

On an Alabaster Sculpture,

THE PROPERTY OF REV. B. W. SPILSBURY, OF FINDERN.

BY REV. J. CHARLES COX, LL.D.



ONE of the features of the temporary museum, formed at the Free Library, Derby, during the visit of the Royal Archæological Institute, in August, 1885, which attracted much attention, was a small alabaster carving, contributed by the Vicar of Findern. A distinguished scholar of the Institute was good enough to promise our local society a paper on this relic, a subject upon which he was peculiarly fitted to treat; but unfortunately, after the coloured plate had been prepared, serious illness prevented the carrying out of his intentions. It has, therefore, devolved upon the editor to write a brief monograph on this subject, and to bring into comparison all known instances of a like character of which any information could be obtained.

It is, however, more than possible that there may be yet other sculptures of a like character in England, for the list here given includes three that have not hitherto been noted.

As to the past history of this sculpture, Mr. Spilsbury tells us that it was purchased by his great-grandfather at the sale of Sir Ashton Lever's museum; but of its previous position there is not even a tradition.

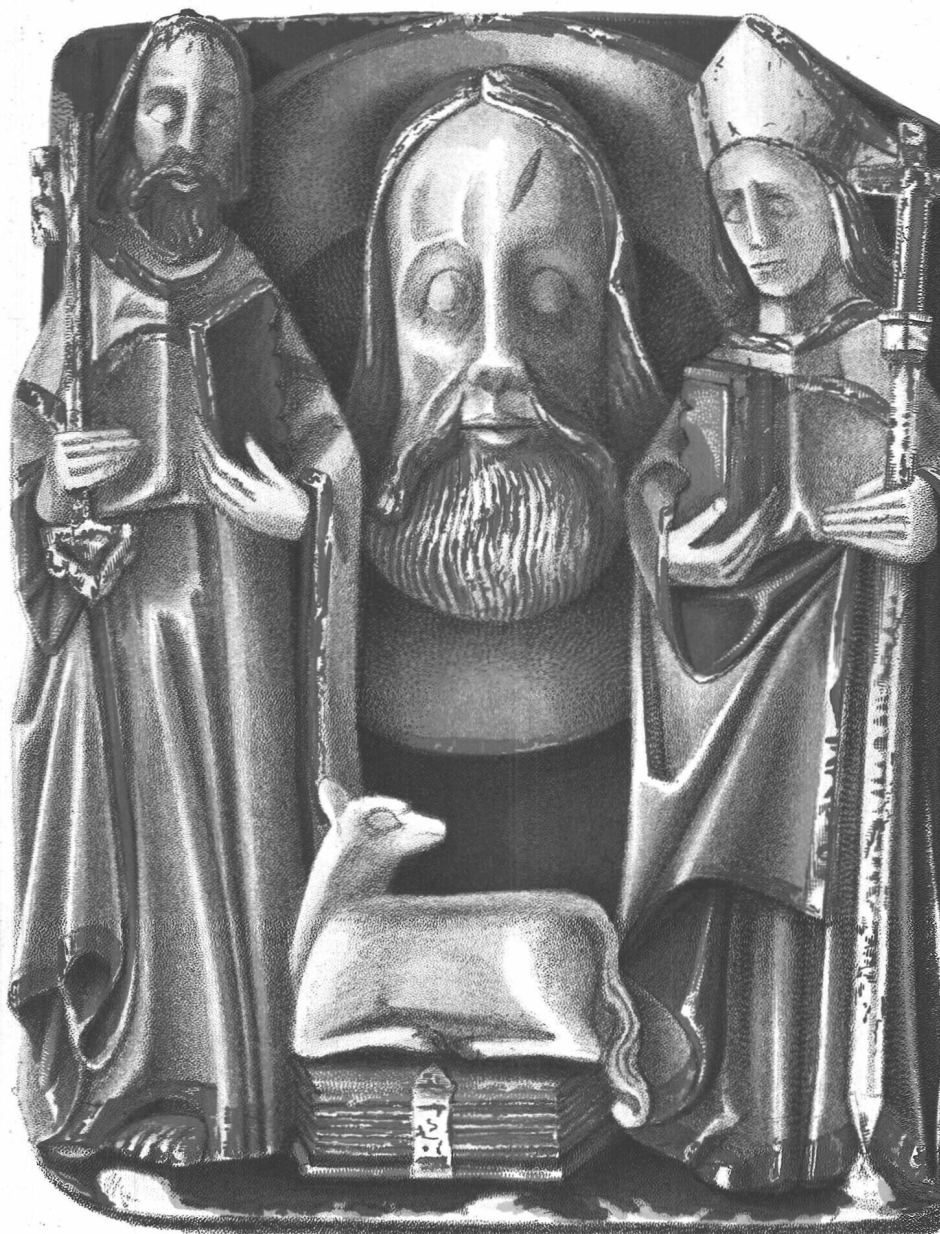
The size of the carving is $8\frac{3}{4}$ inches by 7 inches, and about $1\frac{1}{2}$ thick. Mr. Bailey's most careful and accurately coloured drawing (Plate I.) almost precludes the necessity of detailed

