,⁴ the General Court agreed that the stonework, with the carving and the altars of stone, should continue to stand in the Chapel (presumably St. Thomas's), and the ground nearby, where two wooden chantries had been, should be paved.

In 1547 an order by the Protector Somerset for the general 'purification' of churches decreed that all painted glass, statues, roods and rood lofts should be taken down and laid low. The Company's accounts record payment of 5/2d. for taking down the images 'according to the King's injunctions'.

In 1549 the Mercers' own Chapel was 'transformed' and used as the Company's grammar school; all the altars in both Chapels

¹ Thieme Becke lists a Cornelis van Dale, glass painter of Antwerp, working between 1534 and 1567; a second of the same name, a painter of Antwerp, a pupil of Jan Adriaensen in 1545, Master in 1556; a Johannes or Hans van Dale, a painter of Antwerp, working between 1545 and 1560; Lodewyck van Dale, painter of Antwerp, pupil of Adriaensen 1544, Master 1553, d. 1585; and Simon van Dale, glass painter of Antwerp, Master by 1502, Dean of the

Guild of St. Luke 1519, d. between 1530 and 1533. There is no mention of a Walter van Dale, nor is any sculptor of the name included in the list of Antwerp sculptors in J. de Bosschert, *La Sculpture anversoise aux XVe et XVI siecles*, Brussels, 1909, p. 179.

² Letter of Robert Ward to Cromwell, April, 1535; Watney, 1st ed., p. 114.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

were taken down and a wooden altar table bought, presumably for use in St. Thomas's.¹

With the accession of Queen Mary in 1553 a high altar was again set up, presumably in St. Thomas's, and vestments and ornaments for its use purchased. The image of St. Thomas that had been taken down in 1538 was again set up over the great door to the street, and a solemn Mass was again said on St. Thomas of Canterbury's feast day. At Queen Mary's death the Mercers' own Chapel became a grammar school again, and in 1571 was turned into a shop. Both Chapels, together with the hall of the Company, were burnt in the Great Fire of 1666, after which a simpler structure was erected in 1682 to serve the religious needs of the Company.

We have told the story of the vicissitudes of St. Thomas of Acon and the Mercers' Chapel, since it makes it clear that sculptures from them might have been buried beneath the floor, as the statue recently discovered was buried, in 1538 or 1547, or possibly but hardly probably in 1571. No evidence can be adduced in favour of either of these dates, though a *prima facie* case might be argued for the earliest. The style of the sculpture strongly suggests that it was carved at a date in the 16th century, earlier than 1538; the influence of the Renaissance may be seen in the treatment of the drapery, especially the loin cloth, but the feeling and style of the whole is still in the main Gothic. We cannot be certain from which Chapel it originally came; their almost identical connection with the Company makes the answer of little significance.

The statue itself is of far greater interest. It represents, in life size, the dead body of Christ lying flat on a rough bier of three transverse beams (Pl. XXI). The bier is covered by the royal mantle that Pilate's soldiers gave to Our Lord in mockery.² Traces of colour show that this was originally painted a purplish crimson over a white undercoat. The broken crown of thorns lies beneath His head; one thorn from it remains in the wound that it has made, piercing through the brow above the left eye (Pl. XXII). The right arm, the left hand, and both feet are missing. It is evident that the left arm lay across the body, and that the right rested straight along the side. The extraordinarily skilful representation of the muscular structure makes us regret the loss of the hands and feet the more. It has been pointed out to us, by one with more anatomical knowledge than we possess,³ that the representation of the knees and of the bunched muscles of the calves show the cramp that would be one of the horrors of crucifixion.

Two wounds appear in the right side; from the lower fall drops of blood. The body is wrapped in a loin-cloth, once painted white. Traces of paint show that the whole body was once coloured: the tongue (which

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

² This was worn by the actor representing Christ in the Mysteries and is commonly portrayed in 15th and 16th-century representations of the Resurrection in illuminations and stained

glass, which suggest that it was thought of as having been put in the Sepulchre.

³ Miss Mary C. Fair, to whom we express our thanks.



The Statue of Christ found in the ruins of Mercers' Hall
(Photograph reproduced by permission of The Times Newspaper)



The Head of the Statue

(Photograph reproduced by permission of The Times Newspaper)



Details of the Inscriptions

(Photographs reproduced by permission of The Times Newspaper)



Entombment Group in painted stone, 1495. Salers, Cantal
(*Photograph reproduced by permission of Archives Photographiques, Paris*)

slightly projects from the mouth) red, the teeth white, the hair a reddish brown, the rest flesh colour.

