

**THE TWO EXAMPLES OF
SCULPTURED ALABASTER PANELS
NOW REMAINING IN HAMPSHIRE CHURCHES**

THE BETRAYAL AT HAWKLEY CHURCH
THE ST. JOHN'S HEAD AT AMPORT CHURCH

By ARTHUR R. GREEN, F.S.A.

THERE are, I believe, only two alabaster panels remaining in the churches of the County, but these, although entirely different in character and in date and in the subject portrayed, are such excellent examples and so well preserved that they are worthy of a careful examination.

Alabaster or gypsum is a massive fine-grained sulphate of lime which is found in the red marl of the upper Kuper beds in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire, etc., and the chief quarries during the Middle Ages were near Tutbury, Staffordshire and Chellaston near Derby. In its natural state and before exposure to the air it is soft and easily cut, but afterwards it becomes hard and is capable of being polished like marble.

From the beginning of the fourteenth century alabaster effigies were being made, and a local school of carvers was formed near the quarries, the Chellaston and Nottingham centres becoming famous not only for their tombs, but for their panelled reredoses and images of Saints, which were distributed throughout England and the Continent. The reigning house gave great encouragement to the new industry, and examples of alabaster effigies still remain to Edward II in Gloucester Cathedral, to Prince William of Hatfield at York, and to two children of Edward III at Westminster, and it is evident that early in the century blocks of the material were conveyed to London and carved there, examples being the weepers on the tomb of lord John of Eltham, *d.* 1336, in Westminster Abbey. There are indeed magnificent alabaster tombs and effigies in cathedrals and churches all over England.

At a somewhat later date there is evidence that alabastermen at Nottingham, York, London, Burton and Lincoln were busily engaged in the carving of images and tables for reredoses and the like. The records of the Borough of Nottingham contain many references to the alabastermen during the latter part of the fifteenth century, and disclose the fact that a great industry was being carried on there, images and tables, among which St. John's Heads are specially mentioned, being sent away for sale in large quantities. There is evidence also that alabaster work was probably hawked

about the country for sale by men in search of orders, for in the churchwardens' accounts at Bramley, Hants, the following occurs under the date 1531-2 :—

“Item to the alabasterman in ernystes on a bargin iiij^d”

The meaning no doubt is that he came to sell his alabaster tablets, probably showing examples of the work, was given an order and to confirm the bargain was paid four pence

Another entry in the following year gives further information :

1532-3. “Item paied for the ymages in the Rode loft out of the Churche boxe xiiij^s”

Unfortunately we are not told where they came from nor what they were like, but probably they were panels for a reredos to the Rood-loft altar, and although they are now lost, perhaps they, like so many other examples, may some day be recovered.

The two types of Alabaster Panels.

There are two types of alabaster panels, the early and the late, and of these the Betrayal at Hawkey belongs to the first and the St. John's Head at Amport to the second.

The earliest panels are rectangular in form, the scenes being carved in low relief on a sunk background and the sides of the tables are generally finished on all sides with a hollow moulding. The gilded backgrounds were adorned with gesso knobs.

It is believed that these earliest carvings were produced in London, the probable date being c. 1345 to c. 1375, the close resemblances in the handling of the draperies of the weepers on the tomb of the lord John of Eltham, c. 1340, being taken, among other things, to confirm this suggestion.

From an examination of these early panels it is apparent that they were employed in two ways, either in the composition of the reredos of an altar, or used singly for individual adoration, the reredoses being in honour of the Blessed Virgin on the altar of Our Lady, or in honour of Our Lord on the Jesus altar.

No complete reredos of either subject *in situ* has come down to us, but it seems probable that the panels were arranged in sets with terminal figures of saints and the subjects on the Lady altar (the Christmas panels) would be the Five Joys of the Virgin, namely the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi or the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension and the Coronation of the Virgin.

Of the reredos in honour of the Passion of Our Lord (the Easter panels) three scenes have been preserved, the Betrayal, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and perhaps no other subjects

were employed in this early type, but if they were, probably the Flagellation and the Entombment or the Harrowing of Hell were the subjects.

