

MEDIÆVAL TRIPTYCH: REMAINS DISCOVERED AT ASHBOURNE CHURCH.

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IN the parish church of Ashbourne, when the vestry was being cleaned on a recent occasion, there was found behind the safe, a 15th or early 16th century oak panel painted on both sides, evidently part of a triptych which may have been the reredos of a side altar, or may possibly have enclosed an alabaster panel hung on the wall. It is also possible that this panel, painted on both sides, may have come from the base of a parclose screen, between two chapels, where it might have been thought desirable to have decoration on both sides.

On the one side there is the figure of a woman in a grey dress and full mantle, falling in large folds round the hands and arms. The left hand is raised, the right is slightly lowered. The face is rather full, the hair fair, and falls down on the shoulders. There is no halo, but from near the mouth, and filling in the top of the panel comes a scroll of the familiar type intended to carry an inscription. Careful examination fails to reveal any trace of wording and it looks as if the inscription was never added. Here, the suggestion is rather of shop work, not prepared for any particular client, but intended to be altered in accordance with the wishes of a buyer who doubtless would select an appropriate inscription, and possibly add an emblem.

The other side of the panel contains two subjects. At the top is what was known as the 'Image of Pity,' showing our Lord as in his Passion, with the upper part of

the body only, naked except for a loin cloth, only the top of which appears. The hands are crossed at the wrists and hang down; the head is turned downwards towards the right side, the beard is rather fair and slight, the hair exceptionally thick and dark, falling on to the shoulders. The background is gold with a diaper pattern suggesting a 'cloth of gold' fabric and is rather roughly executed as compared with the other work. Beneath this figure is a narrow panel with an inscription in four lines in closely painted black letter on white ground. Each line begins with a capital letter, and unfortunately the inscription has flaked so badly that it is not possible to read more than a few words. Such words as the writer has been able to read are as follows:

Uis indulta patru [m] tibi prosint

Hanc gregorius ferat ass

Ni ant maior est illa

Rome ix presens iam pater

This inscription, which is much more difficult to read than appears at first sight, is evidently connected with the indulgences attached to the Image of Pity, which were very popular at the end of the mediaeval period. The painting of the Image here is strangely reminiscent of the figure of Christ in a wood cut inserted in the unique copy of William Caxton's *Directorium Sacerdotum* of 1487 in the British Museum. The subject is connected with the legend of the appearance of our Lord as in his Passion to St. Gregory when saying mass, after which St. Gregory is supposed to have granted indulgences to those who looked upon this Image. Sometimes the picture takes the form of St. Gregory saying mass at an altar, with our Lord appearing to him above the altar, but in others it only displays the isolated figure of our Lord, as in this instance. The whole subject of the Image of Pity is fully dealt with in Appendix IX, page 646, of the Henry Bradshaw Society's reprint of the *Ordinale Sarum* sive



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Directorium Sacerdotum, edited by Christopher Wordsworth, Volume 2, London, 1902, in which the wood cut in question is reproduced as Plate I. These indulged representations of the Image of Pity were very common, and no doubt woodcuts of this kind found their way all over the country. It may therefore be suggested that the artist in this case was influenced by this Caxton woodcut, the date of which is probably about 1487, so that these paintings are probably not earlier than the very end of the 15th century, and may well be somewhat later.

The lower part of the panel below this inscription contains a figure of St. Michael, slaying the dragon with a cross headed spear in the usual way. Here, a lot of background has flaked away, together with most of the dragon. St. Michael is in an unapparelled alb, girded at the waist, with an unapparelled amice, and a cope worn like a mantle, with the right arm coming from underneath the side and not in the front, so that the left side of the cope hangs down in front of the figure. The cope is dull red without orphreys—the background dark blue powdered with stars. There are white wings and a golden halo.

The general character of the work is of exceptionally high quality. There is definitely Flemish influence, and it is rather more like East Anglian than West of England work. The panel is of exceptional artistic importance because any painted wood work in the Midlands is very rare. This means that we have practically nothing wherewith to compare it. It is difficult to suggest any special place of execution, unless it may have come from the workshops where the wooden housings were made for the alabasters carved at Nottingham.

The panel has been cleaned, treated for preservation and set in a simple frame by Mr. Herbert Read of Exeter, and it has now been fixed in a screen in Ashbourne church, where both sides can be seen.