The edge of the mantle on which Christ lies bears two inscriptions. The first, on the right and at the foot, of which the words are divided by three gouts of blood, reads HVMILIAVIT SEMETIPSVM FACTVS OBEDIEVS (sic) VSQVE AD MORTEM : MORTEM AVTEM CRVCIS. PAVLVS EPTS AD PHILIPPENS. At the head is the customary *titulus* · IHE · NAS. REX. JU [D]. On the further left-hand side, which the evidence of the sculpture shows to have been set against a wall, the inscription, divided by groups of four pellets, reads : [I]N P[AC]E FACTVS EST LOCVS EVS . . . (Pl. XXIII).

This last sentence—based on Psalm lxxv, 3—was one of the antiphons sung in the Sarum use at the enclosing of the Host in the Sepulchre at the *Depositio* of Good Friday.¹ The *Humiliavit* inscription is usually adapted for liturgical use by inserting the word *Christus*—*Humiliavit semetipsum Christus*, or *Christus factus est*. Its exact quotation, with chapter and verse, illustrates the growing importance of the Biblical text in 16th-century England.²

The body and its bier seem to have been represented lying upon an altar, or an altar tomb. A section across the plinth (which on the right-hand side has two hollow mouldings with a chamfer below) clearly shows that while the head, foot, and right-hand side stood clear, the left-hand side was built in against a wall. Moreover, the inscription on the right-hand side follows the lines of the drapery and is sometimes vertical, but on the left the folds are arranged so that the inscription is kept horizontal, so that it could be read even if it were set against a wall.

The effect of the whole statue is one of tragic dignity and intense realism, united by restrained passion to form a great work of art. The body of Christ lies alone, with none to mourn it, after it has been taken down from the Cross. The rough bier, half-seen beneath the mantle, brings another touch of verisimilitude.

This tragic feeling is characteristic of the late Middle Ages. Emile Mâle has said³ of that time, 'il semble que le mot qui contient le secret du christianisme, ne soit plus 'aimer', mais 'souffrir''. The great Passion plays of the time brought before men's eyes the continuous drama of Christ's sufferings, which necessarily included scenes that had not previously formed part of the traditional iconographic cycle : Christ bound and seated awaiting the Scourging—a theme which in England was known as the Bound Rood ;⁴ Christ bearing the Cross ; the Deposition ; the Virgin of Pity holding the body of her Son ; the Lamentation, Anointing and Entombment. These subjects, widely represented abroad,

¹ *Sarum Missal*, ed. Wickham Legg, p. 115. Our attention was kindly drawn to these points by Mr. Christopher Hohler.

² Such quotation is found as early as the wall

paintings in the Chapel of Eton College, painted in 1478–80.

³ *Art religieux en France au XV^e siècle*, p. 77.

⁴ *Rites of Durham*, p. 41.

are more rarely found in the British Isles. The Mostyn Christ,¹ a wooden figure of the 15th century now in Bangor Cathedral, said to have come from Llanrwst Abbey, is the only British representation in the round known to us of the Bound Rood.² The Bearing of the Cross does not figure in the surviving English sculpture; and the Virgin of Pity survives and is recorded in but few examples.³ The Deposition and the Entombment are subjects chiefly represented in stained glass;⁴ the Anointing was hardly ever represented in England. None the less, it is fair to say that the wave of emotion represented by these themes in French art reached England a little later; the hysteric meditations of Margery Kempe are in themselves sufficient witness to the fact. Outside France, indeed, the whole cycle was most significant in the early 16th century; we may remember that Michel Angelo's great Pietà in St. Peter's at Rome was carved between 1496 and 1501.

We were conscious from the first that the statue from Mercers' Hall was influenced by this current of emotion; yet we also recognized that it did not fall into any of the recognized categories of French or English iconography.

The subject of the anointing of the body of Christ before the entombment—a theme derived from the religious drama—figures on French ivories of the first half of the 14th century,⁵ and is occasionally represented in French sculpture of the end of the 15th century. At Aigueperse a group in painted wood shows the body of Christ lying upon the ground, with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, St. John and the Holy Maries round it. In Nevers Cathedral a contemporary group in stone shows them standing round the body as it lies upon a plain stone slab. In both instances the Crown of Thorns encircles the head of Christ, and there is no mantle. The Ordinal of the Nunnery of Barking⁶ shows that an anointing scene was sometimes included in the English liturgical drama of Eastertide, yet it does not seem to have entered the cycle of English iconography.

The Entombment groups of France⁷ bear a certain analogy with the Mercers' Christ. In certain groups the body of Christ lies flat upon an altar and provides a parallel with the London statue. Instances may be cited at Villeneuve-sur-Yonne, Eu and Moulins Cathedral, while at Tours an entombment group shows the body of Christ lying within a tomb-chest. None the less there are very significant differences. In

¹ See W. J. Hemp in *Arch. Camb.*, xcvi, Cardiff, 1943, p. 231.

² Hemp, *loc. cit.* mentions an alabaster table with the subject. See *Proc. Soc. Ants.*, 1913-4, xxvi, p. 31, and *Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, Denbigh*, fig. 86.