description. The natural colour of the stone is opal grey. At the back are two small holes for the insertion of pegs by which to fasten it up, and part of the base has been chiselled away so as to enable it to fit against some support. All the hair of the central head has been gilt, but now very much worn off in parts. The gilding has been laid on a deep orange ground. The edges of all the robes, books, mitre, crozier, and staff, as well as the rim of the dish or paten, have been gilded. The lining of the robe of St. Peter is red, and that of the archbishop deep blue. The colour of the background is olive.

Before discussing the central position of the sculpture, which presents considerable difficulty, and has been so diversely interpreted, mention should be made of the two figures, of nearly equal height to the tablet, that flank it. In all the eleven examples enumerated below, the figure on the dexter side is that of St. Peter; and in each instance he is represented with a key or keys in the right hand, and a book in the left. In each instance, excepting No. XI., the figure on the sinister side is mitred, vested in a cope, carrying an archiepiscopal cross-staff in the left hand, and a book in the right, save that in No. IV., the archbishop's right hand is blessing with three uplifted fingers. The almost unanimous conjecture as to this archiepiscopal figure considers that it represents St. Thomas of Canterbury; but a more likely supposition, as explained later on, refers it to St. Augustine of Canterbury. The one exception as to the figure on the left is No. XI., in which instance St. Paul takes the place of the archbishop.

In all the examples, the central head is represented as of large size, and the chief feature of the sculpture, to which the other parts are mere subsidiary details. In each case this head is carved without any rays or nimbus, but resting in a circular dish or paten. The head and features are of the same character in all, though the arrangement of the hair and beard differs not a little; and in several, as in No. III., much of the beard and chin are concealed by the rising head of the small figure below.

The great points of difference are in the figures or representa-



SIZE OF ORIGINAL 9" x 7"

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ALABASTER SCULPTURE.
Property of Rev^d B.W. Spilsbury, Vicar of Findern.

tions above and below the central head, but especially in the latter, for in three examples, including Mr. Spilsbury's, the sculpture is complete without any representation about the upper rim of the circular dish.

The following are the examples that we have been able to enumerate :—

I. Preserved at Ratcliffe College, Leicester.* *Below*—upper half of naked figure rising from an altar-shaped sepulchre, the left hand straight down with extended palm, the right hand on the breast. *Above*—the sculpture terminates with the rim of the dish.

II. The property of Rev. B. W. Spilsbury. See Plate I. of this journal. *Below*—lamb on clasped book or missal. *Above*—same as No. I.

III. Exhibited by Mr. Nightingale, of Wilton, to the Archæological Institute, in 1855. Described and illustrated in No. xvi. of the *Archæological Journal*. Found at Old Sarum. *Below*—upper half of naked figure rising from an altar-shaped sepulchre, with hands extended. *Above*—small naked figure in radiated vesica-shaped medallion, upheld by two angels.

IV. Exhibited by Mr. David Wells to the Society of Antiquaries in 1789. Said to have originally belonged to the Fitzherberts, of Swynnerton. Engraved in (1) Schnebbelie's *Antiquaries Museum*, (2) in Nichols' *History of Leicestershire*, vol. iv., part ii., p. 461, and in (3) Fosbroke's *Encyclopedia of Antiquities*, p. 683. *Below*—figure naked to waist, rising, as above, from tomb, on the further edge of which it is apparently seated, with the rest of the figure hidden within the tomb; the hands are crossed. *Above*—two saints appearing above the rim of the dish, the one on the sinister defaced, the one on the dexter side (from the wheel of martyrdom), St. Catharine.

