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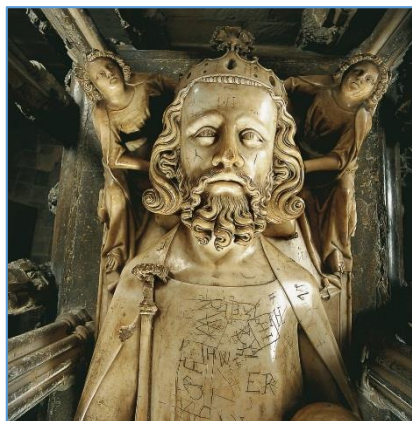
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## *Identity, Status, and Material: Medieval Alabaster Effigies in England*

By Rachel Dressler, State University of New  
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In September 1327 the deposed king Edward II of England died under mysterious circumstances at Berkeley Castle; he was buried in St. Peter's Abbey, now Gloucester Cathedral, three months later.<sup>1</sup> His body was eventually housed in an elaborate tomb comprised of a locally sourced Painswick oolitic limestone base and tomb chest with Purbeck marble panels, a multi-tiered limestone and Purbeck canopy, and an alabaster effigy (**Figure 1**). The installation of this monument sparked the production of a series of royal alabaster effigies and, following these commissions, an increasing number of aristocratic tomb figures. This essay examines that remarkable flowering in order to suggest an explanation of alabaster's rather sudden popularity as a memorializing material. In doing so, it will consider a network of

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<sup>1</sup> There has been some scholarly speculation that he was not murdered at this time, but survived in exile in Italy. The general consensus argues against this however. See Roy Martin Haines, *King Edward II, Edward of Caernarfon His Life, His Reign, and its Aftermath, 1284-1330* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2003), ch. 8 "Life after Death, Edward the Penitent Hermit," esp. 220-221 and George P. Cuttino and Thomas W. Lyman, "Where is Edward II?" *Speculum* 53 (1978), 525.



**Figure 1** Tomb of Edward II, Gloucester Cathedral. Photo: author.

contributing factors: the beginnings of alabaster mining in England and the material's physical qualities, the reputation of alabaster gleaned from biblical mentions and ancient and medieval lapidaries, the decision to sculpt Edward II's figure from this material, the ongoing memorialization of French monarchs at St. Denis, the patronage of alabaster effigies, and the beginnings of the Hundred Years War. No single one of these phenomena can explain alabaster's popularity, but considering them as a network of interacting agents may suggest how this newly discovered stone gained such appeal in the second half of the fourteenth century.

In examining the employment of alabaster in tombs during the later Middle Ages this essay will focus on its use in English high-status tomb effigies and discuss what the material may suggest about English patrons' attitudes towards status in England, especially during the initial phase of the Hundred Years War, from its beginning in 1337 to around 1428, when the English were defeated at the Battle of Orleans. This period witnessed the relatively sudden availability and exploitation of alabaster in England for high-status tombs. It is significant that it was through the tomb effigy, among the most powerful vehicles for representing one's social and spiritual condition, that alabaster gained such a following among England's elite patrons.

In proposing a constellation of factors I am drawing on the work of Michael Callon and Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory (ANT), which advocates tracing relationships between humans, between humans and other animals, between objects, and between humans, other animals, and objects in differing configurations to explain change. In this theoretical model there is no hierarchical distinction between humans and others,

animate or inanimate, all are equally actors.<sup>2</sup> For example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls attention to stone's agentic faculty in his recent book, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that the emergence of alabaster in this period is part of such a network of actors in that it offered an alternative to traditional memorial materials such as freestone, and thus allowed for different understandings of the role of tombs in the construction and performance of identity in later-medieval England. For both patrons and beholders of tombs, this new material expanded the potential for the staging of status through memorials, and also suggested a new dimension to the understanding of aristocratic identity in England in the opening years of the war with France. Indeed, through its agency, alabaster may have allowed its patrons and beholders to think Englishness itself in a different way than before.

### **Alabaster Quarrying and Use for Effigies**

As Anne Harris has so eloquently demonstrated, the mining of alabaster had its own network of connections, beginning with the Jurassic oceans that produced the material and determined its characteristics, and extending to John of Gaunt, whose desmesne included Tutbury and Fauld, two of the earliest sites of plentiful, high-quality alabaster. Two of the earliest surviving monumental works in alabaster, a twelfth-century door surround in Tutbury and a fourteenth-century knight's effigy in nearby Hanbury,

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<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On agency and materiality see also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and for stone in particular, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Stories of Stone," *postmedieval* 1:1/2 (2010): 56-63.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).



come from this area.<sup>4</sup> Also included in this constellation would be the topography of the region, whose abundance of waterways allowed for easier transport of the raw material and blocks to the workshops where they were carved or finished, and the alabaster quarriers and carvers responsible for obtaining the stone and for shaping it into the panels and effigies still in evidence today in English churches and museums around the world.<sup>5</sup> As far as the labor force is concerned, Francis Cheetham long ago speculated that the ravages of the Black Death led to a reduction in workers, increasing the appeal of a material relatively easy and economical to extract from the earth.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Fergus Cannan notes that many of the quarry owners and quarriers would have owned draft animals and hauling equipment as part of the areas' agrarian way of life, which may have eased the transport of alabaster over land.<sup>7</sup>

The alabaster quarried at these sites was shipped to London to fabricate the most elite fourteenth-century tomb commissions, such as the royal tombs ordered by John of Gaunt in 1374.<sup>8</sup> Nigel Saul has noted indications that big London carving workshops may have kept supplies of alabaster on hand in anticipation of commissions.<sup>9</sup> Other

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Harris, "From Stone to Statue: the Geology and Art of English Alabaster Panels," forthcoming in *Art and Devotion in Medieval England*, eds. Stephen Perkinson and Jessica Brantley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications). Nigel Ramsey, "Alabaster" in *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products*, eds. John Blair and Nigel Ramsey (London: The Hambledon Press, 2001), 30-31; Fergus Cannan, "If Marble will not Serve: Medieval English Alabaster Sculpture, From Quarry to Object of Devotion," in *Object of Devotion*, 24. For the dating and attribution of the effigy to Henry de Hanbury (d. c. 1347) see Claude Blair, "The Date of the Early Alabaster Knight at Hanbury, Staffordshire," *Church Monuments* 7 (1992), 1-18.

<sup>5</sup> Cannan, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, 3, citing Francis W. Cheetham, "English Medieval Alabaster Carvings and their Connection with Nottingham," from *Medieval English Alabaster Carvings in the Castle Museum Nottingham* (Nottingham: Art Galleries and Museums Committee, 1962), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Cannan, 28.

