

A Medieval Alabaster from Bushmead Priory

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The fragment of alabaster sculpture illustrated in Plate 1 comes from the remains of the small Augustinian priory at Bushmead near Eaton Socon.¹ It was discovered in November 1976 by staff of the Department of the Environment during conservation work on the gable end of what is presumed to have been the priory frater. This wall has a large late-13th-century window which was reduced in size and given Perpendicular tracery when a first floor was inserted in the frater some time in the 15th century. The alabaster was found with other disused pieces of stone and brick in the loose infilling above the tracery.² It has now (1978) been treated by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory and placed on loan in Bedford Museum. I am grateful to Dr Barry Knight, assistant conservation officer, Department of the Environment, for the following report on the conservation work and description of the painting:

Conservation

As received, the carving was broken into two pieces (a recent break) and covered with orange sandy mud. Nevertheless, some paint was visible in places. The carving is in high relief with a flat back. No means of fixing are apparent on the part surviving.

Dimensions:

Maximum length	29cm (11 ³ / ₈ ins)
Maximum width	17cm (6 ⁵ / ₈ ins)
Maximum thickness	6cm (2 ¹ / ₄ ins)

The stone itself is true alabaster or gypsum (CaSO_4) rather than a form of calcite (CaCO_3), since it is still soft enough to be scratched by a finger-nail, and does not effervesce with dilute acid.

Tests showed that where the paint remained, it was firmly attached to the stone. Accordingly the painted surfaces were cleaned using cotton-wool swabs and water containing a small amount of detergent to aid the removal of the mud.

Since only small patches of paint remained on the stone, it was decided not to take samples for analysis. However, the durability of the pigments

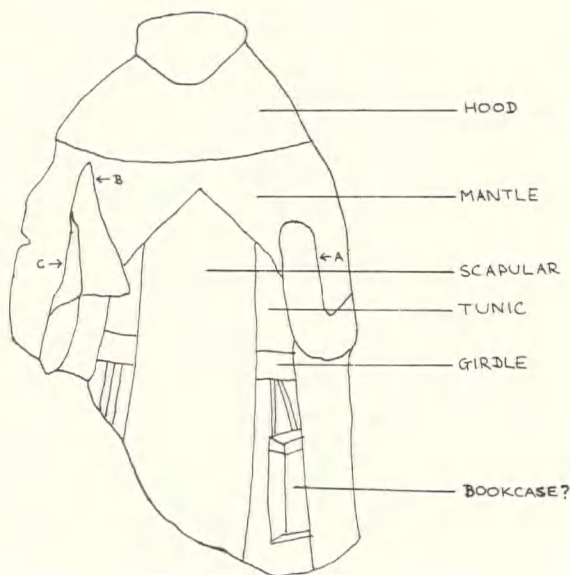


Fig 1 The alabaster figure.

suggests that they are earth colours. Several layers of paint were detected, which are discussed in detail below. An interesting feature was the use of silver foil on the hanging straps. As received these were blackened and tarnished, but it proved possible to reduce them to metallic silver by swabbing with a 15% aqueous solution of ammonium thiosulphate, which was afterwards washed off with large quantities of water.

After the surface had been cleaned the break was mended with Araldite, taking care that no adhesive was squeezed out of the crack.

Finally, the whole painted and formerly painted surface was consolidated with a solution of soluble nylon in ethanol. This has the additional effect of increasing the brightness of the colours.

The Painting (Figure 1)

The hood, mantle and scapular were originally painted black, while the tunic appears to have



Plate 1 The medieval alabaster from Bushmead Priory.

been left as white unpainted stone. The black areas have a pink undercoat, followed by a grey layer with conspicuous brush strokes and the black topcoat.

The two sections of the girdle are ochre with orange underpaint, while the hanging straps on both sides are silvered, as mentioned above, with lower layers of scarlet, orange and black. The book-case on the figure's left side has a pink undercoat, followed by red and orange. Its upper part is gilded, the edge of the gilding being marked by a lightly incised line.

The mutilated object held in the left hand appears to have been painted dark green: traces can be seen on the outside edge (Fig 1, A). Another mutilated object held in the right hand has on the inside (Fig 1, B) gilding over brown over pink and on the outside (Fig 1, C) orange over brown, which is also partly overlaid by the black paint of the mantle.

