

THE KETTLEBASTON ALABASTERS

By M. R. TAYLOR, B.A.

The Kettlebaston alabasters are fragments of four carved panels depicting God the Father holding a crucifix, perhaps part of a Trinity group, the Annunciation, the Coronation of the Virgin and the Ascension, which have been in the British Museum since 1883, when they were presented by the Rev. James Beck of Bildeston Priory, Suffolk. They were discovered in the walls of the church at Kettlebaston and some of the literature gives the date as 1882. However, in the register¹ of acquisitions for 1883 there is the following brief note: 'Found about twenty years since imbedded in the walls of the chancel of the church at Kettlebaston, Suffolk'.

God the Father with the Crucifixion. Plate XXXVI.

God the Father, in a robe the lining of which retains some of its red colour, is seated frontally on a throne which still preserves much green pigment. Between his legs he holds a crucifix, the cross of which has much of the same green that is on the throne.²

The Annunciation. Plate XXXVII

The Virgin, in a robe with traces of red and of gilding, sits on a bench with traces of red. To her left rests an open book. To her right is the base of a vase. Below her feet is a green 'ground' with daisies in white and red. The background, both below the green 'ground' and above the horizontal line of the bench, shows traces of gilding and the marks left by gesso dots which no longer remain.³

The Coronation of the Virgin. Plate XXXVIII

Christ is seated on a bench and turns towards the Virgin to his right. His robe retains traces of red and of gilding. His feet rest on a 'ground' of green dotted with white and red daisies. The Virgin kneels on another at a lower level, and this also shows traces

¹ The registration numbers are as follows:—83, 8-6, 1 God the Father with the crucifixion; 83, 8-6, 2 The Annunciation; 83, 8-6, 3 The Coronation of the Virgin; 83, 8-6, 4 The Ascension.

² Height, 12½ inches. Width, 10½ inches. The base of this sculpture does not have a straight edge, but projects forward. The back of the alabaster is hollowed out at the bottom in the usual manner, and there are no signs of attachment loops.

³ Height, 9½ inches. Width, 11½ inches. One attachment loop remains on the left side of the back. It is situated 7½ inches up from the base, and 1½ inches from the left edge.

of green colour and daisies. Her robe shows traces of red and of gilding, and her hair and the background of the panel both show traces of gilding.⁴

The Ascension. Plate XXXIX

The lower parts of five people kneel in robes with traces of red and green paint and of gilding. The ground on which they kneel is decorated as before.⁵

More than fifty years ago Professor Prior placed English medieval alabaster carvings into three stylistic groups, to which he gave approximate dates. The first group is characterised by the low relief of the carving, by the sunken background and by the moulded framing on all four sides of the panels, and the second group by the battlements along the top edge which form a canopy over the scene carved below. The approximate dates of these two groups (the third group does not concern us here) are 1340–1400 and 1400–1450. On grounds of style one can safely assume that the Kettlebaston alabasters belong either to the first group or else to the second, but the upper parts of all four panels being missing, one cannot know whether the tops were ever embattled or not. Nevertheless, the generally accepted opinion is that they were never embattled and belong quite definitely to the first group.

English medieval alabaster carvings used to be known as Nottingham alabasters, but it is now recognised that they were carved in other centres besides Nottingham, though, so far, it has not been possible to associate any particular style of carving with any particular region. And furthermore, except in the case of a few alabasters with special features, it is not yet possible to date them with more precision than into the wide brackets associated with the three stylistic groups already mentioned.

In 1912 Prior,⁶ discussing the Kettlebaston fragments, called them 'our finest examples of alabaster sculpture', and assigned them to a London workshop before 1350, by comparing them with the alabaster weepers on the tomb of John of Eltham in Westminster Abbey. But Hildburgh, describing them as 'four exceptionally beautiful fragments', compared the Kettlebaston fragments to an

⁴ Height, 10 inches. Width, $9\frac{1}{4}$ inches. This fragment has been restored from several pieces. The back has been plastered over, but one attachment is visible on the right hand side of the back. It is situated $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches up from the base and $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches in from the right edge.