³ See Joan Evans, *English Art, 1307-1461* (Oxford History of English Art, vol. v), Oxford, 1949, p. 88.

⁴ E.g. in the Passion window at East Brent, Somerset, though this is in the main a copy of

an earlier window. See C. Woodforde, *Stained Glass in Somerset*, 1946, p. 1612.

⁵ E.g. Victoria and Albert Museum, 367, 1871, and 239, 1867.

⁶ Cited, Karl Young, *Drama of the Mediaeval Church*, Oxford, 1933, p. 119. 'Deferant Crucem ad magnum altare, ibique in specie Ioseph et Nichodemi, de ligno deponentes Ymaginem vulnera Crucifixi uino abluant et aqua'.

⁷ See Male, *op. cit.*, p. 119, *et seqq.*

France by the end of the 14th century the figures of Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, the Virgin and the Holy Maries—all derived from the mystery plays and often rather theatrically treated—invariably stand round the corpse.

The subject is represented in France in many great sculptured groups of the 15th and 16th century,¹ which are echoed in the 16th and 17th centuries in analogous groups in the Germanic countries² and Spain.³ They were often set up in a side chapel, a crypt, or some other place where a dramatic half-darkness pierced by a skilfully placed beam of light could add to their arresting effect.

Two essentials differentiate this important group of sculptures from that at Mercers' Hall. First, the body of Christ is in them accompanied by other figures behind and beside it, whereas the London figure clearly stood directly against a wall and appears to have been unaccompanied. Second (and perhaps even more significant), all the Entombment groups show Christ's body lying upon a shroud⁴ (Pl. XXIV) (which, where colour is used, is represented as white), whereas the London figure lies upon a mantle of imperial purple.

An older iconographic theme offers a closer analogy with the London statue: the *Threnos* or Lamentation over the body of Christ. It appears in Byzantine Art in the 12th century.⁵ The illuminations of the *Evangelary of Vatopedi*, written at Mount Athos in the 13th century, represent the scene⁶ with the body of Christ lying on a kind of bier of stone, round which stands the Virgin, the Apostles and the Holy Maries. The theme reached Italy in the middle of the 13th century.⁷ The *Book of Hours* illuminated by Jean Fouquet for Etienne Chevalier not long before 1461 includes a Lamentation scene with the body of Christ laid upon a stone altar, while Joseph of Arimathea removes the nails and the crown of thorns. In Italy towards the end of the 15th century the subject was represented in a number of groups in the round in painted terra-cotta.⁸ One by Niccolò dell' Arca in the church of S. Maria della

¹ The subject appears in graphic art as early as the *Parement de Narbonne* in 1370. The special chapels with life-size groups come into fashion in the 15th century, and culminate in the showy work of Ligier Richier about 1530. An unusually late example at Doullens, is dated 1583.

² The body of Christ lying flat upon an altar tomb, surrounded by the customary mourning figures, is to be found in entombment groups at Münster-Maifeld, near Coblenz, Mainz Cathedral, 1495; Kaisersberg, Haut Rhin, 1514; and St. Nicolas, Neufchateau, Vosges.

³ E.g. Cistercian Abbey, Poblet; Convent of San Jeronimo, Granada, by Becerra; Valladolid Museum (wood), by Juni, 1534-5. See Moreno, *Renaissance Sculpture in Spain*, 1931, Pl. XXXIV. Senor Gudiol has kindly communicated to us the photograph of another statue in the Barcelona Museum. In this, Christ is represented nimbed.

⁴ At Tonnerre (1454) the body is being lifted

on to the shroud which lies in formal pleats. At Semur-en-Auxois (15th century), Notre Dame la Grande at Poitiers, and Chaource (1515) the body is held up in the shroud; on the Retable of the Dukes of Burgundy at Dijon, at St. Nizier de Troyes, Chalons-sur-Marne and Salers, Cantal (1495), it lies flat with the shroud draped round it.

⁵ L. Brehier, *L'Art Chretien: son développement iconographique des origines à nos jours*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1928, p. 370.

⁶ Fol. 17, verso.

⁷ A triptych at Perugia (Venturi, *Storia dell'Arte Italiana* v, fig. 85); Duccio in the Siena Pala (Millet 504 and p. 347) and Giotto in the Arena Chapel (Millet, 497, 498; Venturi v, fig. 293; Künstle I, fig. 254).

⁸ Our attention was drawn to the fact by the kindness of Miss Iris Conlay of the *Catholic Herald*.