Discussion

From the foregoing description it will have been gathered that the alabaster represents the

fragment of an ecclesiastic, who, coming from Bushmead, must surely be an Augustinian or black canon. It is unusual in that it shows him in his day-to-day processional vestments and not in his choral or mass vestments which priests are sometimes shown wearing on, for example, monumental brasses.³ He is wearing the hood, mantle and scapular of his religious Order. From his girdle a case for a book (?) hangs on one side; on the other would have hung perhaps a penner for his writing implements or a purse. His left hand possibly held a missal and his right, probably a staff. The staff would make it almost certain he was a prior, but whether a prior of Bushmead or some other father venerated by the monks there we cannot say. He cannot be the hermit, Joseph, who, according to Leyland, was venerated by the monks of Bushmead as their founder (c 1195) but might represent William of Colmworth the first prior of the regularised Augustinian priory. There are no other names of note that have come down to us from the early history of Bushmead.

Alabaster (derived from Alabastrum in Egypt where it was presumably first worked) occurs widely in its natural state. When freshly quarried its softness makes it ideal for carving. Its gentle translucent texture is suitable for polishing but is also ideal for painting and gilding. In England it was chiefly quarried from the hills some 20 miles from Nottingham where an industry of alabasterers grew up early in the fourteenth century and flourished until the Reformation.⁴ The alabaster was generally used for making momental effigies and altar-pieces of multiple panels, richly painted and framed; also for individual statues and figures in the round. The scenes in the panels which are usually from the New Testament or lives of the saints, are lively if somewhat repetitive in style but fulfilled the need which other medieval arts such as glass and painting also fulfilled, to provide an aid to devotion and a means of telling a story without words. The output of the Nottingham alabasterers and the lesser schools (there was possibly one at Lincoln, in whose diocese Bushmead then lay) was enormous. There is scarcely a Dissolution inventory of a religious house that does not list a "table of alabaster" (ie, a retable). Today there are fragments of so-called Nottingham alabasters from churches and houses throughout England, while many of the best-preserved

are among the 3,000 or more that were exported to the continent.

In Bedfordshire there are fragments of alabasters still to be seen near Bushmead in Blunham and Sandy parish churches. These are parts of New Testament scenes. For comparison of subject matter with the Bushmead fragment there is part of the figure of a bishop at Toft Church (Cambs)⁵ and closer still in both subject and design, the figure of a Dominican friar at Barling Church (Essex) which is described as follows in the catalogue of the great 1910 exhibition of alabaster: "A headless figure in brown habit with green girdle, scapular and black cloak with white tippet, holding up a large red book in his left hand and a staff in his right. From his girdle hangs on the right side a pair of paternosters with red beads, gold gauds and gilt tassel. Lower part of figure lost 15½ x 9ins."⁶

The style of the Bushmead alabaster provides no clue for its date of manufacture and the context of its discovery offers only a wide date margin. It must be earlier than c 1450, the date of the late window above which it was inserted, and it is unlikely to be before c 1350 when alabasters first became widespread. The fairly shallow relief in the carving suggests a date of about 1400. It probably came from an altar-piece in the priory church. Such an altar-piece could well have had a statue of Prior William and another of Joseph the hermit either side of it. But it could equally well have stood in the refectory itself and been abandoned when it was accidentally broken at the time the west window was being altered.

NOTES

- 1 For a bibliography on the priory, which is partly in the guardianship of the Department of the Environment, see N.W. Alcock, *Bushmead Priory, Bedfordshire: A Thirteenth-century Hall and Roof*, *Jour. Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, 3rd ser., 33 (1970), 50-56.
- 2 I am grateful to Mr Dennis Smart, chargehand for reporting the find to me.
- 3 For an effigy of an Augustinian abbot in his choir vestments see eg. the brass of Richard Bewforest (c 1510) at Dorchester, Oxon, published in Herbert Druitt, *A Manual of Costume as illustrated by Monumental Brasses* (1906), 95-96.
- 4 For a general introduction to the subject, and one on which this paragraph is partly based, see Francis Cheetham, *Medieval English Alabaster Carvings in the Castle Museum Nottingham* (1973).
- 5 See *Arch. Jour.*, 82 (1925), 35, pl. IV, 2.
- 6 See *Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibition of . . . Alabaster . . .*, Society of Antiquaries (1913), No 84, pl. XXX.

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