



THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES OF NORWICH:
CITY, COMMUNITY AND ARCHITECTURE

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Alabaster fragments from St Martin at Oak

DURING REPAIR WORK at St Martin's following the Second World War, fragments of two alabaster panels were discovered concealed in the blocked holy water stoop in the corner of the south porch (Hildburgh 1955, 110). One shows the lower part of a Beheading of St John the Baptist and the other consists of parts of the lower right-hand corner of a Resurrection, with sleeping soldiers and Christ's tomb. The damage they had sustained is typical of the destruction wrought during periods of iconoclasm following the Reformation and during the mid-17th-century Civil War and Interregnum.

THE BAPTIST PANEL had been smashed; what survives is reconstructed from four small pieces that have been fixed back together (below). They show, on the left, the wall of the prison with John kneeling at its entrance. A small part of his right leg and the camel hair coat he is said to have worn (Matthew 3.4) are evident - the camel's head and hoof are still attached. To either side of the centre is a pointed shoe indicating the feet of his executioner, and further to the right the lower part of Salome's dress; she waits to collect the Baptist's head and take it to her mother, Herodias. Similar compositions are found elsewhere (Cheetham 1984, 118).



THERE ARE NO SIGNS of hammer blows or chisel marks so it is probable that the breakages resulted from its being thrown to the floor. Significantly there are no human heads among the surviving pieces. These may have been even more badly damaged, or more likely were removed from the church by the iconoclasts, perhaps to be burned. Nonetheless, what was left behind was sufficiently valued for the bits to be collected together and, apparently, deliberately concealed. These patterns of behaviour are widespread and well attested among discoveries of religious sculpture across the region and the country at large.

THE FRAGMENT of the Resurrection panel (below) indicates similar treatment. The figure of Christ rising from his tomb is almost entirely missing; the edge and a few folds of his cloak and the lower end of his staff are the only other remnants. To the right is another soldier, and behind him part of a third. Unusually these guards are not wearing armour other than helmets.



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BOTH THESE SUBJECTS are well attested in alabaster, but they are likely to come from different contexts. Resurrection panels are generally part of altarpieces, usually of five panels focusing on the Passion of Christ. The Baptist panel could have been part of another five-panel altarpiece; two complete examples are known (Cheetham 2003, 162-3). However, as at least seven individual panels survive showing this subject, more than for any other episode in his life (Cheetham 2003, 49-50), it was perhaps an independent and self-contained image housed in a small tabernacle. There is antiquarian evidence for an image St John the Baptist in the church with a light burning before it (Blomefield and Parkin 1805-10 (4), 485).

The design difference between the two are clear, the Baptist panel has a canted base, chamfered at either side, whereas the Resurrection has a flat-fronted base and a bevelled frame on the right edge. The style of painting is also different. The former has the dark green 'grass' dotted with a 'daisy' pattern (six white circles around a red circle) which is standard on the vast majority of alabasters where pigment survives, while the Resurrection has a very unusual red ground (to show rocks?), and blades of grass painted up against the base of the tomb. These differences along with other characteristics such as the depth of relief suggest that the Resurrection panel is several decades earlier than the Beheading of the Baptist. Some of the costume details of the soldiers, such as the long hanging sleeve with its elaborated indented cuff, indicate a date quite early in the fifteenth century. It is thus conceivable that it was made for the high altar in the new chancel at St Martin's which was rebuilt in the 1430s, though Hildburgh implies an even earlier date (Hildburgh 1955, 108).

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