Vita at Bologna dates from 1463. The body of Christ rests upon a bier on the ground, much as at Mercers' Hall, but there are certain differences: the arms are crossed; He wears the crown of thorns; the head rests upon a cushion, and the bier is covered by a shroud. A second group in S. Giovanni Decollato at Modena, made between 1477 and 1480 by Guido Mazzoni, has a similar figure; it rests directly upon the bier without shroud or mantle. Round both groups stand Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, the Apostles and the Holy Maries, in attitudes of theatrical lamentation that contrast strongly with the stillness of the central figure.¹

The Lamentation theme seems to have inspired one of Margery Kempe's visions about 1436.² 'Then she thought she saw Joseph of Arimathea take down Our Lord's Body from the Cross, and lay It before Our Lady on a marble stone. Our Lady had then a manner of joy, when her dear Son was taken down from the Cross and laid on the stone before her'. So far as we know it was never represented in England in the visual arts.

The whole aspect of the Mercers' statue, even while it was still covered in mud, at once made us think that it must have been associated with an Easter Sepulchre, and the conjecture was confirmed when the inscriptions upon the mantle had been deciphered and elucidated.

In the *Depositio* of Good Friday,³ the burial of Christ was symbolized by placing a Cross, or Host, or both, in a representation of the Sepulchre: sometimes in a temporary structure of wood, sometimes in a permanent *edicule* of stone, sometimes (especially in France) on the high altar of the church.⁴ At the *Elevatio* of Easter morning the buried symbol was raised from its resting place in token of resurrection; and at the end of Matins, just before the *Te Deum*, a drama of the *Visitatio Sepulchri*—the coming of the Holy Maries to the tomb—was enacted.

We had, however, to recognize that the statue from Mercers' Hall did not fit into any known category of English Easter Sepulchres. Apart from the temporary structures of wood which have perished, the hundred or so of surviving examples fall into two main categories: a kind of tomb chest carved with the figures of the sleeping soldiers, surmounted by a single or a triple niche, within which appears the figure of Christ rising

¹ There is (or was before the war) in Berlin a picture by Carpaccio, painted soon after 1500, that shows a similar Lamentation; as in the Modena group there is no shroud or mantle.

² W. Butler Bowden, *The Book of Margery Kempe, a modern Version*, 1936, p. 279.

³ There is a considerable literature on the subject. The most recent studies are Neil C. Brooks, 'The Sepulchre of Christ in Art and Liturgy, with special reference to the Liturgic Drama', in *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, vol. vii, 1921, and Karl Young, *The Drama of the Mediaeval Church*, 2 vols., Oxford, 1933. Both these works con-

tain good bibliographies. The rites are described in the 10th century; see Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, ii, p. 14 and 306.

⁴ The *Voyages liturgiques* of Moléon (p. 98) record the use at Angers Cathedral, where a temporary shelter of white linen was set up over the altar at Eastertime. The use continued throughout the 18th century, with local modifications. Madame de Tourzel (*Memoires*, i, p. 283) recording the last Easter of the French royal family at the Tuileries in 1791, describes the Easter Sepulchre as a kind of cenotaph with cypress round it and a crown of thorns upon it.



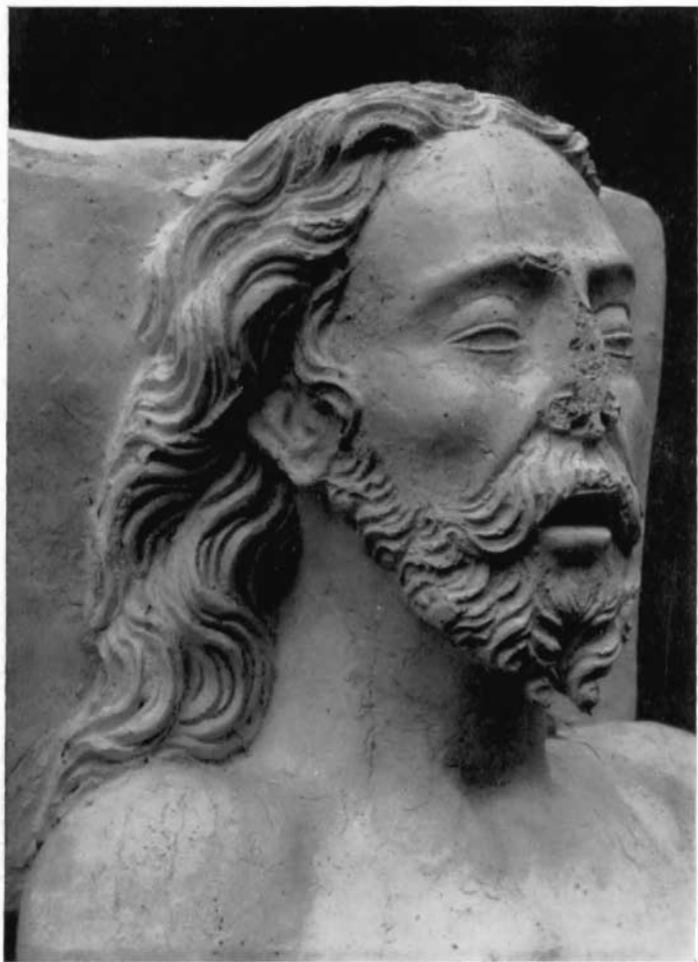
A. Wooden Statue of Christ,
Malines, Musée Communal
(Photograph ACL, Brussels)