The second or late type of alabaster panels, which became popular in the third quarter of the fourteenth century and entirely displaced the earlier type, is characterised by having an embattled finish at the upper edge and the sides are not carefully finished but left rough, especially along the lower portion.

The Betrayal of Our Lord by Judas.

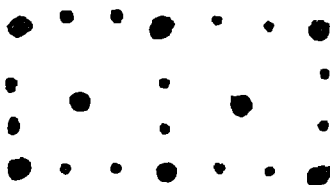
This remarkable and unique carving is preserved in the modern church at Hawkey, which replaces an ancient building. The panel, which measures $17\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches, has moulded sides, the figures being carved in relief on a sunk background, and traces of the original colouring can still be seen in many parts. It bears a great resemblance to an alabaster panel of the Resurrection now in the British Museum and no doubt belongs to the school of London alabastermen, dating from about 1360. Originally it would form part of a reredos on a Jesus altar.

In the centre is Our Lord, with St. Peter on his right hand and Judas on his left. All three figures are clad in long robes and cloaks and their feet are bare. Our Lord's hair and beard are golden and behind His head is a dark nimbus, and with two fingers of His right hand extended, He bestows His healing power on Malchus, who lies beneath at the foot of the panel. St. Peter holds in his left hand a golden key and in his right a long sword. His beard and hair are golden and he is tonsured. Judas has a long pointed beard and long dark hair and his left hand is placed on Christ's breast. On the left of the panel is a man dressed in a jupon, from the belt of which hangs an aulace or short dagger ornamented with bands of black and gold. His hair and short beard are black, his feet are shod with long shoes and in his right hand he holds a tall halberd. Behind him in the background is a man with brown beard and hair who holds, with outstretched arm, a gilded octagonal lantern over Our Lord's head.

On the right of the panel, behind Judas, are two soldiers wearing pointed bascinets, gilded camailles and short jupons, their baldricks being also gilded and upon their feet long pointed shoes. The first soldier grasps the cloak of Christ and the second holds a long spear.

At the foot of the panel, in a separate recess, is the prostrate figure of Malchus. His right foot is missing, and he has short hair and no beard. Clad in a short jupon and baldrick, he holds in his left hand a short staff. Both his ears are present and his lips show traces of scarlet.

The background is gilded and ornamented with gesso knobs arranged thus :—



exactly the same design being found on the Resurrection panel in the British Museum.

The sculptured Alabaster Panels called St. John's Heads.

Various explanations have been brought forward to explain the meaning of these carvings, of which a score or more are known to be still in existence, but the researches of W. H. St. John Hope have definitely established that the theory, first brought forward by Rev. John Pridden in 1789, is the true one and the one supported by very strong evidence

This theory points out that these panels represent the head of St. John Baptist in a charger, with figures of saints, etc. The other explanations only require a passing notice. The head in the centre of the panels has been thought to be the image of Our Lord's face, given as a picture to King Abgarus, according to the Syrian legend, by Christ as a reward for his faith and for offering Him the city of Edessa to protect Him from the Jews.

Other theories are :—

That the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are represented, the central head = God the Father ; the figure at the base = God the Son ; and the soul at the top = God the Holy Ghost.

That the central figure and disk represent the Vernicle or imprint of Our Saviour's face.

That the sculpture represents a variety of St. Gregory's Pity.

