The Descent from the Cross
England, Midlands
c. 1480

40 x 24 x 5 cm; pale, pale-veined alabaster with vestiges of gilding and polychromy. A repaired break across the lower right-hand corner, and some infill behind the kneeling figure, including the proper right heel of the figure on the ladder and the background immediately behind it. A candle mark has scorched the stone on Christ's proper right leg and the robes and underarm of Joseph of Arimathea. A historic drill hole at the top of the cross arm, perhaps used for suspension.

Provenance
Private Collection, France

Description and Iconography
One of the key moments in the Christian narrative of Christ's Passion is the *Descent from the Cross,* or *Deposition* as it is also known, which details the process by which Jesus's body was taken down from the Cross following his death. It is a scene recounted in all four Canonical Gospels[1], and images of it circulated widely in Europe during the Medieval period. On this slim alabaster panel, the lifeless body of Christ is shown still in the process of being removed from a tall, Tau-shaped cross by two men who pull the large-headed nails from his hands and feet with pliers. Both men have rolled up the loose fabric of their sleeves to perform their task; one climbs

[1] Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42.

a ladder resting against the arm of the cross in order to reach up to Christ's hand, while his counterpart kneels on the ground below him to get to the nail in Christ's feet. On the left, catching the corpse as it falls, is the bearded figure of Joseph of Arimathea, who according to the Gospel accounts, boldly asked Pilate for permission to take away Christ's body for burial three days after he was Crucified. Apparently surprised to hear that Christ was already dead, Pilate nevertheless agreed to give the body to Joseph, who purchased a linen shroud in which to wrap it. It is presumably this part of the Gospel accounts that influenced our sculptor's decision to depict Joseph in the guise in which he appears here, with his hands prominently enveloped in a length of cloth as he reaches up to support Christ's torso. Behind him stands the Virgin Mary and, immediately above and behind her, Saint John – Mary's traditional counterpart in images of the Crucifixion. Both figures look on in introspective consternation, their features sharpened subtly by grief. Mary raises her right hand and folds her fingers delicately over those of her son as his loose right arm falls over Joseph's shoulder towards her.

Context

Although pockets of alabaster carving sprang up in the Netherlands, northern France, and the Rhine Valley over the course of the Middle Ages – the so-called Master of Rimini being a vivid case in point – it was without a doubt the alabaster carvers of England who contributed most to the status, reach, and symbolic potential of this material during the period. England boasts rich seams of pale, creamy-coloured alabaster that stretch across large swathes of the Midlands, and the stone was quarried intensively at several sites including the Tutbury/Fauld/Castle Hayes area of Staffordshire, and Chellaston in Derbyshire, where it has been estimated that between 50 and 70 tons of sculpture-quality stone was excavated each year during the fifteenth century.[2] Although it had been sourced for this purpose as early as 1160 (when it was used for the entrance to Tutbury church in Staffordshire), large-scale quarrying seems only to have begun in earnest after 1362, the year in which a shipment was made from Tutbury to London of 'six wagon-loads of alabaster' for the construction of the tomb of Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward III.[3] Following this precedent John of Gaunt commissioned from the same quarries effigies of himself and his wife in 1374. No other quarry seems to have been geared up for the mass-supply of alabaster before this date, and it was only from the following decades that the quarry nearby at Chellaston seems to have begun production.

Localisation of the craftsmen responsible for the surviving corpus of English alabaster carvings has historically centred on Nottingham, since the archives of that city account for by far the most numerous records of 'alabaster men' mentioned amongst surviving documents of rents and contracts.[4] Nevertheless, modern scholars are now starting to reconstruct the output of other centres to which the present example may one day be more specifically attached, since alabaster carvers are also known to have lived and worked in Burton-on-Trent, York, and even as far east as Norwich.

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[2] Kim Woods, 'The Supply of Alabaster in Northern and Mediterranean Europe in the Later Middle Ages', in Jo Kirby, Susie Nash and Joanna Cannon eds., *Trade in Artist's Materials: Markets and Commerce in Europe to 1700*, London (2010) pp. 86-93, p. 87.

[3] Laurence Flavigny and Christine Jablonski-Chauveau et.al., *D'angleterre en Normandie; Sculptures d'albâtre du Moyen Age*, Exh. Cat., Rouen – Evreux, 1998, p. 11.

[4] Edward S. Prior, *Illustrated catalogue of the exhibition of English medieval alabaster work: held in the rooms of the Society of Antiquaries, 26th May to 30th June,* London, 1910, p. 20.