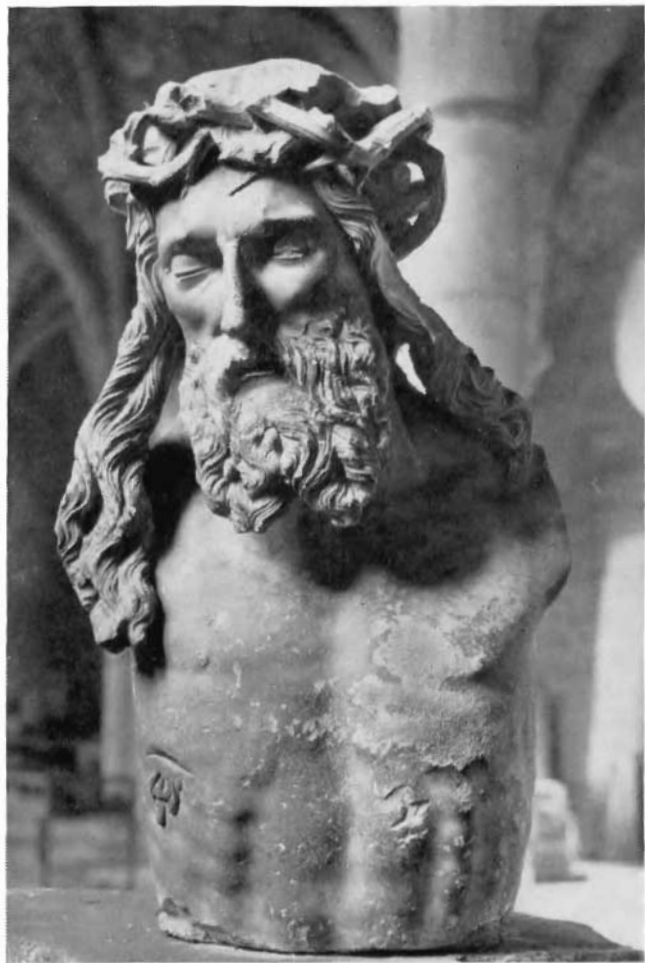
B. Wooden Statue of Christ,
Roslagsbro, Uppland
*(Photograph by courtesy of the State
Historical Museum, Stockholm)*



C. Wooden Statue of Christ,
Diest, Chapelle de Tous les
Saints
(Photograph ACL, Brussels)



A. Head of the wooden statue of Christ, Malines,
Musée Communal
(*Photograph ACL, Brussels*)



B. Head of Christ from the stone crucifix at Champmol,
Claus Sluter, Dijon, Musée Archéologique
(Photograph courtesy of the Musée Archéologique, Dijon)

from the tomb; and a simple flat tomb—often the tomb of the donor—generally surmounted by an ornamental niche or a free-standing canopy. The Sepulchre at Hawton, Nottinghamshire, is typical of the first; the Percy tomb at Beverley of the second.¹

The English Easter Sepulchres nearly always stood on the north side of the chancel, and the permanent stone ones were very frequently associated with the tomb of the donor. At Hawton the Sepulchre was set up alongside the tomb of Sir Robert de Compton, who died in 1330; at Irnham the tomb of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell² (for whom the Luttrell Psalter was written) is combined with a splendid Easter Sepulchre.

The practice continued in the years round about 1500. In 1496 John Pympe of Nettlestead, Kent, directed in his will³ that he was to be buried in the parish church 'before the image of our blessed lady in the place where as the sepulture of Oure lorde is wounte to stonde at the Fest of Ester and to be leyde there in a tombe of stone, made under such fourme as the blessed sacramente and the holy crosse may be leide upon the stone of the said tombe in the manner of sepulture at the Feest abovesaide'. Thomas Windsor, who died in 1486, by his will founded a chantry at Stanwell, Middlesex,⁴ and directed that his body should be buried on the north side of the choir of Stanwell Church and a 'plain tomb of marble and of a competent height' be erected 'to the intent that it may bear the Blessed Body of our Lord and the sepulture at the time of Easter to stand upon the same'. As late as 1531 Lord Dacre directed⁵ that he should be buried on the north side of the High Altar and 'that a tomb be there made for placing the Sepulchre of Our Lord, with all fitting furniture thereto in honour of the most blessed Sacrament'.

The tombs that were destined to serve as Easter Sepulchres are now devoid of images, or are only inlaid with a brass. The tomb of Michael de la Pole, first Earl of Suffolk, who died in 1415, and his wife, at Wingfield, has removable effigies of wood, and this solution may have been more common than would now appear.