<sup>8</sup> John of Gaunt ordered tomb effigies for himself and his wife, and his effigy was carved by a leading architect, Henry Yvele, and a mason-contractor, Thomas Wrek. See Ramsay, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Nigel Saul, *English Church Monuments in the Middle Ages, History and Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.

commissions may have been carved closer to the quarry site, particularly Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, and the variety of poses employed for the earliest figures suggests local masons learning to work with this new material. Among the diverse poses adopted are the crossed legs of the Hanbury knight and the effigy of Sir William Fitzwaryn, d. 1361, at Wantage, Berkshire. The Fitzwaryn figure also displays hands folded on his chest rather than in prayer, an unusual attitude for effigies. Another early experiment was the figure turned on its side as seen in mid-century fragments from Kingsbury, Warwickshire, Bingham, and Nottinghamshire. After that point, the alabaster effigy pose was standardized into a figure with straight legs, lying flat on its back.<sup>10</sup>

By the fifteenth century certain towns such as York and Burton-on-Trent in Nottinghamshire were home to what by then were known as "alabastermen."<sup>11</sup> Many of these artisans additionally made alabaster panels for altarpieces, whose production was also expanding. By the early fifteenth century, alabaster carving had become a thriving concern with numerous commissions for effigies, statues, and panels from all over England and abroad. Most of this activity came to an end by the late 1530s due to the impact of the Reformation; only effigy production continued as these figures did not suffer from the taint of Catholic image devotion.<sup>12</sup>

Edward's effigy, and the royal and aristocratic figures that followed, are among a number of high-status European alabaster tomb figures dating from the later Middle

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<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reader for the information contained in the paragraph.

<sup>11</sup> Saul, 34. For specific workshops and alabaster carvers see two articles by Jon Bayliss, "Richard Parker, 'alabasterman,'" *Church Monuments: Journal of the Church Monuments Society*, 5 (1990): 39-56, and "Richard and Gabriel Royley of Burton-On-Trent, tombmakers," *Church Monuments: Journal of the Church Monuments Society*, 6 (1991): 21-41.

<sup>12</sup> Saul, 37-40. For the later period of effigy production see N. Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Ages. Among these examples from the period in question is the tomb of Pope John XXII at Avignon, dating around 1334, and possibly modeled on the English royal monument, which exhibits an alabaster effigy. Another is the now-lost tomb of Cardinal Guillaume de Chanac, once installed in Saint-Martial Limoges, and known through surviving documentation and a seventeenth-century engraving.<sup>13</sup> De Chanac's will from 1384 stipulated the use of alabaster, although Julian Gardner describes the vanished monument as carved in marble. Finally, Claus Sluter's tomb of Philip the Bold features alabaster angels and pleurants.<sup>14</sup> As Kim Woods makes clear, alabaster became a favored sculptural material throughout western Europe during this period.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there were plenty of alabaster quarries on the Continent, including France, Germany, and Spain.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, England's quarries were the primary suppliers of alabaster in the period and alabaster effigies were especially plentiful within the island's borders.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its availability elsewhere in Europe, there is some evidence that English alabaster was considered more favorably on the Continent for tomb figures, as there are documented instances of French patrons importing the material from England for this purpose. In 1390, two alabaster stones were exported abroad from Boston at a cost of 76s

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<sup>13</sup> Julian Gardner, *The Tomb and the Tiara, Curial Tomb Sculpture in Rome and Avignon in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 168-169.

<sup>14</sup> Gardner, pp. 138-140. Gardner credits Francis Bond with the observation concerning the relationship between the Avignon tomb and that of Edward II. For the observation concerning the tomb of Philip the Bold see Kim Woods, "The Supply of Alabaster in Northern and Mediterranean Europe in the Later Middle Ages," in *Trade in Artists' Materials, Markets and Commerce in Europe to 1700*, eds. Jo Kirby, Susie Nash, and Joanna Cannon (London: Archetype Publications, 2010), 88.

<sup>15</sup> Woods, "The Fortunes of Art in Alabaster: A Historiographical Analysis," in *From Major to Minor: The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (University Park: Penn State Press, 2012), 82-102. This essay is the most recent standard source for examining alabaster sculpture as a European phenomenon during this period.

<sup>16</sup> Woods, "The Supply of Alabaster in Northern and Mediterranean Europe," 88-91.

<sup>17</sup> Woods, "The Supply of Alabaster," 86.



8d, an amount suggesting stones of suitable size for tomb effigies.<sup>18</sup> In 1408, English alabaster was used for the tomb of John IV, Duke of Brittany.<sup>19</sup> Finally, in 1414, the Abbot of Fècamp purchased a tomb-sized block from Chellaston.<sup>20</sup>

### **Alabaster's Place in the Lapidary and Biblical Traditions**

The type of alabaster quarried in England and elsewhere differed in composition from that used in the ancient world, which is also known as calcite. Yet, it is not clear that artists and patrons recognized this; indeed, the medieval European stone may have retained, or been granted, some association with its illustrious predecessor. Western Europeans, including those in England, in the Middle Ages would have had at least four major sources for their knowledge of ancient alabaster: Pliny the Elder's (c. 23-79 C.E.) *Natural History*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (early seventh century), medieval lapidaries and compilations, and the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Pliny's text is an encyclopedic examination of the world, including its history and its material components. It was widely used in both the Roman and medieval periods and provided the inspiration behind medieval lapidaries, or encyclopedias of stones, gems and minerals, and the so-called Monstrous

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<sup>18</sup> Woods, "The Supply of Alabaster," 87 and S. H. Rigby, "The Overseas Trade of Boston in the Reign of Richard II," *Lincoln Record Society Publications* 93 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer), 109, 132, 135, 157, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Gardner, *Alabaster Tombs of the Pre-Reformation Period in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 11. Gardner cites T. Rymer, *Foedera*, vol. VIII, 510 for the royal passport granting the export of the tomb.

<sup>20</sup> Woods, "Supply of Alabaster," 87; *History of Chellaston* (Chellaston, 1988), 32; J. Bilson, "A French Purchase of English Alabaster in 1414," *Archaeological Journal* 64 (1907): 32-37; and W. Stevenson, "Art Sculpture in Alabaster, Preserved in France, Considered in its Relationship to the Nottingham School of Alabasterers," *Transactions of the Thoroton Society* XI (1907): 92-96.