The interest in alabaster was not limited to its visual properties and perceived preciousness, but also encompassed its symbolic potential and the apparently mircaulous usage of the material by the early Christian community. In imitation of the ancient custom of keeping unguents in perfume vases, made from and known as 'alabastra', objects carved from this material took on potent symbolism and became extremely fashionable. Both Canterbury and Exeter cathedrals, as well as the Abbey of Cluny, Burgundy, claimed to possess the alabastrum used by Mary Magdalen.[5] Alabaster vases were also recorded among the treasures of the church at Conques (Aveyron) and of Norwich Cathedral (inventory of 1368). Other inventories of English religious houses mention alabaster chalices for use in liturgical ceremonies in the same period.

Compositional sources, function and dating

The naturalistic elongation of the figure shown climbing the ladder in order to reach Christ's left hand, the diagonal line of force created by the latter's outstretched arms (which seem to pivot down to the left from his still-attached hand), and the brilliantly clear and legible organisation of the scene in spite of the stacked, busy layering of the figures' arrangement (four of whom interact closely with Christ's body without ever crowding or obscuring it), make for a dynamic and considered composition replete with symbolic and visual nuances. Its formula evidently proved successful, and also seems to have remained in circulation for a long period of time, since many of the thirty or so *Descent from the Cross* reliefs known to have survived from the period spanning c. 1400-1500 were executed with recourse to the same model as ours, including three versions in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 1), a relief from an incomplete altarpiece on deposit at the Museo nazionale di Castello Pandone in Venafro (Molise, south-central Italy), and another produced as part of a spectacular *Passion* retable preserved at the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples (fig. 2a-b).

Tracing the source of this evidently popular composition is not easy; the motif of Christ's body slumping into the outstretched arms of Joseph of Arimathea who stands in profile at the foot of the Cross was a common feature of depictions of the scene right across northern Europe, emerging (most likely first) in manuscript illuminations during the thirteenth century and in artforms including Parisian ivory carvings by the fourteenth (fig. 3). Nevertheless, the formula as it is employed on our relief seems to have been perfected by English alabaster carvers by around 1400[6], well before it appears in a similar guise in early Southern Netherlandish and German prints and manuscript illuminations later in the century (figs. 4-5), and it is tantalising to consider what role these 'alabaster men' played in its dissemination across Europe during the period.

Several details on our relief, such as the drapery folds of the figures' garments and the rounded, wide-toed footwear of the two nail-pullers, as well as the stylistic treatment of their faces. hair, and beards, indicate that it was carved in the closing decades of the fifteenth century, the last great period of alabaster production before the English Reformation. Like the *Passion* retable in Naples and others of its type, our *Descent from the Cross* was almost certainly produced as part of a larger altarpiece dedicated to the *Passion*. It is marked several times on its reverse with a band of scored

[5] Flavigny and Jablonski-Chauveau, 1998, p. 16.

[6] For dating this and other examples early in the fifteenth century see Lloyd de Beer, *Reassessing English Alabaster Carving: Medieval Sculpture and its Contexts,* PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2018.

horizontal incisions, a treatment that has traditionally been thought of as allowing for its 'keying in' to a larger support or backboard by way of an adhesive or plaster fill. The altarpiece it was originally made for would almost certainly have incorporated a large compartmented structure made from oak planks (wainscot), in which multiple reliefs would have been housed along with decorative carved canopies or other gilded and polychromed embellishments (see fig. 2a-b for an example of this structure). Only a tiny handful of these survive today, owing both to natural decay and to the brutal destruction wreaked during the English Reformation of the 1540s and the Civil War a century later. Many English alabasters survive in better states of preservation by having been exported to the Continent early in their lives, and the recent re-emergence of the present panel in a French private collection could mean that it too shares such a history.

Further Reading

Francis Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters: A Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, Oxford, 1984

Francis Cheetham, *Alabaster Images of Medieval England*, Woodbridge, 2003

Paul Williamson ed., *Object of Devotion: Medieval English Alabaster Sculpture from the Victoria and Albert Museum* Alexandria, Virginia, 2010

