

A DOOM REREDOS

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THERE are preserved in the British Museum, in the Museum at Rouen, and in private possession, five alabaster panels of the earlier half of the fifteenth century, which evidently formed parts of a set, and have been identified by Dr. Montagu R. James, F.S.A., as depicting signs preceding the Last Judgement. It is to the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine that we turn in order to understand the scenes represented :

Now we have that S. Jerome showeth to us in the early histories of the Hebrews, fifteen signs and tokens, the which shall come before the Judgement, but he declareth not if they shall show continually, or if there shall be a space between them. The first sign is that the sea shall arise fifty cubits above the height of the mountains in being in his place as a wall. The second day the sea shall descend so low that unnethe it shall be seen. The third sign, the great fishes, as whales and others, shall appear above the water and shall cry unto the heaven, and God only shall understand their cry. The fourth sign shall be that the sea and water shall burn. The fifth sign that the trees and herbs shall give dew of blood ; and in the fifth day, divers clerks affirm that all the birds of the air shall assemble in a field, every kind by themselves, and shall not eat nor drink, but shall abide the coming of the Judge in great fear. The sixth sign, the edifices and buildings shall

fall down: and in this sixth day thunders and tempests full of fire shall grow in the west, where the sun goeth down against the firmament, in running to the east. The seventh sign, the stones shall smite and hurtle together and shall cleave in four parts, and each part shall smite other, ne none shall understand ne hear the sound, but God only. The eighth sign shall be the moving and general trembling of the earth, which shall be so great as it is said that no man ne beast shall not mow stand thereon, but fall to the ground. The ninth sign, all the earth shall be even and plain, and all the mountains and valleys shall be brought into powder and be all like. The tenth day, the men shall issue out of the caves and shall go by the ways and fields as men aliened and out of their wit, and shall not con speak one to another. The eleventh day the bones of dead men shall issue out of their burials and places and shall hold them upon their sepulchres, and from the sun rising unto it go down, the sepulchres shall be open, to the end that the dead bodies may all issue. The twelfth sign, all the stars shall fall from heaven and shall spread out rays of fire, and then great quantity shall grow. In this twelfth day it is said that all the beasts shall come to the field howling, and shall not eat ne drink. The thirteenth sign, all living shall die, to the end that they should arise with the dead bodies. The fourteenth day the heaven and the earth shall burn. The fifteenth day shall be a new heaven and a new earth and all things, and all dead men shall arise.¹

From this extract it will be seen that the five panels illustrated herewith represent respectively the signs of the fifth, sixth, tenth, thirteenth, and fifteenth days, and it is also clear that several of the fifteen signs would not lend themselves readily to portrayal in sculpture, though we might have expected that the third and twelfth signs, viz. those referring to fish and beasts, would have been depicted, and it is quite possible that these panels may yet be found. From the style of the hairdressing of the men and from the horned head-dresses of the women, these carvings must have been executed *circa* 1430, while the long girdled tunics, with their

¹ *The Golden Legend*, by William Caxton (ed. Dent, 1900, i. 14, 15).

PLATE I

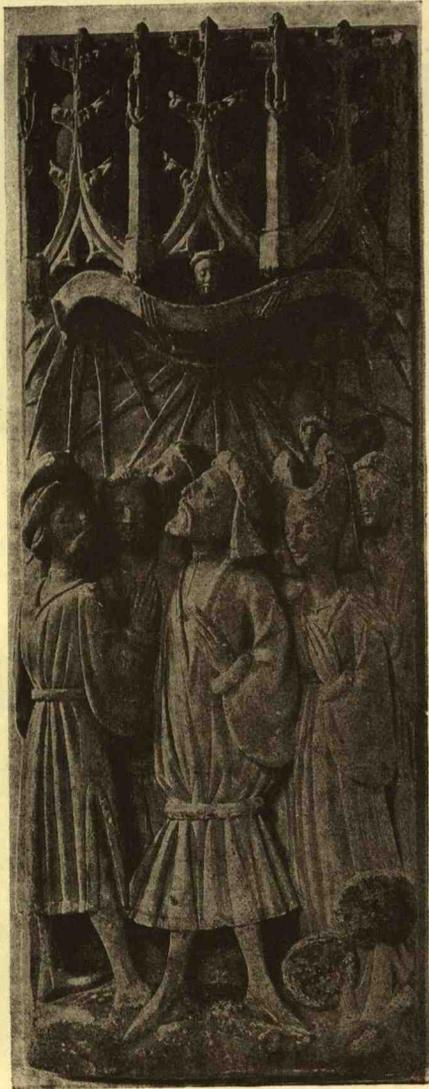


1. THE FIFTH SIGN



2. THE SIXTH SIGN

PLATE II



THE TENTH SIGN

PLATE III



1. THE THIRTEENTH SIGN



2. THE FIFTEENTH SIGN

baggy sleeves edged with fur, and the turban-like chaperons of the men, point to the same date.