<sup>21</sup> Ramsay, 29; for Isidore of Seville see *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof with the collaboration of Muriel Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Races, which feature prominently on English *mappa mundi*.<sup>22</sup> In Book 13, Chapter 3 of *Natural History*, “The Mode of Testing Unguents,” Pliny observes that unguents keep best in boxes of alabaster.<sup>23</sup> He is no doubt referring to Egyptian alabaster, which, as noted above, differs from that quarried in England and other parts of Europe.

Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* was also widely disseminated in medieval Europe with Gaul and Ireland being the first places beyond the Iberian Peninsula to feel its impact.<sup>24</sup> It was known in England by the late seventh century, and its influence continued to be felt through the fifteenth century.<sup>25</sup> In the dedication to the *Etymologies*, Isidore makes very clear that his encyclopedia is drawn from a variety of sources, including those from antiquity.<sup>26</sup> One of these sources was Pliny, who is mentioned at least seven times in Isidore’s text.<sup>27</sup> Concerning alabaster, Isidore repeats Pliny’s comments about its appropriateness for storing ointments, “*Alabastrites* is a white stone, tinted here and there with various colors. The ointment box spoken of by the Evangelist himself was made out of *alabastrites* (Luke 7:37), for people hollow out this stone for ointment vessels because it is said to be the best material for preserving ointments unspoiled.” He goes on to discuss its geographic origins, “Particularly white alabaster originates around Thebes in Egypt and Damascus in Syria, but the highest quality comes from India.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance, The Legacy of the ‘Natural History’* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, Book XIII, ch. 3, eds. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), accessed through the Perseus Project.

<sup>24</sup> Barney *et al.*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Barney *et al.*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Barney *et al.*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Barney *et al.*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Both quotes Barney *et al.*, 321.

The medieval lapidary tradition built on Pliny and Isidore as well as other ancient predecessors such as Theophrastus's *On Stones*, which dates to the end of the fourth century B.C.E.<sup>29</sup> Like their ancient ancestors the medieval treatises emphasize the active properties of stones, their virtues and their capabilities. So, for example, according to Marbode of Rennes's (c. 1035-1123) *De lapidus* jasper cures fever and aids women in childbirth, while sapphire guards against intended harm and helps prisoners to escape captivity.<sup>30</sup> Albertus Magnus's (1206-1280) *Book of Minerals* treats alabaster under the name *nicomar*, "Nicomar is the same as alabaster, which is a kind of marble; but because of its marvelous power it is placed among precious stones."<sup>31</sup> This lapidary goes on to repeat Pliny's and Isidore's explanations, stating that the stone's coldness allows it to preserve ointments, so that the ancients used it for ointment boxes. However, Albertus Magnus adds something new: alabaster also preserves corpses, so that it is frequently used for tombs.<sup>32</sup>

In 1398, John Trevisa finished his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum* in which alabaster is treated in Book 16, the section concerning rocks, gems, and minerals.<sup>33</sup> According to Elizabeth Keen, no definitive version of the Latin text survives, and Bartholomew's identity and place of origin have been the topic of

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<sup>29</sup> See Theophrastus's *On Stones, Introduction, Greek Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, eds. Earle R. Caley and John F. C. Richards (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, 1956), 4.

<sup>30</sup> John M. Riddle, *Marbode of Rennes' (1035-1123) De Lapidus: Considered as a Medical Treatise with Text, Commentary and C. W. Kings' Translation Together with Text and Translation of Marbodes' Minor Works on Stones* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1977), 40-43.

<sup>31</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, trans. Dorothy Wyckoff (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Later on in the treatise Albertus confuses alabaster with a stone he labels sarcophagus, whose virtue is that it devours dead bodies, see p. 116

<sup>33</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus and John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum, a Critical Text*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. 1 and 2, 1975; vol. 3, 1988). On the historiography and interpretation of this text see Elizabeth Keen, *The Journey of a Book: Bartholomew the Englishman and the Properties of Things* (Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, The Australian National University, 2007).

much scholarly debate.<sup>34</sup> Keen asserts that he was a Franciscan who completed the work in Magdeburg around 1240.<sup>35</sup> Trevisa was the chaplain for Berkeley Castle and probably produced his translation at the behest of Thomas Berkeley IV.<sup>36</sup> In Trevisa's translation, Bartholomew's text draws on Pliny and Isidore for its description of alabaster, including its preservative properties, adding that it is reputed to help win victory and mastery, and to generate and preserve friendship.<sup>37</sup>

The most famous biblical reference to alabaster is the episode from the Gospels in which a woman with an alabaster box anoints Christ's feet as he is dining in the house of Simon the Leper. The late-fourteenth-century Wycliffe Bible translates the passage from Matthew 26:6 as "a womman havynge a boxe of alabastre of precieuse oynement."<sup>38</sup> In the fourteenth century, both Exeter and Canterbury Cathedrals claimed to possess the *alabastrum* described in the gospel passage, which held the ointment with which the woman, understood to be Mary Magdalene, anointed Christ's feet.<sup>39</sup> This suggests the presence of ancient containers made of calcite in at least these two church collections. The similarity in appearance of the two materials, calcite and English alabaster, along with the hallowed ancient and Biblical pedigree of the former, may have resulted in labeling the European stone by the same name as its ancient predecessor.

### **Alabaster's Appeal to the Elite**

For Edward's tomb, this material's availability, its material qualities, and its

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<sup>34</sup> Keen, 1-4.

<sup>35</sup> Keen, 78

<sup>36</sup> Keen, 87.

<sup>37</sup> *On the Properties of Things*, vol. II, 827-828.

<sup>38</sup> Ramsay, 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

ancient and biblical associations, suited the desire to emulate the French royal marble tomb figures installed at Saint Denis. England possessed no native sources for this stone and importing marble from the Continent would have been extremely expensive. The Saint Denis series of monuments was initiated during the reign of Louis IX and marked the burials of French royalty going back to the Carolingian period.<sup>40</sup> According to Georgia Sommers Wright, the intent of this enterprise was to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Capetian dynasty, some of whom were descended from Carolingian rulers through the maternal line, and to reinforce the Abbey's role as a royal burial church.<sup>41</sup> Louis himself was memorialized in a now-destroyed tomb commissioned by his son, Philip III, as part of a campaign for the crusading monarch's canonization, as Stephen Perkinson has noted.<sup>42</sup> Philip III also commissioned a tomb for his wife, Isabella of Aragon, dated 1275, which features a marble effigy. Philip IV continued this trend by commissioning a tomb with a white marble effigy for his father Philip III between 1298-1307. The practice of using marble for the gisants of French royalty continued throughout the fourteenth century with memorials for members of the Valois dynasty.