V. In the Ashmolean Museum. Not hitherto described. Label attached only partly legible—" . . . the Vera Icon . . . date, 1,400 about. Arundel Marble . . ." *Below*—a similar

* The Rev. Joseph Hirst has most kindly sent us a full-sized coloured drawing of this example.

figure to the last, but the hands rest on the front edge of the tomb, from which it seems to be rising. *Above*—small naked figure, kneeling, in an oval (like No. III.), upheld by two angels.

VI. In the Ashmolean Museum. Came from Tradescant's collection. It is described as "the Vernicle." *Below*—a figure, like the preceding ones, rising from a tomb. *Above*—the sculpture terminates, like Nos. I. and II., with the rim of the dish.

VII. Described by Rev. E. Duke, who then (1824) owned it, in a long letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. xciv., part ii., p. 209, with an illustration. *Below*—a figure, like the preceding ones, rising from a tomb, the hands on the breast; the tomb in a slightly sloping position, as though suddenly disturbed. *Above*—a small naked, kneeling figure, like No. V., supported by two angels; also the figures of two saints, appearing above the dish, as in No. IV., St. Catharine on the dexter, and the Blessed Virgin with lily on the sinister.

VIII. Described (and owned) by Mr. J. B. Nichols in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1824, vol. xciv., part i., p. 397. *Below*—figure rising from tomb. *Above*—youthful head, supported by drapery, upheld by angels.

IX. Given by Dr. Meyrick to Mr. J. B. Nichols, described and engraved in *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1824, vol. xciv., part 2, p. 209. *Below*—lamb on the ground. *Above*—youthful head, supported by drapery, upheld by angels.

X. Described in *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1824, vol. xciv., part ii., p. 292. Came originally from Horrington, Somerset. *Below*—lamb on the ground. *Above*—as in Nos. VIII. and IX.

XI. Described and engraved in Stukeley's *Palæographia Britannia*. The central head is flanked by figures of St. Peter and St. Paul. *Below*—figure rising from tomb, the hands crossed. *Above*—two saints appearing above the rim of the dish; on the dexter St. Catharine, on the sinister the Blessed Virgin.

Having thus enumerated and described the salient features of each example, it may be well to mention the differing suggestions that have been made respecting the central head and leading idea

of these sculptures. It has been taken for (1) the head of St. John Baptist, (2) the Vernicle, (3) the image of our Lord's face, given to Abgarus after the siege of Edessa, and (4) the first person of the Holy Trinity.

Only a word or two are necessary with regard to the last of these suppositions, although it is upheld at much length, and with considerable misapplied learning, by the late Rev. E. Duke, in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. His contention was that the central head personified God the Father, the figure out of the tomb (or the lamb) below God the Son, and the small child-like figure above God the Spirit. Some strange and extravagant propositions, both theological and antiquarian, are adduced in support of this contention, but the whole theory is at once upset, when it is noted that in Nos. I., II., and VI. of the above list of these sculptures there is no upper figure whatever, so that a Trinity conjecture is an impossibility.

The theory that the head represents the decapitated head of St. John Baptist in a charger was originally propounded by Mr. Nicholls, in his *History of Leicestershire*, and asserted in the following concise and positive terms:—"The middle figure is the head of St. John the Baptist." Equally positive is the assertion in a far later publication, the *Archæological Journal*, where the engraving is lettered to correspond with the brief statement in the text. Almost the only argument that seems to tell in favour of this theory is the description, in a testamentary inventory of one Agas Herte, of Bury St. Edmunds, who died in 1522, of an object that apparently corresponds with these sculptures—"Seynt Joh' is hede of alabaster with Seynt Peter and Seynt Thomas and the fygur of Cryst."* But before the Reformation, as well as after it, inventories abound in blunders when dealing with art, almost as strange as the catalogues of the modern provincial auctioneer. In the last volume of one journal, a similar blunder was brought to light. An inventory of the church goods of Hartshorn, taken in 1612, mentions "a plate of Silver having

* *Bury Wills and Inventories*, Camden Society, pp. 115, 255.