The various panels constituting the reredos may be described as follows :

I. *The Fifth Sign.*—Between two trees having flat circular foliage stand three men ; perched on the trees are a dove, a cormorant, a hawk, a cuckoo, a heron, an eagle, a raven and a pelican, whilst from an aperture in the bole of the tree in front an owl is peering out, and it is interesting to note that all these birds are named in the Scriptures. At the upper part is an angel, who holds a scroll. This panel is 15 in. high and is in my collection. Plate I. No. 1.

II. *The Sixth Sign.*—Four men are falling to the ground, their bodies licked by tongues of flame. In the background are two houses, apparently falling, above one of which is an angel holding a scroll. This panel is in the British Museum, and measures 15 in. in height. Plate I. No. 2.

III. *The Tenth Sign.*—Beneath a fine triple-gabled canopy is an angel, holding in both hands a narrow scroll from behind which emerge rays of light. Below are seven figures, of whom two are women having horned head-dresses, and in the right-hand lower corner is a small tree. This panel, which measures $23\frac{1}{2}$ in. in height, is in the British Museum. Plate II.

IV. *The Thirteenth Sign.*—Nine men, of whom already five are dead, while the remainder have their hands raised in supplication, are shown in front of a tree, behind the foliage of which were two angels. This panel, in the British Museum, measures 14 in. in height. Plate III. No. 1.

V. *The Fifteenth Sign.*—Seven figures are seen in this subject ; two are still in their shrouds, and two are emerging from moulded tombs, whilst of the others, one, a bishop, wears his mitre. This panel is in the Rouen Museum ; it measures 15 in. in height. Plate III. No. 2.

In each case the backgrounds are gilt, with gesso knobs, the foregrounds are green with red and white flowers and sprays of leafwork, while the scrolls held by the angels formerly bore inscriptions. The central taller panel alone retains its canopy, which

is carved on the same slab of alabaster; the canopies of the remaining subjects, being separately carved, have unfortunately been lost.

The panels of the signs of the Last Judgement are about 9 inches wide, and they would no doubt be set up to form a reredos within a wooden frame, having stiles between each panel and at each end, about 3 inches in width.

We learn that in 1534 St. Mary's Gild, Boston, had in St. Mary's House "a table of Alabaster with the storry of the dome conteynynge in length ij yardes di,"¹ and from this it would appear that the said table was about 90 inches in width. Now if each panel were 9 inches in width and each stile 3 inches, this would admit of a series of seven panels and would extend to about 87 inches. In place, however, of including the signs of the third and twelfth days, panels representing the Blest entering Paradise and the Lost entering Hell might have been placed, one at either end, and such an arrangement is quite a probable one, since these two incidents occur as tracery lights in the Pricke of Conscience window, in All Saints' Church, York, and small alabaster panels of the same exist in the National collection.²

In the Church of St. Mary the Great, Cambridge, there was up to 1550 an "altar of Doomsday," which was destroyed in that year,³ and doubtless, if it were enriched with a reredos, it would be of the type of that which forms the subject of this paper.

In addition to the panel of the fifteenth sign in the Rouen Museum, another example, somewhat differently treated, exists in the Cluny Museum. In this we see eight figures rising from their tombs,

¹ Peacock, *English Church Furniture*, p. 208. My attention was kindly directed to this passage by Sir W. St. John Hope, D.C.L.

² *Transactions, Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, vol. lxi. p. 86, Pl. IV. Nos. 2 and 3.

³ *Archæological Journal*, vol. xii. p. 340.

including a pope, cardinal, and king, and in the background are two full-length figures of angels, between whom is a tree with characteristic foliage.¹

It would be of interest, in view of the exceptional nature of the subjects represented, if we could identify the atelier from whence these panels emanated. Prof. E. S. Prior, A.R.A., has suggested that we must look to the York alabasterers for the carving of this series, and this attribution appears quite possible, since (as he points out) the signs of the Last Judgement appear in the Pricke of Conscience window in All Saints' Church, York, while tiny beasts hiding in burrows occur on the St. George coffers, preserved in York Minster and in the Victoria and Albert Museum, though these date from a few years earlier.

Two remarkable features occur in this series, viz. the peculiar flat, stalked, circular foliage, and also the long scrolls, once inscribed. Both these features appear on a set of panels at St. Mary's, Shrewsbury, which depict St. John Baptist preaching and the baptism of our Lord, with a taller central table representing a monk kneeling, beneath the Trinity and the Holy Mother and Child, holding two intertwined invocatory scrolls.

In conclusion I must thank the Society of Antiquaries for permission to use Fig. 1, Plate I., Plate II., and Fig. 1, Plate III.; Mr. Arthur Gardner, M.A., for Fig. 2, Plate I.; and the Director of the Rouen Museum, M. de Vesly, for Fig. 2, Plate III.

¹ *The Archaeological Journal*, vol. lxxvii. p. 71, Pl. VI. No. 2.