To the tomb's commissioners, the qualities of translucence and whiteness, similar to the appearance of marble, may have suggested alabaster as a means of enshrining Edward's body. The king lies recumbent, with his head resting on double pillows

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<sup>40</sup> The major sources on the Saint-Denis royal tombs include Claire Richter Sherman, *The Portraits of Charles V of France (1338-1380)*, (New York: New York University Press for the College Art Association, 1969); Georgia Sommers Wright, "A Royal Tomb Program in the Reign of St. Louis," *Art Bulletin* 56/2 (June 1974), 224-243; Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *Le roi est mort: étude sur les funérailles les sépultures et les tombeaux des rois de France jusqu'à la fin du XIIIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1975); and Stephen Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King, A Prehistory of Portraiture in Late Medieval France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Wright, 224, 238.

<sup>42</sup> Perkinson, 102-103.

supported by angels, his feet on a semi-reclined lion, his bent left arm supporting an orb surmounted by a cross, and his straight right arm and hand holding a scepter, now gone. He wears a tunic with tubular folds, a dalmatic, and a long mantle. On his head is a floriated crown, now missing its jewels. His alabaster body gleams under light, and although the figure once displayed polychrome in the crown and other areas, the flesh of the face and hands remained unpainted, so that the luminous, polished yet waxy qualities of the alabaster were and are fully visible. Like marble, alabaster mimicked glowing flesh and imparted an aura of transcendence to the figure.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, alabaster's slight waxiness might convey flesh more effectively than a smoothly polished marble surface. Not surprisingly, its use changed artistic practice from covering tomb figures in polychromy and other surface treatments to leaving the exposed "flesh" of faces and hands uncolored.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Edward II's effigy, alabaster's luminosity produced a suggestion of sanctity which served to gloss over the unsavory events of deposition and possible murder that led to the monument's creation. Such a choice may have been prompted by the fact that Edward's burial site became a pilgrimage goal even before the installation of this elaborate monument, as attested by the *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae*, which indicates that their donations helped to finance completion of the building's south transept, the St. Andrew's Aisle.<sup>45</sup> The luminescence of his effigy once the monument was completed would surely have reinforced any saintly suggestions. Its use for this royal tomb was almost certainly also

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<sup>43</sup> Perkinson, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Sally Badham, *Medieval Church and Churchyard Monuments* (Oxford and New York: Shire Publications, Ltd.), 32-33.

<sup>45</sup> *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae*, ed. William Henry Hart, Vol.1 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863), 46.



inspired by the French royal marble effigies. Indeed, in his entry for Edward II's tomb in the *Age of Chivalry* exhibition catalog, Christopher Wilson already suggested that the monument was likely commissioned to emulate the French series of memorials.<sup>46</sup>

Wilson's contention is further supported by the fact that after the production of Edward's tomb, two renowned European sculptors, one of whom was associated with the Saint Denis monuments, were commissioned for Philippa of Hainault's tomb. This indicates a clear awareness of the French works on the part of her husband, and the tomb's probable commissioner, Edward III. Jean de Liège, who worked at Saint Denis, is documented as responsible for this tomb, and André Beauneveu might have produced its weepers. It follows that Edward III knew of Continental developments in prestigious tomb carving and of the top sculptors producing these monuments. His choice of artists for his wife's monument indicates his desire to compete with his royal French counterparts.<sup>47</sup>

Recognition of alabaster's capacity for enhancing the spiritual aura of a royal figure seems to have led to the commission of a series of English royal effigies in this material following upon the Gloucester monument. Around 1336, several years after the making of his father's tomb, Edward III likely carried on the material tradition of that work by ordering an alabaster effigy for the tomb of his brother John of Eltham and, several decades later, his wife.<sup>48</sup> Numerous other members of Edward III's family also

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<sup>46</sup> Christopher Wilson, "Gloucester Cathedral, tomb of Edward II, north side," in London, Royal Academy of Art, *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400*, eds. Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1987), 416-417.

<sup>47</sup> This attribution was first made by George Gilbert Scott, *Gleanings from Westminster Abbey* (London: J. Henry and J. Parker, 1863), 63-64. See also H. M. Colvin, *A History of the King's Works*, Vol. 1, *The Middle Ages* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1963), 486-487; and Sally Badham, "What Constituted a 'Workshop' and How Did Workshops Operate? Some Problems and Questions," in eds. Sally Badham and Sophie Oosterwijk, *Monumental Industry: The Production of Tomb Monuments in England and Wales in the Long Fourteenth Century* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2010), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Perkinson, 91.

had alabaster effigies. The list includes William of Hatfield (d. 1337) in Westminster Abbey, Isabella de Valois's (d. 1348) now-lost sculpture in the Franciscan Church at Newgate; John of Gaunt and his first wife, Blanche of Lancaster (d. 1368) in Old St. Paul's, London (now destroyed). The use of alabaster for these effigies may have been promoted or reinforced by John of Gaunt, who stood to benefit from the mining of the Tutbury and Fauld seams in his demesne.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, by the later fourteenth century, this creamy, luminous material had some royal cachet, although later royal effigies would employ gilt bronze instead.

The use of marble for the French royal tombs figures and alabaster for the English examples is likely no coincidence. In each instance the material itself must have had some royal associations. As Paul Binski has noted, the medium and material of a work could function metaphorically, especially in the case of tomb effigies.<sup>50</sup> In the Saint-Denis monuments, marble, a stone associated with the enormous prestige of the ancient world, was used to confirm and celebrate the legitimacy and long history of the Capetian dynasty; in England, alabaster, with its similar qualities of whiteness and luminosity, was employed to similar ends. It may have worked to confirm the legitimacy of the Plantagenets in the aftermath of a royal disaster.

The question remains, if alabaster signified royal status to Edward III's family and descendants, what did it mean to the aristocratic patrons choosing this stone for their memorials in the late-fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries? Surviving documentary

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<sup>49</sup> Cannan, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 95-96.



**Figure 2** Tomb of Thomas Beauchamp and Katherine Mortimer, Warwick Collegiate Church. Photo: author.

evidence in the form of contracts suggests that after the series of royal tombs discussed above, an increasing number of non-

royal, yet elite commissioners turned to alabaster for their effigies, suggesting that the material had come to resonate with the interests and values of this strata of medieval English society.