⁵ Height, $7\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Width, $11\frac{1}{4}$ inches. This fragment is restored from two pieces. Two attachment loops remain. One is situated on the left of the back, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches up from the base and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in from the left edge. The other is on the right, and is 3 inches up from the base and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in from the right edge.

⁶ *An Account of Medieval Figure-Sculpture in England*, Prior and Gardner, 1912.

Annunciation and Coronation of the Virgin in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and found the similarities very close.⁷ This comparison is significant because these two alabasters have embattled tops, and Hildburgh decided that the Kettlebaston fragments had been carved towards the end rather than towards the beginning of the first period. Originally these panels would have been mounted in a compartmented wooden frame, and the series most probably represented the Five Joys, with God the Father and the crucifix taking the place of the more usual central subject of the resurrection. But until more work is done on English medieval alabasters, until documents or datable sculptures are discovered, the Kettlebaston alabasters, as also nearly all the others, will remain incompletely understood.

Fragment of an alabaster panel. Plate XL

Recently this fragment of alabaster carving⁸ was discovered in a wall of a cottage which was being demolished in the parish of Orford, Suffolk.* The fragment has been given to Orford church by Mrs. Wales, the owner of the cottage. The scene has not yet been identified. It represents on the left, under an arch, a man in a hat and robe holding a long scroll. On the right under the remains of another arch one can just discern the drapery on the ground of another figure now almost totally disappeared. All this is quite straightforward. What is, however, exceptional, is the fact that below these figures there is the top part of another scene, a large moulded projection, and beside it a small capital, all seen through another arch. Two-tiered alabasters do exist, but they are of such subjects as the Annunciation and the Trinity, and even then they are very rare. So far I have not found any other example of such a panel, one in which scenes which have secular figures in architectural settings are placed one above the other.

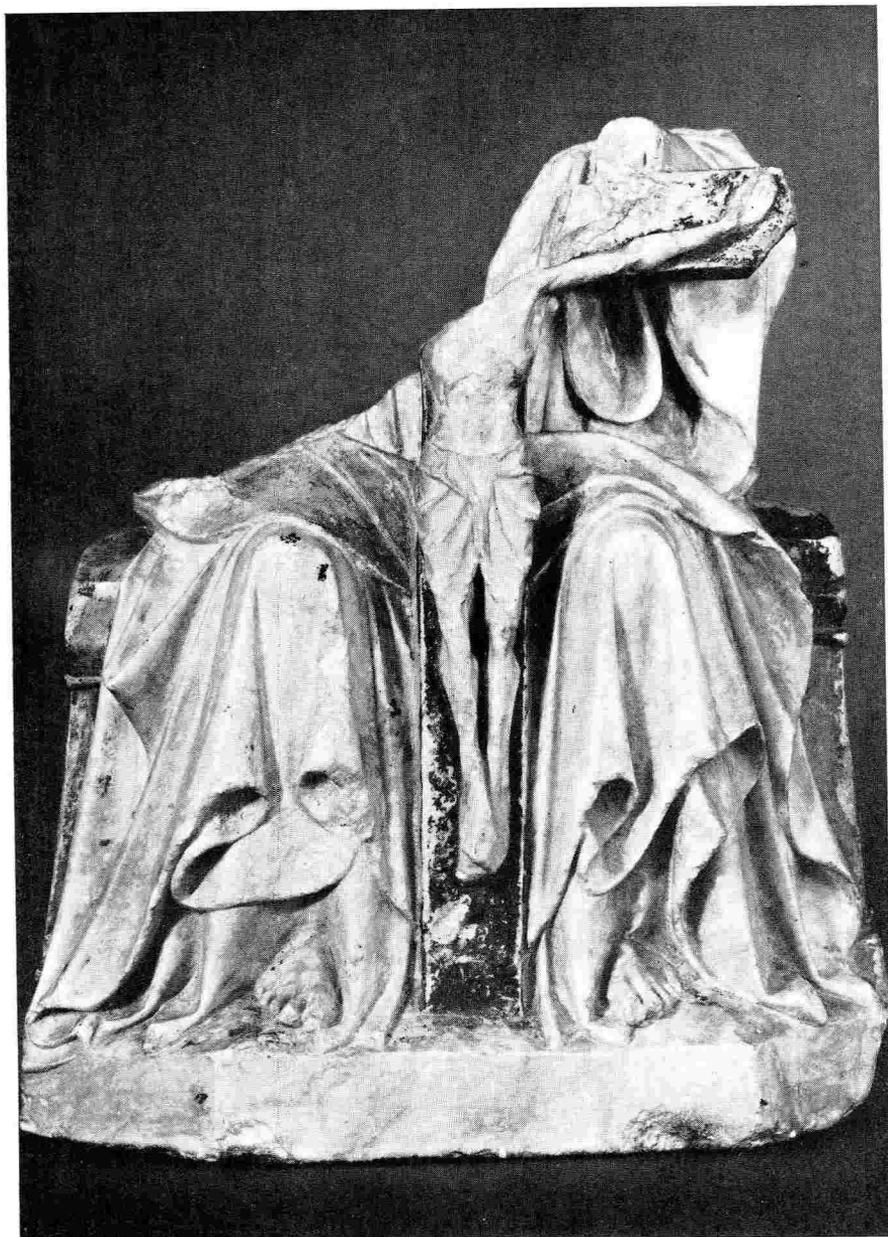
I am indebted to Mr. David Sherlock of Orford for bringing this fragment to my notice.

