

SOME FINE HAMPSHIRE FONTS.

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Among the objects of Archæological interest in Hampshire may be reckoned many very fine Baptismal Fonts, some of them possessing very special characteristics.

Odiham has a 14th century example, with well-cut inscription of the text—

“Auxiliu meum a Dno : qui fecit Coelu t tra.”

It has also a curious stoup-like projection, the use of which has been the cause of much discussion.

Michelmersh has a fine font ornamented with large fleur de lys and grotesque heads.

The font at Portchester is tub-shaped, it is exceedingly handsome, and is ornamented with fine intersecting arches surmounted by interlaced ribbons and mythical animals.

Very many more fine Hampshire Fonts might be mentioned, but undoubtedly those of the highest archæological and historical interest are the fonts of Winchester, Southampton, East Meon and St. Mary Bourne.

These are all of the same date, type, and material, and although they vary somewhat in their ornamentation, they are all connected in some way by the subjects carved upon them.

The date and origin of this fine series of fonts, was long a disputed question among archæologists, but a careful study of the marble of which they are made, and of the subjects carved upon them, has led us to the conclusion that

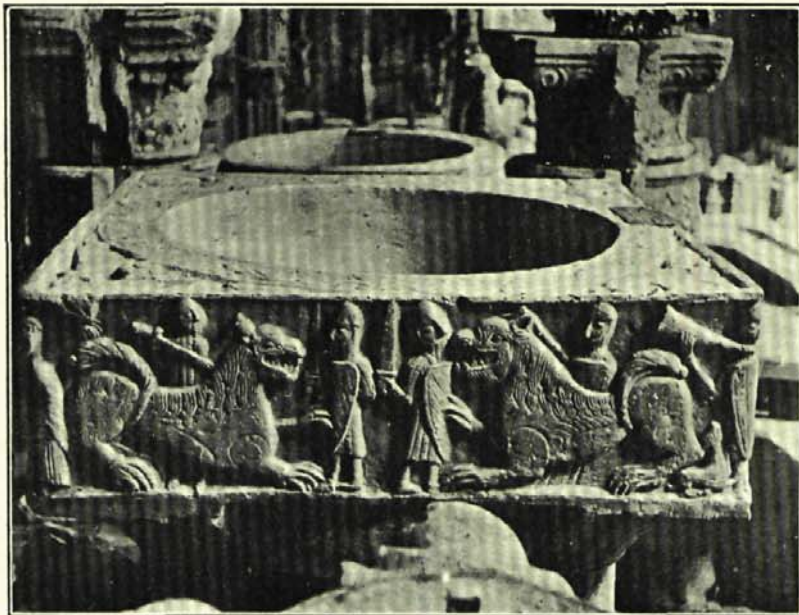
their date is circa 1160, and that they were either made in Belgium, or under the direction of Belgian workmen in England.

The marble of which they are all composed, is of a bluish-black colour, and very little of this is to be found in England, but at Tournai in Hainault quarries of it are still being worked, and it is significant that at Zedelghem and Termonde, both places near Tournai, are fonts of this marble of such similar size, shape and ornamentation as the Hampshire examples, that there can be no reasonable doubt that they were all made under the same influence.

On the fonts both in England and Belgium are carvings representing a Bishop, Knights in Armour, and Ladies, and as all these wear the costume of the 12th century, we may be sure that this is the date to which we may assign all these fonts, for it was the invariable practice of painters and sculptors before the 16th century, to represent their subjects in the dress of their own period, and not of the time in which their personages actually lived.

All the fonts of this series, both English and Continental, are of the same shape. They have a large heavy square block hollowed in the centre into a round basin. The block stands on a massive round central pillar, and is supported at each corner by four smaller ones. Many of these seem to have been originally ornamented by a spiral band, but in many instances they have been replaced by more modern pillars of quite plain character.