Typical of aristocratic alabaster effigies is the tomb of Thomas Beauchamp, Eleventh Earl of Warwick, and his wife Katherine Mortimer, dated shortly after 1369 and located in Warwick Collegiate Church. The high-status, military alabaster effigy type was established by the tomb of Hugh Despenser III and his wife, Elizabeth Montacute, in Tewkesbury Abbey. His is one of a group of alabaster effigies commemorating veterans of the Battle of Crecy that also includes the tombs of Thomas, Lord Berkeley, d. 1364, at Berkeley, Gloucester; John de Harteshull, Baron Hatch of Hartshill and Ashton (probably early 1360s), Ashton, Northhamptonshire; and Ralph, Lord Nevill, d. 1367, Durham Cathedral.

The Beauchamp monument is an excellent example of the quality such aristocratic alabaster effigies could attain (**Figure 2**). The carefully rendered costume details on both figures speak to a time-consuming and careful sculptural process. Note,

**Figure 3** Tomb of Sir Hugh de Calveley, St. Boniface's Church, Bunbury. Photo: author.

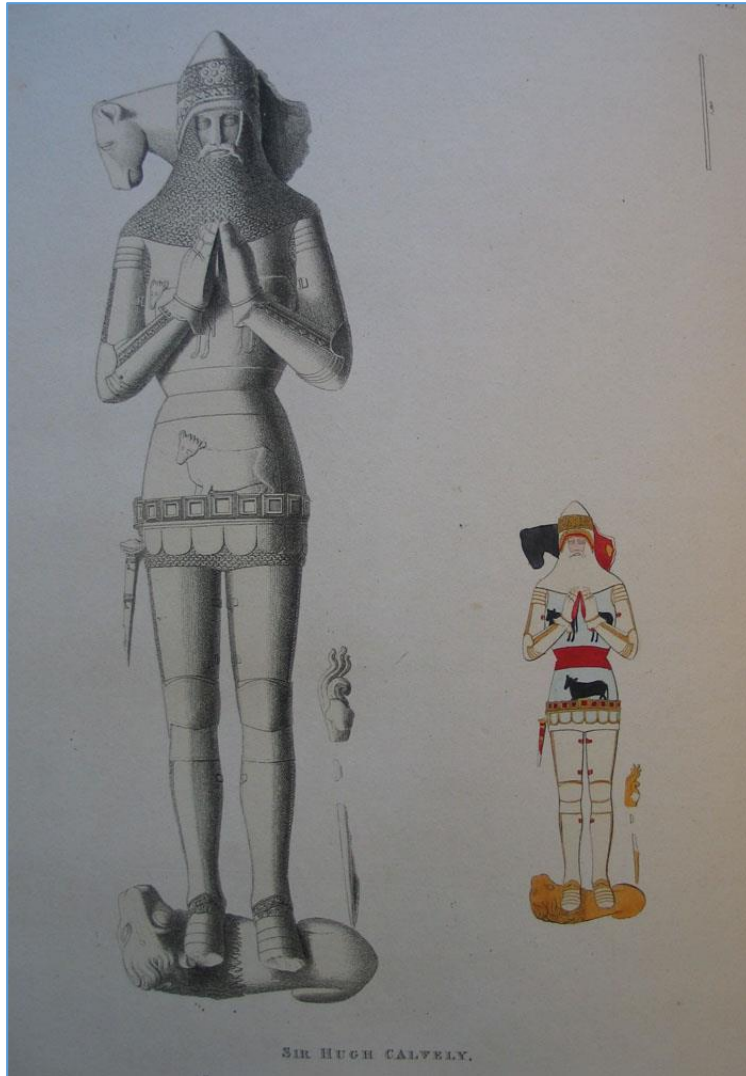


for example, the frilled veil  
in a sharply delineated  
pattern of the nebulée  
headdress, which graces  
Katherine's head and

floriated crosses on Thomas's heraldic coat armor, and his hip belt with rondels and a central lozenge.<sup>51</sup> Both the effigy and tomb chest of Sir Hugh de Calveley in Bunbury, c. 1394, are of alabaster and both evidence finely detailed carving (**Figure 3**). While the figure has suffered damage and erosion over the many centuries since its production, the facial features are still intact, save for the broken nose, and the decorative details on the armor are still clearly readable. For example, one can easily make out the flat band on the bascinet with its alternating lozenges and rectangles and five-leafed flowers, as well as the wide belt encircling the hips. The carving on the tomb chest is also very fine with its now empty traceried niches that once held mourners. The figure and chest also retain a great deal of the original color. Enough of this remained in the nineteenth century for Charles Stothard to reconstruct some of the effigy's color in his *Monumental Effigies of Great Britain* (**Figure 4**).<sup>52</sup> The double tomb of John, Fourth Baron Harington and his

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Stone, *Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955, 2d ed. 1972), 182. Stone is rather dismissive of this tomb's quality and refers to the facial features of both figures as summarily handled, an opinion with which I disagree.

<sup>52</sup> See Claude Blair, "The Effigy and Tomb of Sir Hugh Calveley" from the collection *The Bunbury Papers*, series editor Maurice H. Ridgway, early 1950s ([http://www.bunbury.org.uk/papers/Bun\\_papers.html](http://www.bunbury.org.uk/papers/Bun_papers.html)).



**Figure 4** Charles Stothard, Sir Hugh de Calveley, *Monumental Effigies of Great Britain*, facing page 75. Photo: author's copy.

wife, Lady Elizabeth Courtenay, in St. Dubricius Church at Porlock, c. 1418, displays the same high quality as the previous two monuments (**Figure 5**). As with the earlier examples, the sculptor of the Porlock figures has produced carefully and fully rendered details of costume, including the male figure's vambraces,

lames, and elbow and knee cops, and the female figure's cauls held by jeweled nets and coronet.

