

A Medieval Alabaster Figure

Black Abbey, Kilkenny

By Helen M. Roe

IN the Dominican Priory of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in Kilkenny is a medieval alabaster group representing the Trinity. It is a substantial piece¹ carved from a single block of stone and, except for some minor damage, is remarkably well-preserved.

This statuette offers an excellent example of the depiction of the Trinity in the formal composition commonly called the **Throne of Grace**. Known from at least the 12th century, the formula continued for several centuries to appear in a variety of materials — painting and embroideries; engraved brasses; carved in stone, wood and, as here, alabaster. Despite the extent of time, however, individual instances differ in only minor details and their exact dating remains therefore somewhat conjectural.

During the Middle Ages alabaster was extensively quarried at several sites in the English Midlands and, worked up as figures in the round or in the form of small-scale oblong figured panels or “tables,” may be described as the characteristic material of the majority of English religious carvings of the 14th and 15th centuries. Here again the stereotyped nature of the formulas renders the recognition of specific pieces as works of particular craftshops, such as those of Nottingham, York or London, almost impossible, so that the source from which this Kilkenny group emanated cannot be certainly identified. In this connection, however, the indications for the existence of a gild or school of “alabaster Ymagers” centred round Bristol are to be noted² for, when the well-attested trading communications between that city and S-E Ireland are recalled, it would seem reasonable to regard the Kilkenny alabaster as a product of some such Western workshop. Further if this were the case it could well be that the sculpture reached its destination in the Black Abbey through the port of Waterford between which and Bristol such close links were long maintained.

In the formula used in this rendering of the Trinity (Pl.) **God the Father** appears seated and wearing a low crown or diadem of simple fleurons, now in part broken away. His formally waved hair hangs to His shoulders and His thick beard is divided into two short ringlets. He is clad in an ample mantle over a long full robe beneath the hem of which His bare feet are seen. His arms are bent at the elbows and both

hands held upwards, the right in the gesture of benediction, the left in that conventionally used to call forth the attention and admiration of the beholder.

Rising between the Father's knees is a tall cross on which **God the Son** hangs. Depicted aged and worn, His Head, with eyes closed in death, is inclined to His right shoulder, His hands are sharply angled upwards and His feet, crossed right over left, are pierced by a single nail. His body is naked except for a folded loincloth while a shallow notch cut into the stone just below the left breast indicates the wound in His side.



Photo]

ALABASTER TRINITY

[Lawrence

By courtesy National Library of Ireland

To complete the group **God the Holy Spirit** in the form of the Dove descends on outspread wings from below the Father's chin to alight upon the Son's cross thus giving expression, as it were, to the mystery of the essential unity of the Three Persons in One.

In itself this work illustrates one of the great advantages of alabaster as a representational medium in that when newly quarried, the comparative softness of the stone enables details of great delicacy to be directly achieved. Witness here the sensitive treatment of the Father's hands, the shadowing of His eye orbits and, above all, the flow and substance of the draping of His robe and mantle.

For a second valuable quality of alabaster, however, that is the ease with which the stone could be coloured, the Kilkenny piece now affords no evidence. That no trace of painting can be discerned is, however, scarcely surprising considering the circumstances of its survival. Apart from such recurrent cleansing from the smirch of candle-smoke as it may have undergone in medieval times, must be reckoned the long concealment in the rather damp and close conditions of the walled-up recess in which it is said to have been hidden for centuries following the dissolution of the priory and finally the general cleaning of the piece when, in recent times, it was once more brought to light and set on display. Be that as it may, it need not be doubted that this Trinity group was originally painted in the clear reds, blues and yellows, known from other examples of the subject, and that like them, the plastic effects of the drapery were enriched and enhanced by applied diaper or other pattern, the hair and eyes appropriately tinted, while in shocking contrast to the pure cream of the untreated stone, the scarlet gouts of blood appeared to stream from the sacred wounds of Christ.

The dating of the piece must now be considered. A striking feature of the work is the cutting all across the base of the crucifix of the numbers 1 2 6 4 in incised Arabic numerals. Locally the carving of these figures has been accepted as original and thus as establishing a mid-13th century date for the making of the work. In view, however, of the accepted chronological range of English alabasters such a conclusion seems untenable. According to this the earliest production of effigial figures and the larger style free-standing statuettes, such as this Trinity, is said to fall mainly within the 14th century and to continue into the earlier part of the 15th after which time the large image tends to be replaced by the smaller figured table. Indeed the first references to actual Trinity figures seem to occur in the middle years of that period when the gift to the Cathedral of Durham of such an image together with its ornamental housing was made between 1341 and 1347, while in 1382 a royal licence for the export to Rome of a similar group is recorded.³ A further argument against the acceptance of a 13th century date for the alabaster derives from the actual figures, as the use of Arabic numerals rather than Roman is scarcely attested prior to the late 1300's and becomes fairly widespread only from about the middle of the following century. Moreover

both placing and style of these figures strongly suggest work of relatively recent times, even perhaps to be referred to the early years of the 19th century when it is said⁴ the piece was "discovered" bricked up in the church wall. For these reasons therefore, it seems that, in conformity with other surviving Trinity alabasters, this Kilkenny work should be regarded as one produced about the turn of the 14th-15th centuries or, at latest, within the first half of the 15th.

The question of the original placing of this fine sculpture remains to be examined. When the statuette is considered as a whole it is at once clear that it was designed to be viewed from the front and not in the round. This is shown by the fact that the stone is deeply hollowed away at the back; that the wrists and forearms behind God's upraised hands are not shaped but remain as small solid "bridges" between hands and body; that a ring attachment, embedded in the back of the piece must be presumed to have served to hold and steady it within some form of housing. Furthermore the vertical presentation of the figures without inclination for perspective viewing goes to show that the group was planned to stand at eye level or but little higher.

With these facts in mind it becomes difficult to accept the locally-held opinion that from the first the statuette had stood in the wall niche where, hidden in post-Reformation times, it had so happily escaped destruction, if not at the hands of that notorious and rabid iconoclast, Bishop John Bale, then almost certainly during the long years of secular occupation of the religious house. The recess itself is at a considerable height above floor-level and as no window gives on to it, is almost completely dark so that, apart from the difficulties of its adequate lighting, the setting of the piece at this height would largely have nullified both the visibility and intended effect of the composition.

Instead, and once again in line with medieval usage, we may picture this impressive image of the Trinity, housed in its decorative tabernacle and, brilliant with colour and gilding, set above an altar in this Dominican house of its especial dedication.

1—Dimensions: Total height 87 cm (34 ins.); width of head at diadem 18 cm (7 ins.); width at shoulders 33 cm (13 ins.); width at throne 43 cm (17 ins.). Thickness of stone ca. 15 cm (6 ins.).

2—See E. S. Prior in *Catalogue . . . English Medieval Alabaster Work*, 46.

3—For the gift by the Prior of Durham of an image of the Holy Trinity and one of the B.V.M. with their tabernacles and ornaments, worth in all £22 see *Historiae Dunelmensis Scriptorum Tres* (Surtees Society 9) 131. For Richard's writ for export of alabaster images see Gardiner, A., *English Medieval Sculpture*, 300.

4—Writing ca. 1900 Rev. Ambrose Coleman O.P. says alabaster had been found 70 or 80 years before. *Ancient Dominican Foundations in Ireland*, 27.