Ihon Bapt head upon it.* This turns out to be a mediæval paten, with the Vernicle in the centre, and is reproduced in this volume (Plate X.). This head, as represented in these sculptures, does not correspond in any particular with any of the known mediæval delineations of St. John Baptist, either by the glass-stainer, painter, or the sculptor. It is simply the charger or circular dish that has suggested the idea of the Baptist's head, and of that a far better solution can be offered. In the Findern example (No. II.), there is a greater space between the head and the figure below than in any other. On turning up the tablet, under the beard, the cut-off neck can be seen projecting from the dish.† It is cut perfectly smooth, and left of the natural grey colour of the marble. With the lavish use of colour on the carving, had a decapitation been intended to be represented, it would not, we think, have been left thus white; nor in the realistic treatment of the time would the neck have been left in a far smoother condition than could have been achieved by the most accomplished headsman. It certainly is true that the head of St. John Baptist was held in so much honour that there was a contention as to the authenticity of the relic, a church at Rome, as well as the cathedral church of Amiens, ‡ claiming to possess the original; and having on two occasions seen the remarkable veneration shown by modern Roman Catholics to the Amiens relic in its crystal-covered shrine, we are by no means disposed to minimise the special sanctity that pertains to its cultus. But after making due allowance for this, is there, we ask with confidence, any trace whatever of such altogether exceptional veneration being paid at any period in any part of Christendom to the head of St. John Baptist, as would gather round it such a remarkable hagiotypic arrangement of saints of the first rank? or what possible connection could there be between the head of the Baptist and Christ below rising from the tomb?

* *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, vol. vii., p. 44.

† This would be quite visible to any one kneeling before the sculpture.

‡ The claim of Amiens is far the strongest; the head was brought there from Constantinople in 1204.

And here it may be remarked, that this lower figure, where it is not a lamb, has been described as (1) the Baptist in prison, and (2) Lazarus coming forth from the tomb. But these are, beyond doubt, erroneous surmises, for in three instances the signs of the pierced palms are quite evident, especially is this the case with the left hand of No. I. It may, therefore, be taken as proved that the lower figure is Christ coming forth to resurrection, and where there is a lamb in this position, that it refers to the Lamb of God once slain for us.

The two other suggestions enumerated above are that the central head is the Vernicle, or another legend of a miraculous appearance of our Lord's portrait. Though it does not seem to us that either of these surmises is the right one, still we are here closely approximating to the true solution. We have placed the coloured plate of No. II., the frontispiece to this volume, before fourteen educated Christians, at different times, and in each case, on the question being put as to the central head, the answer was unhesitatingly given that it represented our Lord's face. Though the arrangement of the hair and beard differs somewhat in the different examples, there is the same quiet pathetic dignity in each of these full faces that seems irresistibly to suggest to the pious observer the humanity of the Second Person of the Trinity. Moreover, the general appearance, as well as the details, of the countenance are entirely in accord with the legendary views of the Santo Volto, and altogether foreign to anything traditionary as to Our Lord's great forerunner.

With regard to the beautiful and touching legend of St. Veronica, the circular dish on which the head rests in each example seems at once to exclude this reading. It is true that our Lord's head, surrounded with rays, without the handkerchief, is spoken of as a Vernicle in medieval art, but there is no known instance of an unradiated circle or dish taking the place of the handkerchief of the story. Moreover, if it is the Vernicle, the hagiotypic arrangement, though more possible than in the suggestion of the Baptist, seems unreasonable, and, at all events, admits of no lucid explanation.

The less known Syrian legend of Abgarus, applied to these

tablets by Fosbrooke and others, relates that Christ gratified the faith of King Abgarus by granting to him the perfect impression of His face on linen, he having invoked Christ's healing power, and offered the strong city of Edessa to protect Him against the malice of the Jews. Precisely the same reasons that militate against these carvings representing the Vernicle apply also to the Abgarus legend.

These carvings seem to be specially English. Eleven of them are known to be extant. Probably there are several others not yet noted in private collections. When we consider the iconoclastic fury of the Reformation and Commonwealth eras, it is remarkable that so many remain. Their number must originally have been very considerable, to be counted probably by the hundred or hundreds. It was loosely asserted some time ago that such representations are often met with on the Continent, but having applied to travellers of repute with considerable knowledge of the sacristies of Italy, France, and Spain, we cannot learn of any like examples, nor have we³ met with them in foreign works on ecclesiology. Monsieur Rohault de Fleury, of Paris, whose great work *Sur les Monuments de la Messe*, makes him one of the best Continental authorities on such subjects, has been good enough to correspond with us about this matter, and he assures us that he has never met with any sculpture similar to that of our frontispiece.

The suggestion that these sculptures represent some version of "St. Gregory's Pity" was made by the Rev. Joseph Hirst, at Derby, last August, and herein, we believe, lies the true solution.

