

The Holy Shroud and the Head of John the Baptist in Nottingham Alabasters.

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Earlier this year I was blessed that Michael and Lynne Kowalski told me that they had contacted Halifax Minster and found an openness to host the Shroud exhibition. Michael and Lynne continued to work really hard to organise the exhibition and its publicity, including a beautiful month-long display about the Shroud in Halifax library. ¹ The life-sized Shrouds were in the Minster for over four weeks and Michael's talk on the Shroud was very well supported and warmly received.



Halifax is deeply associated with John the Baptist. The coat of arms shows Christ as the Lamb of God on top of a medieval helmet, and in the shield below, the head of John the Baptist on a circular dish is surrounded by lions. ²

The exhibition in Halifax caused me to revisit some ideas from years ago about the Face of John the Baptist (or is it Jesus?) in the ancient English art called Nottingham Alabasters. The example overleaf shows Christ wrapped in his Shroud at his entombment (Metropolitan





Museum of Art, New York) ³. Alabaster is a soft stone made of gypsum or calcite which is easy to carve. Many medieval cathedrals and churches have alabaster tombs. The production of this specific form of religious art between the 14th to 16th centuries took place across England, for example in York and London, but Nottingham produced the largest quantities. In the 12th century Nottingham castle was home to the infamous Sheriff of Nottingham who taxed the poor on behalf of Prince John. It was at the castle that the legendary Robin Hood fought for the right of the peasants. Prince John was regent until his brother King Richard I died on his return from the 3rd Crusade in 1199. And John was king when Constantinople was sacked by Crusaders in 1204. Some of the Crusaders were English. Historians Ian Wilson and Juliet Faith have argued strongly for a knowledge of the Shroud of Turin in England.

The magnificent Nailloux Altarpiece ⁴, made in the Midlands in the second half of the 15th century, after the display of the Shroud at Lirey, is an example of the thematic thread of multiple panels. The first shows Jesus' arrest, in the second he is bound with rope as he is whipped and the third panel is the crucifixion. The burial panel depicts Jesus wrapped in his Shroud. Finally there is the resurrection with Jesus stepping out of the tomb.



The head of John the Baptist on a platter was a very popular subject matter for the alabaster workers. Evidence of its prevalence occurred in October 1491 when an imagemaker named Nicholas Hill brought an action against his salesman William Bott for the money owing on no less than *fifty-eight heads of John the Baptist part of them in tabernacles and in niches.* ⁵ An example of a tabernacle is the Altarpiece with the Head of St John the Baptist ⁶ (15th century) currently in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow, Scotland.



In this tabernacle at the centre is the head of St John and around him are ‘St James the Greater, St Catherine of Alexandria on the left, and on the right, St Anthony of Egypt (decapitated) and St Margaret of Antioch. The remaining saints standing in the forefront are St Peter (on the left) and an unidentified sainted archbishop, possibly St Thomas of Canterbury ... Above is the soul of St John the Baptist being taken into heavenly glory by two angels.’⁷

There are a few small question marks regarding this beautiful sculpture. Why does St John have a wound to his forehead? His beard is divided, which is very common in these sculptures, but why is that specific style adopted? Below the head of St. John is *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, rising from the tomb. This is intriguing. Why would the two themes be inter-connected? And why is the Christ figure so much smaller than St. John? John famously said of Jesus: “He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”⁸ John 1:27



There is another set of alabaster panels which raise significant questions. Years ago my husband Phil (currently the treasurer of the BSTS) and I visited St Michael's Mount in Cornwall. St. Michael's Mount, like Mont Saint-Michel in northern France, is an ancient and fascinating place. I was really intrigued by an extraordinary triptych of alabaster panels behind the altar in the chapel and photographed them. Believed to have been made in Nottingham in the 15th Century, they contain a fascinating selection of concepts which possibly point to an alternative meaning. It is impossible to know if the panels were originally meant to be displayed in this order, but the first panel shows the Mass of St. Gregory (Fig. 1), the third deals with Jesus' trial before Pilate (Fig. 3), and, between the two, there is the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Fig. 2). What connects the three concepts?

The first panel shows a priest celebrating the Mass of St Gregory at the altar (Fig. 1). His arms are missing, but it is likely he was elevating the Host. Behind him the altar server is lifting his chasuble which occurs in the Latin Mass at that sacred moment. An explanation why this is the Mass of St Gregory is given in the guidebook entitled *A Personal Tour of St. Michael's Mount*, by James St. Aubyn. He is the twelfth generation of the St. Aubyn family at the Mount. He writes: 'the image ... 'represents the Mass of St Gregory, a medieval allegory which relates that St. Gregory had come to doubt that communion bread really changed into the body of Jesus until his faith was restored by a vision of the crucified Jesus.'⁹



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

In the 15th century there were numerous depictions of the Mass of St. Gregory which are significant for Shroud studies. The extraordinary engraving overleaf by Israhel van Meckenem in the 1490s shows the priests and servers kneeling at the altar during the Mass.¹⁰ Jesus is depicted in two ways: first as the Man of Sorrows with his arms crossed and second as the Image of Edessa or the Holy Mandylion, which is being held up above the altar. (Figs. 4 & 5).