These monuments, like all tombs, are among the most significant and charged vehicles for the cultural construction and performance of identity. The means by which we mark our burial places engages our highest hopes and deepest fears, especially our fear of death. This was as true in the Middle Ages as it is now. Medieval Christians feared dying primarily because of uncertainty about their fate afterwards. An individual faced a two-stage fate: the first was immediate judgment and consignment to Purgatory in





**Figure 5** Tomb of John, Fourth Baron Harington, and Lady Elizabeth Courtenay, St. Dubricius Church, Porlock. Photo: author.

order to work off sins through punishments; the second was the collective judgment to come at the end of time with Christ's Second Coming. Christ's Resurrection held the promise that all the faithful would enjoy eternal life, but there was still the need to atone for various sins in

Purgatory. The belief that one could shorten a stay there in part fueled the making of tombs since medieval Christians believed that prayers offered on behalf of the deceased individual buried there could help lessen her or his time atoning. Consequently, many tombs must have once displayed solicitations for these prayers and the promise of indulgences for the performance of this good work, although most of these statements have not survived, especially if they were painted on the monument. But in order to be most effective, these prayers needed to focus on specific individuals, hence inscriptions identifying the deceased, and effigies representing his or her physical embodiment. Yet, as has been long recognized, the "individual" memorialized in the monuments of



medieval Europe was not the same as in our contemporary understanding. Rather than the particulars of appearance and distinguishing events of personal biography that we use to construct a given individual identity, medieval Europeans looked more to social status, rank and lineage. Contemporary grave markers, when they display figural representations of the deceased, strive to capture that person's actual appearance, the physiological idiosyncrasies that make up his or her face. As noted by many scholars, medieval effigies generally feature little attempt at an individualized portrait. As Stephen Perkinson has recently stated in connection with the Louvre "portrait" of Jean le Bon, traditionally considered the first truly accurate painted likeness of an individual since antiquity, "it is dangerous to assume that present-day conceptions of physiognomic likeness were shared by artists and audiences from different periods and cultures."<sup>53</sup> In the case of the alabaster effigies which are the focus of this study, there is not much attempt to present an individualized portrayal; instead, what is represented is a generalized presentation in which identity resides in markers of gender, status and lineage: costume and attributes, heraldic insignia, and, in the case of alabaster effigies, the material from which the figure is carved. English rulers at this period clearly considered this material to be an effective, and practical, means to convey royal status and spiritual elevation. The first nobles to commission alabaster effigies were likely motivated by a similar desire to claim a high rank in both the temporal and spiritual realms, and they drew upon the now-established royal prestige to do so. Using alabaster allowed for an association with the royal commissions, enhancing earthly status and power; it also lent to aristocratic figures the

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<sup>53</sup> Perkinson, 8.

same aura of transcendence so notable in Edward II's effigy, and in the other royal figures that followed.

It is important to note that there is a distinct difference in quality between alabaster effigies and the numerous panels featuring devotional themes, which form the other major category of alabaster production in England. Effigies tend towards finely detailed carving and customized treatment while panels display a high degree of standardization in iconography and composition. Tomb effigies seem to have been produced by and large for high-ranking elite, while the market for altar panels could range from those of elevated status to those occupying the artisan ranks of late medieval England.<sup>54</sup> Surviving tomb contracts indicate that that high-status patrons specified in great detail exactly what the tomb should show.<sup>55</sup> Alabaster is soft and therefore easily worked. Furthermore, its creamy translucence allowed the face and hands of figures to remain unpainted yet still present the appearance of luminous flesh. When coupled with the prestige it acquired from royal use, alabaster's appeal to elite patrons must have been very strong.

Readily available, relatively inexpensive, and comparatively easy to work, alabaster offered English patrons an excellent alternative to the marble being used in France. The whiteness and relative translucence of the finest quality alabaster, that found near the ground's surface, provided such royal patrons as John of Gaunt with something comparable to the creamy marble used for the French royal monuments. In addition, pure white alabaster could present the appearance of unblemished purity, rendering it almost

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<sup>54</sup> Ramsay, 36-37; Cannan, 29.

<sup>55</sup> See Badham and Oosterwijk, *Monumental Industry*, "'Cest Endenture Fait Parentre,' English Tomb Contracts of the Long Fourteenth Century," 187-236.

spiritual in its aura. This would have been highly desirable in a tomb monument intended to showcase the deceased in the best possible state to elicit prayers and to enter the afterlife. Alabaster is also more akin to the appearance of flesh than is freestone, a common effigy material, and could be thought of as more like the perfected glorified Resurrection body desired for one's tomb.

### **Alabaster and “Englishness”**

Thus far this essay has explored the links between the physical characteristics of alabaster, its mining in later medieval England, its use for royal effigies and, ultimately, as a material of choice for aristocratic figures. One last encouragement to the growing preference for alabaster tomb figures may be found in the social and political circumstances at the time. The same period that witnessed the early exploitation of alabaster for high-status tombs also marked the initial phase of the Hundred Years War, from its beginning in 1337 to around 1428, with the English defeat at the Battle of Orleans.

1337 marks the point at which sporadic, yet persistent, belligerency governed the relations between the English and French monarchies. For over twenty years, historians and literary scholars have been suggesting that the Hundred Years War produced a growing sense of singular cultural identity in both adversaries. In the 1970s, V. G. Scattergood, for example, asserted that increased contact with other peoples in the period up to and during the war gave the English an intensified sense of their own identity such that by the fifteenth century phrases like “our Englysshe marchauntes,” “oure Englande,”

and “oure Englysshe men” were appearing with greater and greater frequency in poetry.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Kenneth Fowler has noted that this consciousness is apparent in literary production such as the poetry of Lawrence Minot, written between 1333 and 1352.<sup>57</sup> More recently, Anne Curry has pointed to fourteenth-century chronicles, such as the *Brut* and the *Chronicles of London*, and fifteenth century works as displaying both a sense of Englishness and an anti-French attitude.<sup>58</sup> In addition, John Bowers has offered a postcolonial reading of *The Canterbury Tales* in which Geoffrey Chaucer’s text promotes an Englishness which resists aristocratic England’s francophone heritage in three ways: by employing English, by eliminating any hint of the Norman Conquest in its historical narratives, and by denying any acknowledgment of English regionalism in favor of a homogeneous national cultural discourse.<sup>59</sup> Finally, Keen speculates that a cultural rivalry may have in part prompted Trevisa’s translation of *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, since it had already been translated into French for the French king Charles V by his chaplain, Jean Corbechon in 1372.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Blandford Press, Ltd., 1971), 41-42.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Fowler, "Introduction," in *The Hundred Years War*, ed. Kenneth Fowler (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1971), 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Curry, *The Hundred Years War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 7-8.

<sup>59</sup> John Bowers, "Chaucer After Smithfield: From Postcolonial Writer to Imperialist Author," in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 51-63. Against these theories is the recent book by Ardis Butterfield, which reminds us of the entangled relationship between England and France, with the result that in the author's view the Hundred Years War was not "a war of nation-states where the boundaries of aggression are clearly marked, but a feudal and familial one where the two sides are tightly bound by lengthy and intimate identifications, through marriage and territorial possession." The author's analysis of various literary works, including Chaucer, leads her to assert that they betray no concept of nation, in the modern sense. Instead, what emerges is the simultaneous existence of two vernaculars, French and English, in fourteenth and fifteenth century England. See Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in The Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xx.