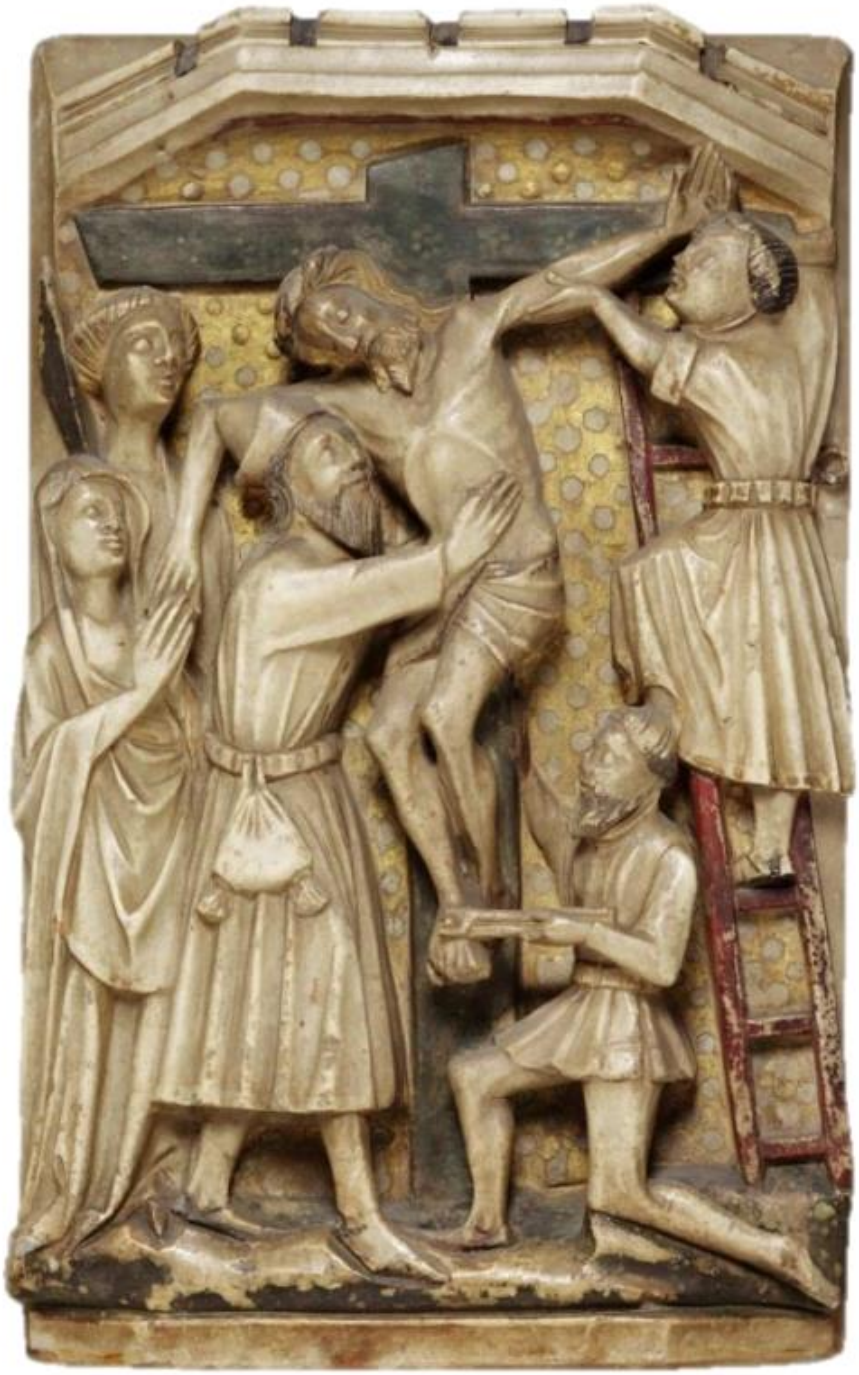

Fig. 1
Descent from the Cross
England, Midlands
c. 1400
44.2 x 27.8 cm; Alabaster with polychromy and gilding
London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.

Figs. 2a-b
Retable of the Passion (top), with a detail showing the scene of the *Descent from the Cross* third from the right (above)
England, Midlands, Early 15th century
Naples, Museo di Capodimonte

Fig. 3
Plaque with the Descent from the Cross
France, probably Paris
c. 1320-40
23.2 x 18.3 x 2.1 cm; Ivory with traces of gilding and polychromy
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 17.190.199

Fig. 4
The Descent from the Cross
Netherlands, Delft?
c. 1430-40
Pen and brown ink with grey wash, touched with watercolour, on vellum
London, British Museum, inv. 1854,0628.29
Image: The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 5
Descent from the Cross
German or Netherlandish
1457
8.8 x 6.6 cm; Woodcut with hand colouring
London, British Museum, inv. 1856,1011.21
Image: The Trustees of the British Museum