Main image Figure 4.

The Image of Edessa was in Constantinople from 944 AD. The raising of the Shroud of Jesus on a Friday night at St Mary Blachernai, witnessed by Crusaders probably occurred after 1036. In this engraving, Christ as the Man of Sorrows and Christ depicted in the Image of Edessa have become associated with the Mass of St Gregory (*Figs. 4 & 5*).



Inset Figure. 5.

There are onlookers and soldiers who are dressed in the clothes of medieval England. The question is: what associates the trial of Jesus before Pilate with John the Baptist? Why is this story one of the three panels?

The third panel of the triptych tells the story of Jesus appearing before Pilate with his hands bound together with rope (*Fig. 3*). Jesus has a specific beard which involves rolled hair divided in the middle. His hair is long and on his forehead there could be a lock of hair. Pilate, who is seated, is washing his hands in a circular dish, held by a child.

The magnificent second panel apparently shows the head of John the Baptist on the platter, being received into heaven (*Fig. 2*). Above him are the three Persons of the Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their heads are significantly smaller than St. John's head. This seems unusual. Similarly, under the image is a depiction of the Virgin Mary, holding the Christ Child, who has the world in his hands. The figures around the edge are 'St. Peter with book and key, St Christopher, carrying the Lord across the water, St. James the Great with a pilgrim's hat and an Archbishop, possibly Thomas Becket.'¹¹

The face of John the Baptist has closed eyes, a long nose, and the same rolled, divided beard as Jesus in the third panel. Could this actually be a hidden reference to Jesus and his Shroud rather than just John the Baptist? In which case, this might be a veiled image

of the Host, elevated at the Mass of St Gregory, superimposed with the Face of the Man of the Shroud? In the context of the other two panels, the trial of Jesus (*Fig. 3*) and the Mass of St Gregory (*Fig. 1*), that may be a possibility.

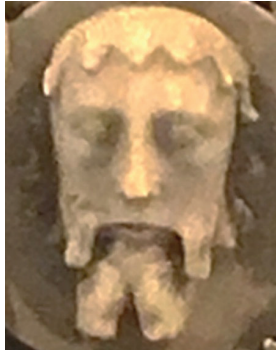


The association of the blood of Christ and the Mass is a frequent motif in alabasters. In this beautiful alabaster at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London the blood flow from Jesus' wounds is being collected into chalices by angels.¹²



There is a modern-day miracle which also reflects the combination of the Holy Face of Christ and the Host. On May 5th 2001, in Trivandrum, India, blood appeared on the Host, and took on the form of a Christ-like face.¹³





The alabaster artwork of the later Middle Ages in England produced some beautiful work which is honouring to the Christian story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. St. John the Baptist, the saint on the coat of arms of Halifax, is a frequently used thread. Whether there were other meanings hidden within the depictions of St. John which relate to the Shroud of Turin and the Mass of St Gregory is possibly open to further study. There certainly appears to be similarities between the image of the face of St. John the Baptist and the face of the Man of the Shroud.¹⁴

References

- ¹ Michael and Lynne Kowalski: Photograph of Shroud display in Halifax Library
- ² Halifax coat of arms photograph: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>
- ³ The Entombment of Christ; Available online: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470900>
- ⁴ Nailloux Altarpiece Image by Widlauragais - CC BY-SA 4.0 Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nailloux_Altarpiecehttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nailloux_Altarpiece#
- ⁵ Francis Cheetham; *Unearthed: Nottingham's Medieval Alabasters*; Nottingham City Museums and Galleries; page 8
- ⁶ John the Baptist alabaster; Burrell Collection, Glasgow. Image Lawrence OP; Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/paullew/7885976118>
- ⁷ *ibid*
- ⁸ Bible quotes New International Version
- ⁹ James St Aubyn, *A Personal Tour of St Michael's Mount*; Revised 2013; page 24
- ¹⁰ Mass of St. Gregory Israhel van Meckenem; Information available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_of_Saint_Gregory
- ¹¹ James St Aubyn, *A Personal Tour of St Michael's Mount*; Revised 2013; page 22
- ¹² *Trinity with the Virgin and relief*: V and A Museum collection; Available online: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93915/trinity-with-the-virgin-and-relief-unknown/>
- ¹³ Eucharistic Miracle, Trivandrum, Indi, Information Available Online: http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharst/mir/english_pdf/Chirattakonam.pdf
- ¹⁴ Shroud images ©1978 Barrie M. Schwartz Collection, STERA, Inc. <http://www.shroud.com/>