<sup>60</sup> Keen, 91.

All of these authors present good arguments, whose conclusions can be confirmed by moving beyond written texts. An examination of visual culture, in addition to written texts, may provide additional insight into English self-consciousness in the second half of the fourteenth century. In fact, a sense of English distinctiveness already characterizes their visual production even before the Hundred Years War. One example is the English response to Gothic architecture as it developed in France. According to Christopher Wilson, English designers mostly absorbed those features of French Gothic which could be adapted to the native taste for elaborate ornamentation, but never really abandoned the thick wall construction and desire for horizontal continuity that had long characterized English buildings.<sup>61</sup> Westminster Abbey, arguably the most "French" of English Gothic buildings, stands as an exception, mainly due to its political significance, since with this structure Henry III sought to rival the French coronation church of Reims with his own construction.<sup>62</sup> But, as Wilson notes, the English church is not a purely French Gothic structure, but a hybrid which combines English features with selected, and by then dated, French elements compatible with English taste.<sup>63</sup> Even the Perpendicular style in its earliest full expression in the south transept of Gloucester Cathedral, does not so much

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher Wilson, "The English Response to French Gothic Architecture, c. 1200-1350," in *Age of Chivalry*, 74-82 and Draper, 236.

<sup>62</sup> There has been some scholarly controversy over the French sources for Westminster Abbey with Robert Branner arguing that The Sainte-Chapelle was the model, due to Henry III's relationship with Louis IX, and Paul Binski reinstating Reims Cathedral as the most important inspiration. See Robert Branner, "Westminster Abbey and the French Court Style," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 23/1 (March, 1964): 3-18; Christopher Wilson, Pamela Tudor-Craig, J. Physick, and Richard Gem, *Westminster Abbey New Bell's Cathedral Guides* (London: Bell and Hyman, 1986); Paul Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power 1200-1400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 43-44. Sally Badham and Sophie Oosterwijk have also noted the influence of Louis IX's Sainte Chapelle on the design of Westminster Abbey and argued that the design of Henry's coronation church was in part the result of his competitiveness with his French royal cousin. See Badham and Oosterwijk, "The Monument of Katherine (1253-7) Daughter of Henry III and Eleanor of Provence (1253-7)," *The Antiquaries Journal* 92(2012), 186.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, "English Response," 77-78.



**Figure 6** Effigy of Jean d'Alluye, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource.

absorb French Rayonnant as transforms it into a distinctive English idiom of applied rectilinear tracery.<sup>64</sup> In short, English designers avoided taking over French Gothic as a system, such as occurred in the German churches of Marburg and Trier, as noted by Wilson

Peter Draper has also noted an attitude favoring English distinctiveness manifested in architecture as well as other areas in the thirteenth century. He has contextualized the English allegiance to indigenous traditions by seeing Early English architecture as part of a larger picture. This context included a resurgence of interest in

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<sup>64</sup> Wilson, "English Response," 82.



long-standing cults of Anglo-Saxon saints such as St. Frideswide, St. Etheldreda, St. Ethelbert, and St. Oswin, possibly sparked by the success of the cult of St. Thomas of Canterbury.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps more pertinent to the subject of this essay is the English approach to the military effigy.<sup>66</sup> Life-size, three-dimensional military memorials probably originated in France and were subsequently produced all over western Europe in the Middle Ages. In general, these figures followed a standard pattern of recumbent armored figure with hands folded in prayer and straight parallel legs, such as seen in the effigy of Jean d'Alluye, c. 1260, and now in the Cloisters Museum (**Figure 6**). Other effigies, such as those produced in German regions may sometimes display more active hand gestures such as holding up buildings or grasping a sword hilt, but all feature straight, parallel legs. English sculptors dramatically departed from this pattern by giving their armored effigies crossed legs. In addition, many of the figures from the second half of the thirteenth century, and into the fourteenth, feature dynamic sword handling, not just grasping the hilt but actually reaching across the body to pull the sword out of its scabbard (**Figure 7**). The English type of armored figure has no parallel or equal for vigorous movement on the Continent..<sup>67</sup> Clearly, builders and patrons in medieval

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<sup>65</sup> Draper, 240.

<sup>66</sup> The major recent monographic sources on English military effigies include Judith Hurtig, *The Armored Gisant Before 1400* (New York: Garland Press, 1979); Harry A. Tummers, *Early Secular Effigies in England* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980); A. Morgenstern, *Gothic Tombs of Kinship*; and Rachel Dressler, *Of Armor and Men in Medieval England: The Chivalric Rhetoric of Three English Knights' Effigies* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Rachel Dressler, "Steel Corpse: Imaging the Knight in Death," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 144-145; eadem, *Of Armor and Men*, ch. 4 "The Knight's Social Body," 78-97.



**Figure 7** Effigy of a Knight, Dorchester Abbey Church. Photo: author.

England were interested in producing both architecture and figural art with a distinctive English approach.

*Mappa mundi* also suggest a consciousness of English singularity, this time in relation to its geography and natural resources, including alabaster. Kathy Lavezzo has noted that Britain's, hence England's, marginal location on certain examples of this genre contributed to a sense of cultural distinction.<sup>68</sup> By privileging their marginality, "on the edge of the world," according to the author, medieval writers resisted a religious universalism that threatened to de-value their island home.<sup>69</sup> In her discussion of the two-page map, the *Ramsey Abbey Map*, associated with the text of Ranulf Higden's mid-fourteenth-century *Polychronicon*, and presumably commissioned by the monks of that

<sup>68</sup> Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Lavezzo, 10.

foundation, Lavazzo points to England's (*Anglia*) large size in comparison to the rest of the world and to its distinctive red color as ways that the map focuses on England as a sovereign entity.<sup>70</sup> She argues that the text of the *Polychronicon* used England's geography to imagine a unified culture at a time of great political upheaval and divisiveness. Thus, in his second preface, Higden argues for a geographic cohesiveness that counteracts England's history of successive waves of conquest by Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, and Normans. Throughout its history, England maintains a spatial continuity and manifests as a land of bountiful natural resources: plants, animals, and minerals.<sup>71</sup>

Asa Mittman also notes the anxiety of English medieval writers over their remoteness from the sacred centers of Jerusalem and Rome. This might explain the relatively high number of surviving medieval maps of English production whose purpose could have been to relieve this cultural concern.<sup>72</sup> Thus, for Mittman, these maps served as vehicles by which the inhabitants of the island explored their own place within divine creation. His analysis of England's consistent location on the edge suggests a more ambivalent attitude embedded in this mapping of place: the edge occupied by England is both the zone of Paradise, Eden, and of monsters.<sup>73</sup>

In contrast, the *Wilton Diptych* offers a quite different perspective on the relationship between England and divinity. Nigel Morgan has suggested that the painting declares Christ and the Virgin's special attachment to the island and its king.<sup>74</sup> While the

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<sup>70</sup> Lavazzo, 71.