* Alabasters found in similar circumstances at Burg Apton (*New Arch.* 35 (1970)1; Shaftsbury (S. Museum); Newport, I. o. W. (Canisbrook Castle Museum).

⁷ 'English alabaster tables of about the third quarter of the fourteenth century', W. L. Hildburgh, *The Art Bulletin*, March 1950. The Annunciation is shown in figure 29, and the Coronation in figure 27.

⁸ Height, 13½ inches. Width, 7 inches. The back has the remains of an attachment loop, which is 4½ inches from the straight edge at the top of the panel, and 2½ inches from the straight edge on the right.

PLATE XXXVI



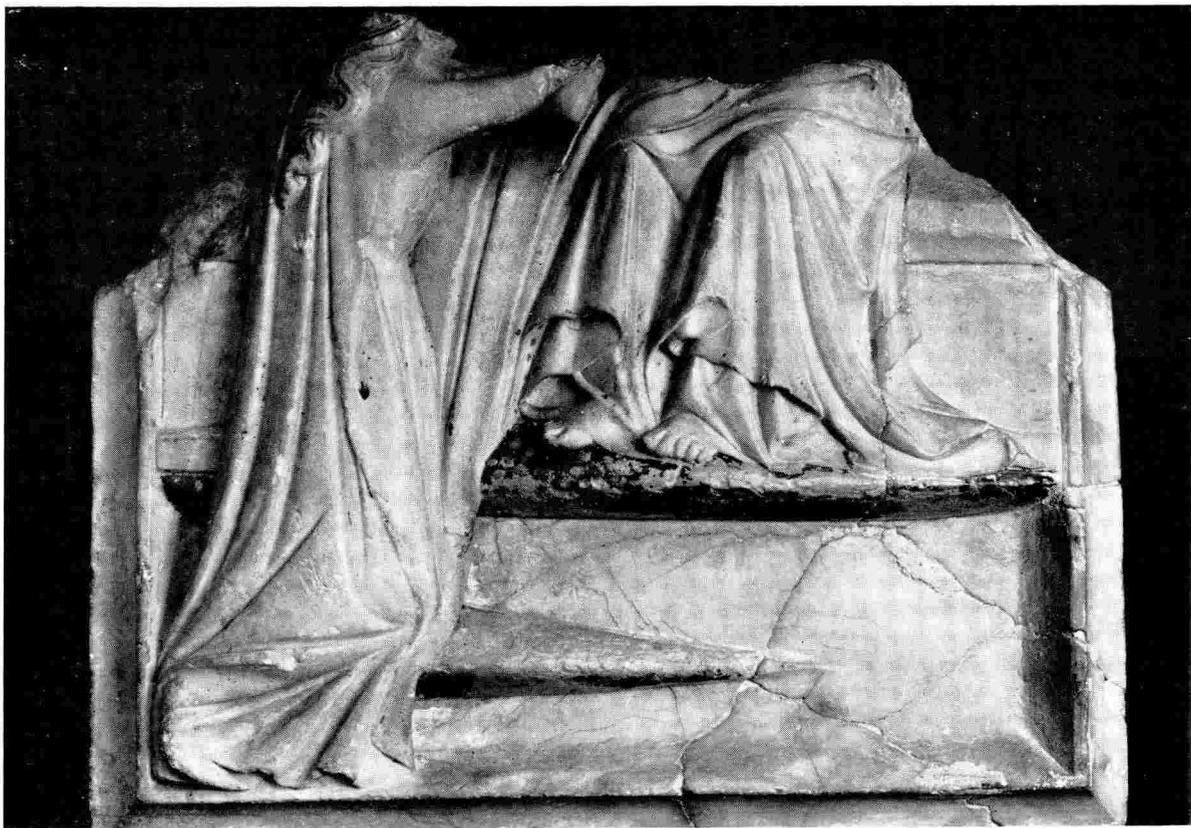
By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Kettlebaston, God the Father with the Crucifixion.