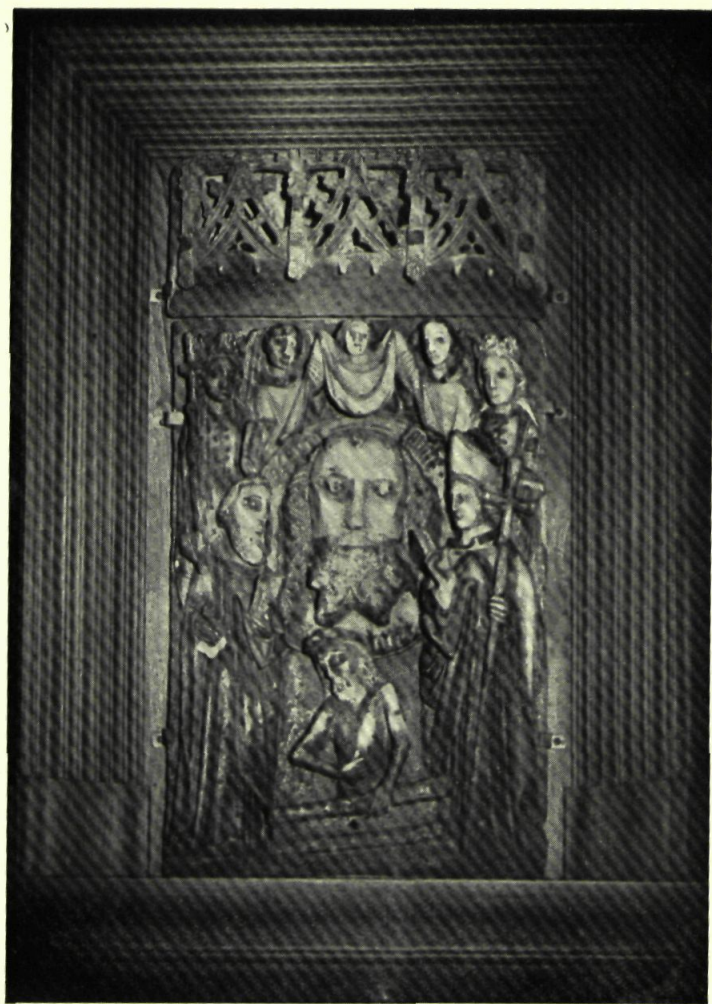
Before describing the panel at Amport it may be well to give a general description of these carvings, for although the subject is always the same, the details vary considerably. The central object in every case is the head of St. John Baptist on a plain round dish and this may be all, except that at the base there is a figure of Our Lord standing in a tomb, or an Agnus Dei, or the Virgin and Child.

In many of the tablets a cut in the Saint's forehead over the left eye is shown.



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SCULPTURED ALABASTER PANEL. c. 1360.
THE BETRAYAL
HAWKLEY CHURCH



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SCULPTURED ALABASTER PANEL. xvth century.
ST. JOHN'S HEAD
AMPORT CHURCH

Generally the central head is flanked by figures of Saints, and the one on the dexter side is always St. Peter, with key and book. The corresponding sinister figure is an Archbishop, generally said to be St. Thomas of Canterbury or St. Wilfrid of York. In some panels two other Saints are introduced above the first pair.

At the top occasionally two angels are shown, who support a small naked figure representing a soul, but one example has the three Persons of the Trinity in this position.

That all the panels were originally painted is proved by the traces which remain, and these show that the field was coloured green and diapered with groups of five white spots encircling a red spot

This peculiar device is characteristic of medieval sculptures of alabaster of the date of these tablets, which probably came from the same workshops. The panels are all roughly cut away at the bottom, and at the back the remains of latten wire, used to fasten them, can be seen.

W. H. St. John Hope, in his paper "*On the sculptured Alabaster Tablets called St. John's Heads*," from which I have quoted extensively, brings forward much evidence to prove his views. The following may be mentioned :—

"In Amiens Cathedral is preserved a most precious relic, the front part of a human skull, brought thither from the East in 1206 and reputed to be part of the skull of St. John Baptist. Du Cange published an engraving of it in 1665, and in describing it says :—

'Au dessus de l'oeil gauche est un petit trou en longueur, qui a donné suiet à quelques-uns de dire, que comme Herodias, suivant le rapport de Saint Hierosme, ayant reçu la testle de Saint Precurseur, en perça de l'eguille de ses cheveux la langue, de laquelle ce Saint avoit repris ses incestueux adulteres, elle luy en donna aussi dans les yeux, et que mesme elle porta le coôteau sur le sourcil.'¹

"On one of the panels on the carved screen on the north side of the choir-stalls at Amiens Herodias is shown in the act of striking St. John's head with a knife over the left eye.