The following is the account of St. Gregory's vision given by Dr. Rock:—"The vision, in which the Apostle of the Saxon-English, Pope S. Gregory, was given to behold Christ's flesh in the Sacrament, is related by both his biographers, Paulus Diaconus (*Vita S. Greg.*, op. S. Greg., t. iv., p. 10, c. xxiii.), and by Johannes Diaconus (*Ibid.* p. 58, c. xli.), and the latter, who wrote about A.D. 875, particularly tells his readers that it was one among the miracles of that Pontiff read in the English Church, for he begins his recital of it with this remark:—
'Quæ autem de Gregorii miraculis penes easdem Anglorum

ecclesias vulgo leguntur omittenda non arbitror' (Ibid. p. 58). From the account of Paulus Diaconus, we gather that as S. Gregory was once giving the Holy Communion, at Mass, to the people, he found that a Roman lady, by her smiling at the words 'the Body of Christ,' applied to the Sacrament, had doubts of transubstantiation. Upon this, the Pontiff withheld the outstretched particle from this matron, and carried it to the altar, whereon he laid it. Then, begging all the people to join with him in entreating that God would show to the eyes of the flesh what this woman ought to have beheld with the eye of faith, he threw himself upon his knees and prayed. On arising, and lifting up the corporal, or linen cloth which had been spread over the particle of the Sacrament, there was to be seen by everyone present, a part of a human finger trickling with blood. After telling this lady that God, by the power with which He wrought all things out of nothing, changes bread and wine into flesh and blood through the prayers of the Catholic Church, S. Gregory besought that the Sacrament might take its usual shape and look; which it did, and was then administered to this same woman:—

“ ‘Mulieri dixit (S. Gregorius Papa) Disce, inquam, veritate vel modo jam credere contestanti: panis, quem ego do, caro mea est; et sanguis meus vere est potus. Sed præcius conditor noster infirmitatis nostræ, eâ potestate qua cuncta fecit ex nihilo, et corpus sibi ex carne beatiosimæ Virginis Mariæ, operante sancto Spiritu, fabricavit, panem et vinum aqua mixtum, manente propria specie, in carnem et sanguinem suum, ad Catholicam precem, ob reparationem nostram, Spiritus sui sanctificatione convertit.’ ”—
(*Vita S. Gregorii Papæ*, a Paulo Diacono, circa A.D. 757, op. S. Greg. t. iv. p. 10, c. xxiii.)

“This miracle may often be met with figured in old English Churches, but especially in our Salisbury missals, under the representation of Christ with all the instruments of His Passion about Him, on an altar, whereon He is seen standing three parts out of His grave, crowned with thorns, and showing His wounded hands to Pope S. Gregory and his deacon and sub-deacon, all three kneeling at the foot of the altar; while, amid the crowd

behind them, one is found carrying the Pontifical tiara, and another holding the Papal or triple cross. From its dolefulness, this representation was known among our Catholic forefathers as 'St. Gregory's Pity,' and is given in a woodcut before the first Sunday of Advent in the folio *Sarum Missal*, printed A.D. 1555, at Paris, by J. Amazeur, for G. Merlin, of which I have a fine copy."*

If these carvings represent some version of this legend of St. Gregory, or any like one, the difficulty with regard to the dish or charger at once disappears, for it becomes a paten. In none of the examples does the paten come out clearer, with the inner circular depression, invariably met with at that date in all patens but not in all dishes, than in Mr. Spilsbury's specimen (No II.). The majority of the fourteen to whom we showed the illustration, and who recognised in it Our Lord's face, described the dish as a paten.

If, too, these carvings are a tribute of respect to the Blessed Sacrament, the whole arrangement of the subsidiary figures is readily explained by a natural and unstrained interpretation.

If the central idea of these sculptures is the presence of Christ in the Sacrament, represented by the head on the paten, the figure below of Christ rising from the tomb and thereby giving to the faithful that eat the Bread the power of living for ever (St. John vi. 58), comes in with singular appropriateness; and the equal fitness of the small representations of Christ's Ascension above, as shown in the majority of the sculptures, is also obvious. The symbolism thus seems to us singularly apt and well suited as a text for a medieval instruction. The Blessed Sacrament being a perpetuation of the Incarnation, the conquering Humanity is typified below, and the ascending Divinity above.

The three instances of a Lamb below admit of a like explanation, and the Lamb in Mr. Spilsbury's example still further bears out the connection with St. Gregory's Pity, for it is represented as resting on a clasped book, which is undoubtedly intended for a missal.

