

**Three figures seeking alms, or, *the healing of a lame man*,
from the tomb of Saint Elzéar de Sabran
in the church of the Franciscan Brothers Minor at Apt
carved in Apt or its environs by a French sculptor and installed by 1373**



42.5 x 25 x 12 cm; alabaster. The surface of the stone has been eroded by water damage, and the right-hand section of the relief, possibly showing the figure of Saint Elzéar interceding on behalf of the three men, is missing (see discussion below). Some traces of what appears to be a painted surface survive under the armpit of the figure on crutches.

Provenance

Carved for the tomb of Saint Elzéar and installed in 1373;
Recorded in situ by visitors to the church in 1624, 1654 and 1690;
Sold along with the church and its other contents to Jean-Baptiste Sollier, 13th July 1791;
Dismantled and dispersed shortly thereafter;
Sotheby's London, 17 March 1961, lot 16;
Collection of R. Lee, England;
with Jan Dirven, Antwerp;
Collection of Ferd Grapperhaus (1927-2010), Amsterdam

Published

Country Life, 27th April 1961, p. 943

This deeply sculpted relief measures a little over 40cm in height and is carved from a single block of pale alabaster. It depicts what appear to be three beggars standing in a tight-knit group and directing their attention to a now lost figure or figures engaging with them from our right. The nearest of the three is clearly lame; his twisted leg swells from the effects of a suppurating wound on his shin, and he supports himself on long crutches whose faceted surfaces suggest roughly hewn wood. His dishevelled status is affirmed by the tear in his garments at the level of the thigh, a shorthand motif for poverty used across a large spectrum of late-Medieval works of art. A second, taller figure at far-left is shown crossing his hands over his chest as if in supplication. He appears to be an old man, his advanced age suggested by a receding hairline and a long, bifurcated beard. At the far right, the tallest of the three figures is shown with wildly curling hair and a clean-shaven face. He raises his left arm to show us an alms pot strapped to his forearm. All three men are barefooted, undoubtedly intended to emphasise the depth of their poverty. Since the crippled individual at the front is both shorter than the other two men and comparatively younger-looking, it is also possible that they are intended to show three generations of man, perhaps from a single family, but more likely as a general suggestion of the arc of human life.

Having languished unrecognised and unpublished for much of its modern history, this remarkable figural relief has only recently re-emerged onto the market from private hands. Far from being an anonymous, unidentifiable relic of Medieval sculpture, it is in fact a large section of a long-lost relief carved for the tomb monument erected in 1373 to Saint Elzéar de Sabran at the Franciscan church of Apt in the Vaucluse region of Southern France until its dismantlement and dispersion during the French Revolution.

Born in the castle of Saint-Jean-de-Robians in Provence in 1285, Saint Elzéar was educated by his uncle Guillaume de Sabran, the Abbot of Saint Victor in Marseille and enrolled as a tertiary of the Franciscan Order. He rose to prominence following the death of his father in 1309, when he was given control of his domains in Italy and became a diplomat and military leader. In 1312 he marched to Rome at the head of the army of King Robert of Naples, mobilised to aid the expulsion of the Emperor Henry VII. Returning to Provence shortly after, he apparently established a strict household in which piety and faithful practice of the Catholic faith were the rule. In 1317 Elzéar went to Naples to become the tutor of Duke Charles, son of King Robert, and later became Charles' castellan, when Charles became Vicar General of the Kingdom of Sicily. He was sent as ambassador to the King of France in 1323 to obtain the hand of Marie of Valois in marriage for Charles, edifying a worldly court by his heroic virtues. He apparently died while serving in that post, and his body was returned to his domain and buried in a Franciscan habit in the church of the Friars Minor at Apt. The decree of his canonization was signed by his godson, Pope Urban V, and was carried out by Urban's successor, Pope Gregory XI in 1371. Elzéar's wife Countess Delfine was also beatified by Pope Urban around the same time. Their liturgical feast day, which they share, is celebrated by the Franciscan Third Order on the 26th of September.