It seems to us extremely significant that Thomas, Earl of Ormond—descended from Thomas Becket's sister Agnes—who died in London on August 3, 1515, left instructions⁶ that he was to be buried in the Chapel of St. Thomas of Acon 'on the north side of the high altar, where the sepulture of Almighty God was used yearly to be said⁷ on Good Friday, as the sacrament would rest on his body, to the ghostly relief and comfort of his soul under the altar'. Yet clearly, if the statue we are considering formed part of his monument, it is remarkably ill adapted as a resting-

¹ The view published by one of the authors in *English Art, 1307-1461*, p. 172, has in her opinion been confirmed by the fact that an Easter Sepulchre at Beverley 'ex parte aquilonari' is recorded in the 13th century. Young, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 539.

² Evans, *op. cit.*, Pl. CXXVIIb.

³ Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁴ G. H. Cook, *Mediaeval Chantries and Chantry*

Chapels, 1947, p. 172, n. 1.

⁵ Rock, *Church of our Fathers*, iii, p. 79.

⁶ Watney, 1892 ed., p. 45. The will is dated on the last day of July in that year.

⁷ When the Mercers' Chapel was refurnished in 1449 £5 was 'Paid to John Curson for the Resurrection of needle work'—probably an embroidered hanging for an Easter Sepulchre.

place for the Sacrament, or even as a base for a temporary Easter Sepulchre of wood.

Continental parallels may perhaps shed some light on the problem. In the 16th century the 'burial' of the Host in many places developed into a rite of exposition of the Host,¹ which led to a change in the whole conception of the Easter Sepulchre. The essential symbol of the body of Christ continued to be the Host, usually in a pyx or veiled monstrance, but it was commonly associated with a sculptured life-size figure of Christ.

In Southern Bavaria and in the adjacent parts of Austria a whole series of 'Heilige Gräber' bear testimony to the change.² In Germanic countries the Easter Sepulchre is not erected over the High Altar or on the north side of the chancel, but at or near the altar of the Holy Cross, sometimes to the north beside the arch from nave to choir, in the middle of the north aisle or at the west end, and sometimes in a specially constructed chapel,³ usually just large enough to hold the group of figures. A fine typical example at Freiburg im Breisgau⁴ dating from the middle of the 14th century, is in a separate 'Grabkapelle'. It consists in a tomb chest, with the sleeping soldiers carved on the sides as in many English Easter Sepulchres. On the top of the tomb lies the body of Christ draped in a shroud that covers the head like a hood. It is said that a slit above the heart served to hold the Host at Easter.⁵ Detached figures, on a much smaller scale, of two censing angels and the three Maries, two of them holding pots of ointment, stand on the tomb;⁶ they may well be additions to the original design.

The figuration is fairly constant in these representations of the dead Christ; they usually lie on a plain altar tomb, or on a stone slab projecting from the wall. One arm usually lies across the body and one straight beside it. The evidence seems to show that originally the 'Leichnam-Christus' lay alone; but in several instances such figures as Mary Magdalen and angels have been added later.⁷

Southern Bavaria and the adjacent parts of Austria are a long way from London, but we have found other instances nearer at hand. An Easter Sepulchre of stone of about 1500 at Neuweiler in Alsace⁸ has a coffin chest carved with the sleeping soldiers; on it lies the body of

¹ Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

² We wish to thank Mrs. Francesca Claremont for her kindness in giving us information about them. H. Otte, *Handbuch der Kirchlichen Kunst-Archäologie des Deutschen Mittelalters*, Leipzig 1883 I p. 365, stresses the fact that the Heilige Grabe represent Entombments rather than Lamentations.

³ Young, ii, p. 510.

⁴ Illustrated in F. Kempt, *Das Freiburger Münster*, Karlsruhe, 1926, p. 172.

⁵ Mrs. Claremont informs us that some of the Baroque Christs still have this slit above the heart. Brooks (p. 38) says that the present-day

Easter Sepulchre in South Germany and Austria is usually a tomb with the figure of Christ surmounted by a monstrance containing the Host. The wound on the Mercers' statue appears too superficial to have held a sacred wafer.

⁶ The lesser figures are now represented by casts, the originals having been removed to the Cathedral Museum.

⁷ At Baden, for instance, a 14th century Christ had mourners added in the 17th century. The mourner groups become general in the Baroque period.

⁸ Brook, *op. cit.*, fig. 20.