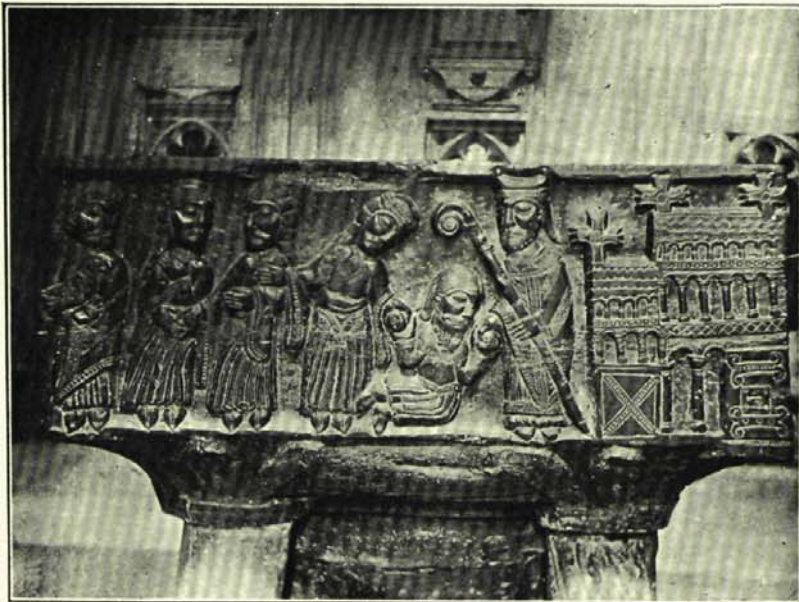
In all the fonts the large square block is profusely ornamented with bold carvings on each side of the square, on the flat top, and in some cases even on the under side of the block. The subjects carved are, many scenes in the life of St. Nicholas of Myra and the miracles performed by him; Knights fighting with mythical animals; birds and winged beasts of known and unknown shapes (often enclosed in dotted circles); a building, evidently representing the Cathedral of Myra; Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from Paradise, &c.



FONT. ZEDELGHEM, BELGIUM.



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FFONTS. WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL.



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Tournai was in very early times celebrated for stone-carvings, and we know that in the 11th century there was a well established School of Art there.

Dean Kitchen, in a Paper on the Winchester Font, read in August, 1893, tells us that—

“ There are many proofs of the extension of Tournai art and architecture ; wherever works of skill and delicacy were needed, Tournai men were sent for, and the Tournai artisans seem to have liked to travel with their own materials.”

Evidence points very strongly to Henry of Blois, brother of King Stephen, as the introducer of these fonts into England.

He was Bishop of Winchester from 1129 to 1171 ; he is known to have been an ardent archæologist, and to have collected many things for the enrichment of his Cathedral, and the Churches in his diocese. The Churches of Southampton, East Meon and St. Mary Bourne, which possess fonts of the same type as the one at Winchester, were all under his jurisdiction.

Our conclusion as to the date of the fonts rests mainly on the consideration of the costumes worn by the figures that are carved upon them.

In early times Bishops wore no distinctive head-dress ; in fact, Ecclesiastical dress in the Anglo-Saxon period did not differ greatly from that worn by the laity. Bishops sometimes wore gorgeous fillets on their heads, but there was no special form worn until the very end of the 11th century, after which a cap or mitre of crescent-shape with low, round ends was adopted. This was called the *mitre corniculata*. An example may be seen in the Cottonian MSS. in the British Museum (Nero C. IV., 12th century).



**"MITRE
CORNICULATA."**

Brit. Mus. Cotton. MSS.
Nero C. IV. XII. cent.



"MITRE BIFIDA."

Glass at Chartres, early
XIII. cent.

This shaped mitre is worn by St. Nicholas as represented
on the fonts at Winchester and Zedelghem.

The fashion lasted until the beginning of the 13th century, when it gave place to a high-peaked mitre called the *Mitre Bifida*.

The Knights represented on the fonts wear the nasal helmet so characteristic of the Norman period, similar to those shown in the Bayeux Tapestry, while the civilians are shown with closely-cropped heads, and the ladies have long flowing hair, braided with jewels.

Another evidence of the date may be found in the ornamental pattern of the bands on some of the dresses, which is almost identical with that on the 12th century slab of St. Michael in Ely Cathedral, where he is shown carrying souls to Heaven in a fold of his garment; again the peculiar curl of the hair of the manes of the beasts represented is found in early MSS., but not after the 13th century.

The principal subjects on the Winchester and Zedelghem Fonts, are representations of the miracles worked by St. Nicholas of Myra.

St. Nicholas, the beloved Santa Claus of our childhood, was the Patron Saint of Virgins, Boys, Sailors, and the worshipful Company of Parish Clerks of the City of London!

His fame as patron of the Clerks is not commemorated on the fonts, but reference is made on them of his protection of Virgins, Boys and Sailors.

