THE EASTER SEPULCHRE

By WILLIAM H. FORSYTH

Associate Curator of Mediaeval Art

Easter was celebrated as a great festival of the Christian Church at an even earlier date than Christmas, and one of the most interesting parts of the service in the Middle Ages was the commemoration of the visit of the Holy Women to the Sepulchre on Easter morning. This observance was, strictly speaking, not a part of the liturgy but was inserted before the Introit when the choir chanted a trope as the officiating priest was going to the altar to say Mass. The trope was really a short dialogue between the Angel and the Three Marys. To the Angel’s question: Whom do ye seek? (Quem quaeritis?), the Marys answered: Jesus of Nazareth. This observance developed in the tenth century into a liturgical drama performed in the church with members of the clergy impersonating the Angel and the Three Marys. Entirely separate from the Mass, it now took place at Easter dawn, when, according to Saint Matthew, the Holy Women “came to see the sepulchre.”

The mise en scène of the liturgical drama of the Three Marys, usually referred to as the Visitation of the Sepulchre, is vividly presented in the Concordia Regularis, drawn up at Winchester in the tenth century for the use of Benedictine monasteries in England. A translation of pertinent extracts follows:

“While the third lesson [that is, of Easter Matins] is being chanted let four brothers vest themselves and let one of them vested in a white alb enter as if to perform some other duty and go secretly to the place of the sepulchre [usually at or near one of the altars] and let him sit there quietly holding a palm in his hand. And while the third response is being chanted, let the three others follow... [often with their heads covered like women] bearing censers with incense in their hands and advancing slowly to the sepulchre in the manner of those seeking something. For these things are done in imitation of the angel sitting on the monument [tomb] and of the women coming with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. When therefore he who sits there shall see the three... draw nigh to him let him begin to intone softly in a sweet voice: Whom do ye seek? This being sung to the end let these three respond with one voice: Jesus of Nazareth, to whom he replies: He is not here; He is risen as He foretold. Go, announce that He is risen from the dead. At the word of his command let the three turn to the choir saying: Alleluia, the Lord is risen. After this is said let him, as if calling them back, say the antiphon: Come and see the place. Saying these words let him rise up and lift the veil and show the place bare of the cross, but only the cloths placed there in which the cross was wrapped. [It was the custom to lay a cross in a sepulchre in the church on Good Friday and to remove it very early on Easter morning.] Seeing this let them place the censers which they have borne in the sepulchre and let them take out the cloth and hold it up before the clergy and, as showing that the Lord is risen and is no longer wrapped therein, let them sing the antiphon, The Lord is risen from the sepulchre and let them place the cloth upon the altar. The antiphon being finished, let the prior, rejoicing with them in the triumph of our king who by conquering death has risen, begin the hymn: We praise Thee, O God, and, this begun, all the bells are to peal forth together.”

Interesting parallels may be drawn between the liturgical drama of the Three Marys and the many representations of the subject in mediaeval art. These similarities arise at least in part from the influence of the liturgy upon the other arts as well as upon the liturgical drama. A twelfth-century ivory relief representing the scene at the Easter sepulchre was included in the important collection given to the Museum by George Blumenthal in 1941.
In this ivory the first of the Three Maries carries a censer like those used in the plays, and their dress suggests the albs of the clerics who impersonated the women in the plays and who sometimes wore their amices over their heads to suggest veils. The shroud of Christ, hung over the side of the tomb as a symbol of the Resurrection, was an important stage property in the plays. The two soldiers of Pilate lying prostrate in front of the sepulchre are “as dead men,” in the words of the Gospel. In later liturgical plays the soldiers were sometimes painted on the front of the sepulchre and sometimes impersonated by clerics appointed to keep watch in the church near the sepulchre. The background in our
Ivory gives the effect of the church setting of the play. Kingsley Porter went so far as to suggest that the central architectural feature represented the ciborium of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which was built by the crusaders in the twelfth century. The crown light hanging over the sepulchre is of a type often used in the eleventh and twelfth centuries over the crossing or in the sanctuary of a church as a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem. According to one thirteenth-century text from Monza a crown light in the choir was to be lit just before the start of the liturgical drama.

In Cologne, where the Ivory was made, there were a number of such crown lights, including a particularly famous one in the abbey church of Saint Pantaleon. The personification of the “sun” suggests the moment when the holy women “came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun,” in the words of Saint Mark.

Our ivory, combined with others in the same series, some of which are still in existence, probably was originally used to decorate the front of an altar in a church in Cologne, perhaps being attached to an altar in one of the churches where the liturgical drama of Easter morning was enacted.


Ivory relief also made at Cologne in the xii century. In the Kunstgewerbe Museum, Cologne. Height 8 1/4 inches. The ciborium resembles that in the ivory on page 164.