Christ. Statues of the Three Mariés are ranged behind. A wooden effigy in the Berne Museum, and another in the Zürich Museum¹ continue the story. The latter lies loose in a gable-topped coffin chest of wood, painted on the sides with the figures of the sleeping soldiers. The top, painted with the risen Christ, opens in flaps, to reveal the 'sepulchre' within. In Spain² statues of Christ laid ready for burial—called *Cristo yacente*—are frequent; they are usually free standing, but are sometimes set against the wall. In Sweden the Easter Sepulchre of the late Middle Ages usually consisted in an open coffin-chest containing a wooden effigy of Christ. One from Västerlövsta in Uppland survives in the Museum of National Antiquities at Stockholm.³ It is a crude and provincial piece of work; but a similar statue from Roslagsbro, also in Uppland (Pl. XXVB), which has lost its coffin, is comparable with the Mercers' Hall statue in its effort to show the tension of the tortured body.

Easter Sepulchres of this kind are also found in the Low Countries.⁴ The best known of them is that in the Jerusalem Church at Bruges,⁵ once the private chapel of the Hotel d'Adornes. The wife of the builder of the chapel died in 1463, and it seems to have been associated with her chantry or tomb. It contains, in a barred niche, a full-length statue of Christ of crude and undistinguished workmanship,⁶ lying without shroud or mantle. Various others still exist in Belgium,⁷ all of wood, and all of the years round 1500; two only are of a quality that permits comparison with the statue from Mercers' Hall. One (Pls. XXVA and XXVIA) is now in the Musée Communal at Malines; the uncrowned Christ lies with His head upon a pillow, with hands crossed. The half-open mouth and weary eyes have something of the tragic feeling of the London statue, but with less intensity. The second (Pl. XXVc) is in the 'Chapelle de tous les Saints' at Diest: it is crowned, and the hands lie stiffly uncrossed.

These statues, at present at least, are detached; a statue of the same type in the Chapel of St. Paul at Galmaarden lies in an open tomb.⁸ None of them lie upon the imperial mantle; one, in the church of St. Catherine at Malines, lies upon a shroud. In the Musée Gruithuyse at Bruges there is an entire wooden sepulchre of the early 16th century with sleeping soldiers carved on the sides and a kind of tester above. Christ lies upon a shroud on the top of the tomb.

¹ We owe our knowledge of this instance to the kindness of Mr. A. R. Duffy.

² Our thanks are due to Professor Edward Sarmiento of Cardiff for kindly drawing our attention to the Spanish type. A wooden example from a convent of Bernardines at Aranda de Duero is reproduced in Georg Weise, *Spanische Plastik*, Tübingen 1925, plate 186.

³ Our thanks are due to Dr. Monica Rydbeck, Keeper of the National Department of the Statens Historiska Museum at Stockholm, for information on the subject.

⁴ We wish to thank Dr. George Zarnecki most warmly for his kindness in securing photographs

of these and other instances for our use.

⁵ See E. Gilliat-Smith, *The Story of Bruges* (Medieval Towns series), 1900, p. 323; J. F. T. in *Notes and Queries*, 12th series, iv, March, 1918, p. 78.

⁶ A metal crown has been added later.

⁷ Ste. Genevieve, Oplinter, end of the 15th century; Notre Dame, Aarschot; Hospital, Tongres; Grand Beguinage, Louvain.

⁸ Another in Utrecht Cathedral has the soldiers carved on the chest and a figure of Christ inside it. It originally had large figures standing at the sides, and represents a fusion with the type of Entombment group.

The use of these life-size wooden figures in the Easter ritual is confirmed by the South German writer Thomas Kirchmayer, or 'Nao-Georgus', who published his violently anti-Catholic *Regnum Papisticum* in 1553. It was translated by Barnabe Googe under the title *The Popish Kingdome, or reigne of Antichrist* and published in London in 1570. In it he describes¹ a ceremony on Good Friday.

'Two Priestes the next day following, vpon their shoulders beare,
The Image of the Crucifix, about the altar neare :

Being clad in coape of crimozen die, and dolefully they sing :

At length before the steps his coate pluckt off they straight him
bring,

And vpon Turkey Carpettes lay him downe full tenderly

With cushions vnderneath his head, and pillowes heaped hie :

Then flat vpon the grounde they fall, and kiss both hande and feete,
And worship so this woodden God, with honour farre vnmeete . . .

An other Image doe they get, like one but newly deade,

With legges stretcht out at length and hands, vpon his body spreade :

And him with pompe and sacred song, they beare vnto his graue,

His bodie all being wrapt in lawne, and silkes and sarcenet braue,

The boyes before with clappers go, and filthie noises make,

The Sexton beares the light, the people hereof knowledge take :

And downe they kneele, or kisse the grounde, their hands held vp
abord

And knocking on their breastes they make, this woodden blocke
a God.

And least in graue he shoulde remaine, without some companie,

The singing bread is layde with him, for more idolaytrie :

The Priest the Image worships first, as falleth to his turne,

And franckensence and sweete perfumes, before the breade doth
burne :

With tapers all the people come, and at the barriars stay,

Where downe vpon their knees they fall, and night and day they
pray :

And violets and euery kinde of flowres about the graue

They straw, and bring all their giftes and presents that they
haue . . .'