The most striking coincidence of scenes on the two fonts of Winchester and Zedelghem is one relating to him, as the Patron Saint of Boys.

A certain nobleman promised if he had a son, to give a gold cup to the shrine of the saint; the son was born, and the cup made, but it was so handsome that the avaricious father could not part with it, and gave instead a smaller silver cup. On a voyage with his parents the boy in trying to fill the gold cup with water fell into the sea and was drowned. The father, in remorse, prayed to the Saint and promised to give a larger gold cup if his son was given back to him, whereupon the Saint restored the boy to life. The child is represented on both fonts, as lying in the water with the cup in his hand, and the coincidence of the two

scenes is such, that everyone must be convinced that they were designed by the same person; but they are by no means replicas.

Another scene common to both fonts is the restoration to life of three boys, who were cruelly murdered by an inn-keeper and their bodies put into a tub to be sold as salt pork!

A scene representing the Saint as the Protector of Virgins is shown on both fonts. He is represented as giving a handsome marriage dowry to three girls who were too poor to marry, but the treatment of the subject varies on the two fonts.

The fonts of Termonde, in Belgium, and St. Michael, Southampton, closely resemble each other in their ornamentation, which consists of circles enclosing winged birds and beasts, but there is also at St. Michael's the representation of a winged angel.

St. Mary Bourne is principally decorated with foliage and hanging grapes.

East Meon has carvings of the Temptation and expulsion from Paradise of Adam and Eve.

It has also a representation of a cathedral similar to those on the Winchester and Zedelghem Fonts.

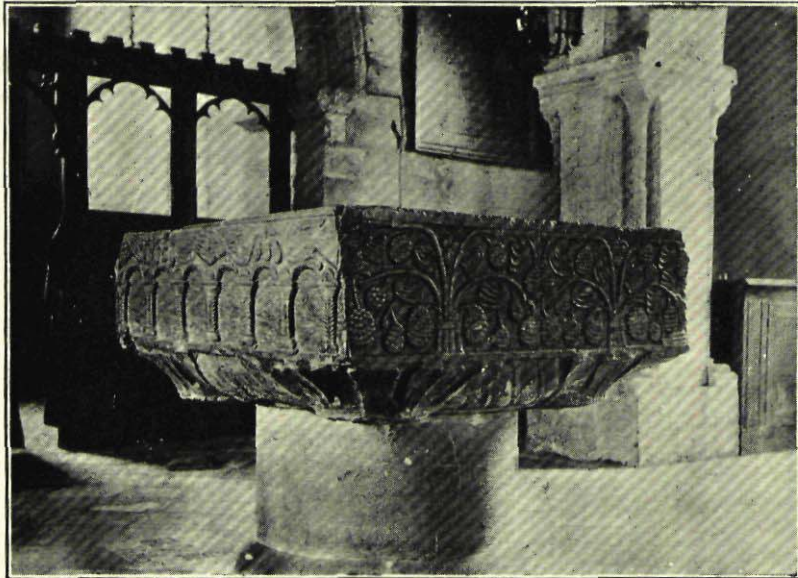
On all the fonts of this series, both in England and Belgium are carvings of peacocks with interlaced necks, doves, pairs of birds drinking together, and beasts of furious aspect.

St. Nicholas was a very favourite Saint in the 11th century. Many churches were dedicated to him, and in England alone are 362 to his honour.

Although Hampshire is the chief place where these fonts are to be found, there are a few others in England; the finest examples are in Lincoln Cathedral, and at Thornton Curtis, in Lincolnshire.

Another of the series may possibly be one at St. Peter's, Ipswich, but this differs from the others in some essential particulars.

The font at Iffley, Oxford, is of the same date, material, shape, and size as the Belgian series, but it is perfectly



FONT. ST. MARY BOURNE.



FONTS. EAST MEON.

plain and unornamented ; it is, however, a very fine font, and Iffley Church contains some of the finest examples of Norman work still remaining in England.

There are two examples of the fonts in France—one at Noiron-le-Vineaux, near Laon, and one at St. Just, on the Ouse, between Amiens and Paris.

Hampshire may well be congratulated on possessing by far the greatest number and the finest examples of these splendid and most interesting testimonies to the piety and munificence of our Norman Conquerors.

The photographs which illustrate this paper are used through the kindness of Mr. Francis Bond, Mr. E. M. Beloe, F.S.A., and Mrs. Pratt.