<sup>71</sup> Lavazzo, 84-85.

<sup>72</sup> Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

<sup>73</sup> Mittman, 48 and 59.

<sup>74</sup> Nigel Morgan, "The Signification of the Banner in the Wilton Diptych," in Dillian Gordon, Lisa Monnas, and Caroline Elam, eds., *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997), 179-188.

presence of two royal saints, Edmund and Edward the Confessor, reinforces this reading, it is really the banner, displaying the Cross of St. George, on which Morgan rests his conclusions. As the author notes, the banner functioned as the standard of the nation. The pennant is topped by an orb containing a miniscule depiction of an island with a small double-turreted castle, surrounded by a silver sea supporting a masted boat. This ship serves as a symbol for England and is represented as the dowry of the Virgin.<sup>75</sup> The painting shows the infant Christ in the act of blessing this banner, underscoring his and his Mother's support of the nation and its ruler.

While they differ somewhat in their conclusions concerning the function of *mappa mundi* for English medievals, Lavezzo and Mittman share a recognition that in these works England's sense of singularity is made visible. Moreover, it is the geographic territory that performs this cultural work. The land itself provides the continuity of identity that the history of England, with its successive invasions and migrations, does not. In Lavezzo's reading especially, the land emphasized by location, size, and color did not simply represent a stable place in the world for a culture in continual flux, but was also perceived as enabling a bountiful existence through its resources.

By the second half of the fourteenth century, one of those resources was alabaster, pulled out of the very land that reinforced England's sense of itself. Indeed, the naming of the material as alabaster, in addition to its ancient and biblical status, may have also been motivated by such a connection between the stone and land from which it comes. As far back as Pliny's *Natural History*, and also appearing in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the Layamon *Brut*, Britain was referred to as Albion, a term derived from the Latin

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<sup>75</sup> Morgan, 185. For the orb see Dillian Gordon, "Introduction," in Gordon *et al*, *The Regal Image of Richard II*, 22-23.

*albus*, meaning white.<sup>76</sup> John Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* also employs the term and specifically associates it with whiteness, "First this land was called Albion from its white rocks."<sup>77</sup> It would not have been much of a stretch to associate the whiteness characteristic of English "rocks" to alabaster, whose whiteness would suggest it as the quintessential English stone, found in abundance in English soil.

Thus, alabaster's prestige value persisted in and may have motivated later aristocratic commissions, but it may have also gained an additional connotation of Englishness due to its identification with the abundant resources of the island. Woods suggests that alabaster also had cultural significance for Edward III and his close associates, as demonstrated by the number of royal monuments employing it after its use in Edward II's tomb.<sup>78</sup> Obviously, once this formerly undervalued stone was chosen to grace the memorials of kings and queens, it must have acquired enough cachet to appeal to other English elite, but they may have also responded to the same cultural prompt as their rulers.

The close geological association between alabaster and English soil may have added extra resonance to its use in Edward II's and other royal effigies, as well as to the aristocratic figures that followed. Emulation of the Saint Denis royal monuments may have been one of the original motivations for turning to alabaster, however, with the

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<sup>76</sup> The discussion of the Albion's etymology and meaning is taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the entry for Albion.

<sup>77</sup> *Firste this ilond higte Albion, as it were the white lond, of white rokkes aboute the clyues of the see that were i-seie wide. Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis; Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Churchill Babington, series, *The Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland During the Middle Ages*, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), 5. My gratitude to Jennifer Brown for the translation.

<sup>78</sup> Woods, "The Fortunes of Art," 93.

outbreak of the Hundred Years War, competition may have also figured in the decision to choose a “native” stone. What better way to rival their adversaries, and reinforce their own identities, than for English royals and aristocrats to use an English natural resource for their memorials?

In fact, alabaster may not have just reinforced Englishness, it could also have been instrumental in constructing such an identity because of the material's abundance relative to supplies on the Continent.<sup>79</sup> As has been well-noted, hundreds of English-made alabaster carvings survive from all over Continental Europe, testifying to the success of the island's alabaster trade in the late Middle Ages.<sup>80</sup> The raw material was also exported.<sup>81</sup> Since no other area of Europe could produce the quantity or quality of English alabaster, the material would have been closely identified with the island realm. Alabaster resonated with England at home and abroad.

John IV, Duke of Brittany's, tomb presents an interesting variation on this possible link between alabaster and Englishness, for, although he was not English, he had very close ties to the English king Edward III. He lived in exile in England with his mother, Joan de Flandres, and his sister, also Joan, in the early part of the Breton Civil War over rightful succession to the duchy of Brittany in the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>82</sup> In 1345, he was committed to Edward's care by his father, who had recently escaped from France. He was also briefly married to Edward's daughter, Mary.<sup>83</sup> He was dependent on Edward for an income until John's return to Brittany in 1362, at which point he agreed to

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<sup>79</sup> Ramsay, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Ramsay, 38.

<sup>81</sup> Cannan, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Jones, *Ducal Brittany 1364-1399: Relations with England and France during the Reign of Duke John IV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, 17.

a number of conditions which maintained his bond with the English ruler.<sup>84</sup> It is possible that the use of English alabaster for his tomb was another sign of his English connection. On the other hand, his commissioning an effigy of English alabaster may also represent a continental recognition of and admiration for this flourishing English practice.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, alabaster, a previously undervalued material, may have become so popular for elite memorials starting in the later fourteenth century because it served several needs so adroitly: it was convenient to obtain, easy to work, and similar to marble in its ability to represent pure unblemished flesh. In addition, for English royals, intent on recovering credibility and prestige for the Crown after the disasters associated with Edward II, alabaster's white luminous surface offered not just the aura of sanctity, but also of antiquity suggesting a permanence that transcended the misfortunes and vagaries of any particular reign. It is the same reason that marble appealed to French royals. Finally, alabaster offered English aristocrats a means of outdoing their French counterparts and emphasizing their Englishness at a time of conflict, while also claiming a spiritual superiority. For all these reasons, alabaster was the perfect answer. 🐼

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<sup>84</sup> Jones, 18