

## The Symbolism of the Brass of Thomas de la Mare.

By H. O. CAVALIER.

**M**R. Ernest Woolley's beautiful photographs of this brass, published in the last number of our Transactions, deserve to be followed by some interpretation of the symbolical design. Every detail of this elaborate brass has a tale to tell, but we do not propose to treat of matters which belong to the province of ecclesiastical symbolism, such as the vestments worn by the Abbat; it is difficult, however, to explain the motive of this memorial without some reference to the religious significance which inspired so much of the work of the Middle Ages. Symbolism is a subject which has not received much attention in this country; we are content to label work as Norman or Decorated without asking what was the ideal in the mind of the designer. There must have been some inspiration behind the rapid advance of Gothic architecture; yet the subject is baffling, for we have to transport ourselves to the days before Caxton printed a book, days when gentlemen who could not sign their names were perfectly at home among the heraldic devices of a thousand families. When Gaffer Hodge entered the portal of his parish church, he could read a meaning in traceries and carvings which are a sealed book to us. Some valiant spirits in modern times have tried to bridge the gulf by a free use of the imagination, but the results have not been trustworthy. The subject has received more attention on the Continent, especially in France, where the work of Emile Mâle has laid a sound foundation; an example of his method will show how thoroughly he has pursued his investigations.

Brasses of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries nearly always portray a youthful figure, although the deceased may have attained to old age; the brass of Thomas de la Mare shows a firm erect figure and a youthful face; he died at the age of 87, and even if he had ordered the brass thirty years before his death, the por

trait would verge on flattery. A similarly youthful appearance is given to the stone effigies carved on tombs of this period, and the French investigators noticed the same characteristic in the figures of the Elect rising at the Last Judgment, in the scene carved on some of the magnificent portals of French churches; the Elect had no children among them, and no old men. Diligent research in the writings of two of the standard theologians of the time, Vincent of Beauvais and Honorius of Autun, led them to the solution of this problem; both authors emphatically state that at the Resurrection every man will have the same age as that of Christ on the day of His Resurrection; the old man will be rejuvenated, the infant of a day will be in the prime of life. There is in this no fancy of the modern interpreter, for the actual writings of the period are quoted in evidence.

Although the brass is laid horizontally, the vision is to be regarded as seen in an upright position; if we refer to the photograph we see that the Abbat stands erect; his vestments are not collapsed like those of a recumbent figure. He shows none of the infirmity of age, yet he does not wear the garb of youth, but the full insignia of the honoured end of his career. It may seem strange that he had his own memorial made during his lifetime, but this was a sign that he had done with ambition and craved no higher insignia of honour. He wears the robes of his sacred office, ready to rise at the Last Day to meet the Judge; then all Christians will appear in their robes of honour, their last earthly tribute of homage to their Lord before they don the robes of light. To none will that Day bring greater felicity than to the priests of Christ, for Holy Writ proclaims "Thou art a priest for ever." So the Abbat stands, awaiting the call; he is ready for action—a characteristic of English memorials. He is not only erect; his stature is raised to a loftier height, for he is treading under foot the lions of sin and temptation, which go about seeking to devour the souls of men; his death is the end of a long fight; it is a triumph.

The crosier shows the Lamb bearing the Cross of the Resurrection; the Abbat is not grasping the crosier—here we have an indication of death, as also in the crossed hands on which the gaze is rivetted; the hands are not

clasped in supplication, but crossed in sign of calm and confident faith in the Cross. This faith is attested by the symbolical seals of the four Evangelists, seen at the corners of the brass; the Gospels preserve the predictions of the Last Day, and their symbols will be seen in the sky, around the Judge. In the place of honour is the Eagle of St. John, who wrote the Apocalypse; and within the border of the brass is a veritable "golden-spined Apocalypse," for the effigy of the Abbat is set in a framework of the soaring pinnacles of the City of Heaven and its sacred mansions, the Abodes of the Blest. At the summit we see the shining tiles of the roof of "Jerusalem the Golden," a reference which may serve to remind us how deeply the mediæval imagination had been stirred by the great hymn of Bernard of Morlaix. The central figure, above the Abbat, has suffered from the hand of time, but the bare foot—a sign of Christ and the Apostles—seems to show that this is the Christ seated on the Throne of Judgment; on either side Angels offer the prayers of men by means of incense, while other Angels sound the harmonies of Heaven. These are flanked by the figures of St. Peter and St. Paul, seated on thrones, as they will appear at the Judgment. St. Peter holds the Key of Heaven, with the sacred Cross cut in its wards, a feature of some old church keys. Beneath each Apostle is a casket with the lid just in act of opening; perhaps these recall the words, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven."

In the lower part of the framework six other Apostles are shown, each of them accompanied by a Prophet; in this companionship the Apostles are regarded as uttering the clauses of the Apostles' Creed for which each of them was responsible, and we are reminded that they thus fulfilled the earlier predictions of the Prophets. The scrolls are too small for the messages, but these were well known:

*Upper pair: the fundamental doctrines of the Faith.*  
*Left* St. John, "He suffered . . . was crucified, dead,  
 and buried."  
 Daniel, "After seventy weeks shall Christ be  
 killed."

*Right* St. James, "He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."  
Isaiah, "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive."

*Middle pair: faith in the Holy Trinity.*

(St. Peter, at the summit, "I believe in God the Father Almighty.")

*Left* St. Andrew, "And in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord."  
David, "The Lord said unto me, Thou art my Son."

*Right* St. Bartholomew, "I believe in the Holy Ghost."  
? Haggai, "My Spirit remaineth among you."  
or Joel, "I will pour forth my Spirit on all flesh."

*Lower pair: the Resurrection and Judgment.*

*Left* St. Thomas, "He went down into Hades; on the third day He rose again."  
Hosea, "O death, I shall be thy death:  
I shall be thy sting, O grave."

*Right* St. Philip, "From thence He shall come to judge the living and dead."  
? Zephaniah, "I shall ascend to you in judgment,  
And I shall be a swift witness."

(St. Paul, at the summit, "The Life Everlasting.")

The whole composition is adorned with symbolical emblems; the central niche, in which the Abbat stands, is all inlaid with patines of creatures in adoration, and is surmounted by seven cusps which announce that the Seven Ages of his earthly life have run their course. All this is intended to tell us that the eye of faith can pierce the veil and gain some intuitions of the glory that awaits us. It is for this reason that special prominence is given to the two Saints who stand on either side of the Abbat's head, St. Alban and one of the Saxon Kings; our own Saints, in our own land, have continued the messages of the Apostles and Prophets; and these two, who seem especially appropriate to this

Abbey, form a link with all the brotherhood of those who have worshipped within its walls; they will all rise together at the Last Day, with St. Alban returning to lead them—such would seem to be the meaning of this last message of the great Abbat: for the last time the anthem of praise will ring through the hallowed building, sung by that countless host, all facing to the east where their eyes, endued with immortal vision, can pierce the walls and gaze upon the sign of the Son of Man in the sky; there steals down to them the call of the Messengers of Christ, whose words they treasured on earth, whose voices they now can hear; already they see the fretted pinnacles and gleaming roofs of the City of God, their endless home. It was the Abbat's last sermon.