"The wound which appears in so many panels is thus explained as the act of Herodias, and can in no way be connected with the head of Our Lord.

¹ Above the left eye is a small longitudinal hole, which has given occasion to some to say, that when Herodias, according to the account of St. Jerome, having received the head of the Holy Forerunner, pierced with her hair-pin the tongue with which this Saint had rebuked her incestuous adulteries, she also pierced the eyes and even thrust the knife into his brow.

"But the most conclusive evidence occurs on a tablet belonging to Lord St. Levan, for round the edge of the dish on which the head lies are traces of a black-letter inscription of which the important words *Sci johis B* are plainly visible."

St. John's Heads are often mentioned in Wills :—

"By will dated September 2. 1522. Agas Herte of Bury St. Edmunds, widow, bequeaths, *inter alia*, to her son Richard Jaxson, a seynt Johis hede of alabastr wt seynt Petr and seynt Thomas and the fygur of Cryst, wt a choche of red sarsnet and grene ffrengyd."

The St. John's Head at Amport.

This very fine alabaster panel is not only quite perfect, but it retains the whole of its original colouring in an unusual state of preservation. It consists of two separate portions, a canopy 4 inches high, at the top, and a panel 14 inches high, with the sculptured head and the saints below.

The Saint's head lies on a dish in the centre, and his hair and beard are gilded. The eyes are open and their irises are painted blue and the lips and eyebrows are also coloured. No cut on the forehead is visible.

The dish is $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter and has a red edge, and round the rim is the inscription :—

"÷ Caput ——— ÷ ——— sancte ÷ 'istorie ÷"
which may be translated—

"The Head of Holy Writ."

Below is a half-length figure of Christ in the tomb. The eyes are painted blue, the hair and beard are golden and a dark green torse encircles the head. The right hand grasps the lower part of the chest and the left the edge of the tomb. The loin cloth, the only garment, is edged with blue. The tomb is placed obliquely and is painted black with white drops.

It will be noticed that Our Lord's Death and Passion are symbolised here, not His triumphal Resurrection, and this idea is the one always represented on these panels.

The dexter figure is St. Peter in a white robe and mantle ; in his left hand is a book and in his right a golden key.

The opposite figure is an archbishop in mitre, alb and cope. His right hand, covered with a glove, is raised in benediction and in the left is a tall cross. This probably represents St. Thomas of Canterbury or St. Wilfrid of York.

Above St. Peter stands St. Margaret of Antioch, crowned and holding a large golden cross in her right hand and a book in her left.

Above the archbishop is the crowned figure of St. Katherine, holding in her right hand a spiked wheel and in her left a sword.

The costumes of all these figures are beautifully painted, the colours being white, gold, blue and red.

Above the head of St. John two demi-angels hold up a white sheet in which is a small figure representing a soul. The angels have white albs and amices and their red wings are ornamented with eyes like peacocks' feathers. The background is painted green in the lower half with the characteristic groups of spots, five white spots with a central red one, and white branches; the upper half is coloured deep yellow, with red branches.

The canopy of pierced tracery is divided into three parts by gabled buttresses and across the top is an embattled cornice, the whole coloured in green, red, gold, blue and brown, while the coved underpart is painted red with yellow stripes in imitation of ribs.

The panel, which measures 18 inches in height by $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches in width, is said to have been found in a house in Amport some 60 or 70 years ago. It is now fixed to the north wall of the nave and is covered in front with glass in a wooden frame.

The writer has availed himself fully of the following sources of information:—

"The Earliest Type of English Alabaster Panel Carvings" by Philip Nelson, M.D., F.S.A., *The Archaeological Journal*, March to December, 1919.

"On the Sculptured Alabaster Tablets called St. John's Heads," by W. H. St. John Hope, M.A., *Archæologia*. Vol. LII.

Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibition of English Alabaster Work, held in the rooms of the Society of Antiquaries, 26th May to 30th June, 1910.

British Museum Guide to Mediæval Antiquities.