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

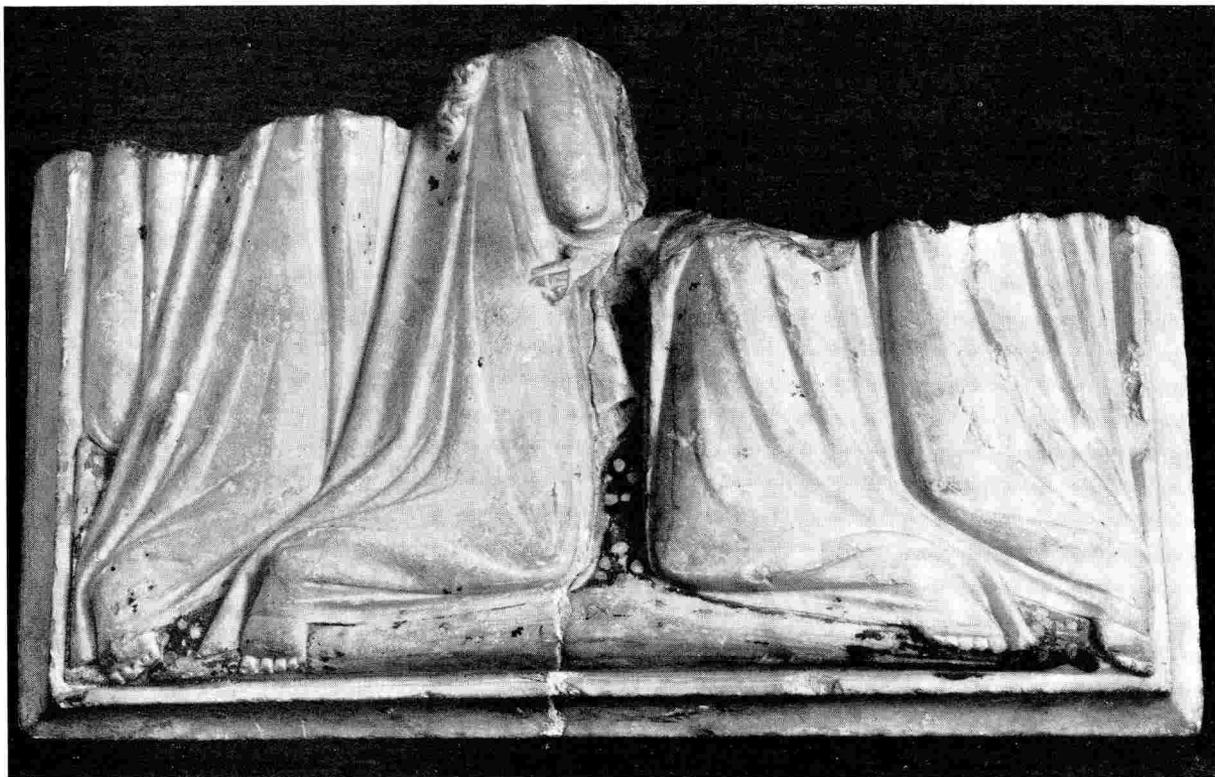
Kettlebaston, The Annunciation.



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Kettlebaston, The Coronation of the Virgin.

PLATE XXXIX



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Kettlebaston, The Ascension,

PLATE XL



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Orford, Fragment of an alabaster panel.