Although no longer in existence, we know that a unique and extraordinary alabaster monument was erected to Saint Elzéar by 1373, only two years after his canonization, since on the 17th and 18th of June in that year cardinal Anglic Grimoard (brother of Urban V) is documented as having exhumed Elzéar's relics and placed them in its interior. According to an eye-witness account written in 1690, it consisted of a tall pyramid set behind or above the high altar of the church, rising from a base decorated with scenes from the saint's life and terminating just under the church's vaulted ceiling; clearly, this was a structure of massive proportions. A small handful

of earlier eye-witness accounts help to corroborate and expand upon these tantalising details. In 1654, a church father called Borély described the same “curious pyramid” dominating the monument’s appearance, its base decorated with eight miracles from the count’s life. Thankfully, a third record, taken in 1624 by a visiting bishop from Vaison called Suarès, explicitly describes each of the eight reliefs that decorated the pyramid’s base, and identifies their respective miracles. Tragically, the church was sold to a local landowner in 1791 and subsequently broken up and dispersed following the first wave of the French Revolution. Some of its fragments found their way into nearby private collections, before being donated to local museums over the course of the nineteenth century, while others were scattered further afield. All of those known to have survived (excluding of course the present relief which was unknown to scholarship at the time) were reunited in a 1978 article by the French art historian Francoise Baron, who used the three eye-witness accounts described above to help flesh out our understanding of the monument’s details. Today, the seven fragments Baron listed as having come down to us are split between the musée du Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Cathedrale Saint Anne in Apt, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and the musée du Petit Palais, Avignon. Following Suarès’ 1624 account, their iconography can be read as follows:

Elzéar visiting the Lepers, now at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, recounts the story of Elzéar’s sojourn in Naples, during which he visited a leper colony and embraced the afflicted.

Two reliefs preserved in the Cathedrale Saint Anne in Apt (Vaucluse) both depict miracles; the *Resurrection of Bertrand Flotte* and the *Resurrection of an infant drowned in the Rhone*.

Following his victory on the battlefield in Italy, Elzéar was saying the *Miserere* when Christ appeared to him to warn him from succumbing to vainglory. The larger of two reliefs preserved in the musée du Petit Palais in Avignon depicts Christ flagellating the saint in the presence of his guard Isnard.

The *Resurrection of a girl at Isle-de-Sorgue* (now in the musée du Louvre) recounts a miracle which is said to have taken place during the passage of Elzéar’s funeral cortege through Provence. When a local girl was found drowned and caught in the wheel of a watermill, she was resuscitated by being placed in proximity with the Saint’s body.

A single figure in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York shows Elzéar kneeling in prayer. This was originally positioned adjacent to a figure of *Christ Blessing*, now in the musée du Petit Palais in Avignon



Above:
Saint Elzéar curing the Lepers
c. 1373
43.5 x 38.5 x 12 cm; alabaster
Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Inv. 27.16 (acquired by Henry Walters in 1925)

Not all of the extant reliefs survive in the same condition, and ours has clearly been affected by water damage in a way that none of the others have suffered from, perhaps as part of an ill-judged program of cleaning or just neglect. Yet it retains clear traces of the tools used to shape it, and these, alongside its stylistic features, material, and dimensions, can be used to link it firmly with the other reliefs in the group. The varied cutting marks visible on our relief's reverse are identical to those on the figure of *Saint Elzéar in Prayer* in New York. Both display a combination of rough sawing, rapid flat-head chisel marks made with a tool of medium gauge, and flat areas

with a much smoother, abraded finish. The undersides of the two reliefs are also similar, with a fine shallow step or groove carved into the stone and running parallel to the back face. It is unclear whether all of the reliefs also incorporate such a feature as it is not possible to see their undersides, and it is unclear what this is for. One possibility is that it allowed for the introduction of a fine layer of fixing material such as plaster or adhesive which, being kept towards the rear of the block, would not be visible to viewers from the front.



Above:
Saint Elzéar in Prayer
35.9 x 23 x 12 cm; alabaster
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. 27.78



Above:

The reverse faces of the New York relief (left) and the relief under discussion (right)

Both from a compositional and an iconographic standpoint, our relief fits closely with the types, and arrangement, of figures on all of the other known fragments. Crucially however, it also perfectly corroborates Bishop Suarès' 1624 description of the monument's first relief ("in sculpta sunt quorum primum", he numbers it as such perhaps due to its primary placement and visibility on the structure) as a scene in which Elzéar heals a lame man; "de sanitate homini claudicanti restituta" (the health of a lame man is restored). The "homini claudicanti" or lame man in question is without doubt the figure shown hobbling on his crutches at the front of our group, his gashed leg twisted awkwardly as a result of his ailment. It is this figure and his pronounced lameness that are clearly intended to form the centre of our focus, and thus reading of the scene. The roughly vertical break running down the right-hand side of the relief means that we are missing what is almost certain to have been the figure of Elzéar himself, a loss which has undoubtedly contributed to its obscurity and anonymity during the centuries since its dispersion from the monument. Its reemergence now is thus of cardinal importance for the scholarship of Saint Elzéar's "curious" and extraordinary monument, as well as for the study of fourteenth-century French sculpture more generally.

Related Literature

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