He goes on to describe the Easter play with 'An other Image of a Conqueror' that they bring out of the grave.

We have little evidence that such an *imago crucifixi* was used in the English ceremonies : but there is a little. The 15th-century Ordinal of the nunnery of Barking² mentions men playing the parts of Joseph and Nicodemus who washed with wine and water the wounds of a wooden

¹ We quote Googe's translation, which faithfully renders the Latin original. See A. Heales, 'Easter Sepulchres', in *Archaeologia*, xlii, 1869,

p. 283 ; Young, *op. cit.*, ii, 525.

² Brooks, p. 36 ; Young, p. 119. See p. 172 above.

image of the crucified Christ; and the account of the York *Elevatio*¹ says 'proferatur Sacramentum cum Imagine cum corona spinea'.

It may be that the image described in Barnabe Googe's translation was almost as well known to his English readers as it had been to the German readers of the Latin original.² It may be that such wooden statues were laid upon the altar tombs. If so, it is easy to believe that the statue from Mercers' Hall was a more beautiful version, not in wood but in painted stone, designed to lie upon its altar tomb not only at Easter but as a permanent memorial to Thomas Earl of Ormond. If so, it may have remained in view later than 1538 or 1547. Easter Sepulchres survived Henry VIII's reforms, and were not abolished until 1549. They were restored by order of Queen Mary in 1554 and only finally disappeared under Elizabeth.

The translation of the wooden statue, used once a year, into a permanent work of art, always visible, finds a close parallel in Holbein's picture (now at Basle) of Christ in the Tomb, inscribed *Christus im Grabe* 1521. It represents the body of Our Lord lying uncrowned upon a white linen cloth, in much the same attitude as the Mercers' Christ. The body is less tensed by suffering, but the head is more macabre. It was clearly inspired by meditation upon one of these Easter images³ and was painted to hang as a predella below a great altar-piece.

It remains to consider whether the Mercers' statue is of English workmanship. Its stone is considered to be possibly of Wiltshire origin, but might with equal probability come from abroad. We know that Walter Vandale, carver of Antwerp, was at work in the Mercers' Chapel in 1523; yet our sculpture has a passion and a beauty that are not to be found in the various Entombments of the Antwerp school.⁴ We know that Guido Mazzoni, the sculptor of the Lamentation group in S. Giovanni Decollato at Modena, came to England between 1498 and 1516 and submitted a project for Henry VIII's tomb which was not accepted. If we accept the Ormond hypothesis, his dates are a little early, and there seems nothing Italianate about the statue. A Spanish sculptor may have followed Catherine of Aragon to the English Court and have carved a *Cristo yacente*: but there is no shadow of evidence that he did.

A parallel for the thorn that pierces the brow may be found in the fine head of the dying Christ at Beauvais, dating from the late 15th century. It is possible, too, to see French influence in the style of the carving; Mr. John Pope Hennessy and Mr. Molesworth of the Victoria and Albert Museum are both agreed in thinking the sculpture to be French. Yet if the comparison with French sculpture be carried further,

¹ Brooks, p. 36.

² Such a figure is still an object of veneration in Ireland; for instance, one lies under the High Altar of the Carmelite Church in Dublin.

³ They seem, too, to have inspired the composi-

tion of the theme of the Mystic Wine Press, as in a window at St. Etienne du Mont at Paris. See Male, p. 11.

⁴ Several are in the Antwerp Museum.

it becomes evident that the likeness lies with such work as Claus Sluter's Christ from Champmol, carved about 1398 (Pl. XXVI B) rather than with 16th-century work; yet the drapery of the London statue is clearly 16th century in style. A certain resemblance to the Entombment group at Salers, far away in the mountains of the Cantal, set up in 1495, lies chiefly in the treatment of muscle and vein;¹ the head of Christ at Salers is already less Gothic than is the London head, and the treatment of the drapery is completely different.² It is, however, worthy of note that the Virgin's veil at Salers is bordered with an inscription in the same style as that of the mantle at Mercers' Hall (Pl. XXIV).

In our view the archaic style of the London head, in comparison with the advanced style of the drapery, suggests an English sculptor who may perhaps have been subject to French influence. The splendid innovation—splendid alike in its visual effectiveness and in its religious symbolism—that the body of Christ lies upon the imperial mantle, remains to our knowledge without a parallel. It seems likely that St. Thomas More was in 1508 admitted Mercer by redemption; and in the innovation we may detect the influence of the subtle and lofty mysticism of the English Catholics of his age.

¹ These were early treated realistically in France; see, for example, the corpse beneath the tomb of Cardinal Lagrange, d. 1402, in the Musée Calvet at Avignon. Joan Evans, *Art*

in Mediaeval France, fig. 258A.

² A further comparison may be made with the Virgin of Pity at Joinville: Male, *op. cit.*, fig. 157.