* Rock's *Church of our Fathers*, vol. i., p. 52. In Parker's *Calendar of the Anglican Church*, p. 52, is a good engraving of one version of St. Gregory's Pity, taken from a Bodleian MS.

St. Peter, as the flanking figure of the sculpture on the right side, is obviously the most suitable possible figure, as representing the Universal Church of Christ, supporting the doctrine of the Real Presence; his position is simply inexplicable, if the carving represents some unknown cult of the Baptist's head, and there is not much more meaning in it if the chief apostle is supposed to appear in support of the legends of St. Veronica or King Abgarus.

The like remarks apply to the left flanking figure of St. Thomas of Canterbury, as representing the attestation and support of the most honoured Saint of the English branch of the Church Catholic. It should, however, be mentioned that Monsieur Fleury suggests to us that this figure of an archbishop is intended for St. Augustine, the great apostle of the Saxons, and the first of the See of Canterbury. In support of this may be urged the close connection between Pope Gregory and Augustine, and also the absence of any martyr's emblem in the figure of the archbishop, which might reasonably have been looked for in any representation of St. Thomas of Canterbury.

The smaller figures that appear in some examples of the B.V.M. and St. Catharine, coincide equally well with the supposition that we have adopted, and that seems to us, the more we reflect upon it, to closely approximate to a certainty. Of the appropriateness of the introduction of the mother of our Lord in such a combination, with such an object, not a syllable is necessary from a Christian; of the signification of St. Catharine's presence, it may be pointed out that she was regarded as the patroness of Christian science and learning, having converted fifty pagan philosophers to the following of Christ, and also that, as the legendary spouse of Christ, she was not unfrequently taken as signifying the Bride of the Bridegroom, that is the Church.*

All the known examples of this sculpture are of about the same

* St. Catharine was specially venerated in England; there was hardly a minster or large church without an altar to her name, and many of the parish churches were directly dedicated in her memory. Archbishop Langham, 1366-1368, authorised and enjoined a special hymn for the Church of England, in honour of this virgin martyr.

date, namely, the end of the fourteenth or quite the beginning of the fifteenth century. Antiquaries, judging the matter from very different standpoints, unite in approximating the date to 1400. The date, surely, of a sacred carving of this character, that must once have been so extraordinarily prevalent throughout England, is worth considering. It was the time when the heresies of Wyclif were making some headway in the church. One of the chief tenets of the Wyclifites was a repudiation of the hitherto universally held doctrine of the Presence in the Sacrament. Some of them expressed themselves in terms that would utterly shock English Churchmen of different schools of the present day, and must have been startlingly repulsive to the Catholics of the time. For instance, John Badby, the tailor of Evesham, who was burnt in 1409, when he appeared the last time in court, and was again questioned as to the nature of the elements in the Eucharist, said that, "in the sight of God, the Duke of York," to whom he bowed, "or any child of a Adam, was of higher value than the Sacrament of the Altar." Archbishop Arundel, 1399-1414, was not only a severe man who readily accepted the aid of the State in the crushing of heresy through the odious statute *De heretico comburendo*, but was an able and even conciliatory administrator when he thought the times permitted, and it seems to us not at all improbable that he specially revived the tradition of St. Gregory's Pity, and perhaps enjoined its perpetuation in stone, in a readily understood form. That there was some kind of order or powerful recommendation for such sculptures, as a popular way of strengthening the faith, we feel convinced, and possibly evidence of this may yet be forthcoming from Arundel's *Register*, or some similar source.

Archbishop Thomas Arundel is said to have taken for his patron saint his predecessor in the see, St. Thomas á Becket, which gives some little support to the theory that this is the saint on the left of these sculptures, though our own opinion coincides with that of Monsieur Fleury, that it is most likely intended for St. Augustine of Canterbury.

All these sculptures are of about the same dimensions, somewhat

less than a foot square, and were intended to be fixed against a wall, as the holes at the back of most of them, for the insertion of pegs, plainly show. They would be fixed above side-altars, or elsewhere in churches or oratories.

A deep cut in the forehead is readily noticed on the illustration of Mr. Spilsbury's example. Mr. Bailey considers this cut intentional, and his view is supported by the fact that a similar cut in a like position is shown in the drawing of the example at Ratcliffe College.

It is hoped that this article may be the means of bringing other like relics to light, for the purposes of further comparison, and of still further establishing their true origin.