

ON FONTS.

Having been informed by the Secretary of the Bury and West Suffolk Archæological Institute, that a short paper on the subject of Fonts, read to the Society at Clare, had been ordered for publication, I have ventured to recall it, and to send an improved copy, hoping by it to induce members, who have more leisure than myself, to undertake the study of fonts, and especially those of this neighbourhood, for the purpose of noting down their peculiarities, with a view to the ascertaining their ages and the subjects of the various sculptures on them. Trusting that the intent with which the paper is written and sent may excuse its many imperfections, I shall, without further comment, proceed to the subject, first premising that I have made use of what works I could, at all bearing on the point, extracting passages from them *verbatim* where sufficiently concise for such a paper, and leaving out irrelevant matter.

It was the custom of the early Christians, from the times of the Apostles to the conversion of Constantine, when their religion became tolerated, and for some time after, to baptize their converts in the rivers and streams near their churches and places of assembly. Of this going from the church to the water, both Tertullian and Justin Martyr make mention. That Baptisteries quickly sprung up after the conversion of Constantine, may be seen from the following quotation from Eusebius, given in Bingham's *Antiquities of the Church*. Speaking of the church of Paulinus at Tyre, he says: "When that curious artist had finished his famous structure within, he then set himself about the Exedræ, or buildings that joined one to another by the sides of the Church", by which buildings, he tells us, he chiefly meant the place which was for the use of those who needed the purgation and sprinkling of water and of the Holy Ghost; that is, doubtless, the baptistery of the church. Baptisteries were usually separate from the church. Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, says that Severus built two churches and a baptistery between them both. St. Cyril of Jerusalem describes the baptistery as a separate building, with a porch or ante-room, where the catechumens made their renuncia-

tion of Satan and confession of faith, and then its inner room, where the baptism was performed. Sidonius Apollinaris speaks of it as a distinct building. That they were buildings of considerable size may be learnt from the fact that a council of Constantinople was held in the baptistery of the church. There appears to have been but one baptistery in a city or district, and that at the Bishop's church; in after ages, however, they were set up in country parishes, for the Council of Auxerre speaks of baptizing in villages at Easter, by allowance from the Bishop; likewise, licences appear to have been granted to priests to minister baptism, in order that the sick should not die without that sacrament.

The earliest name applied to the font was *piscina*, probably in allusion to the Greek word *πρηνος*, which was much venerated by the early Christians, as containing the first two letters of the title of the Saviour. Our own, as well as the French and Italian name, is derived from the Latin; the German *taufstein* seems to show that the fonts in that country were of stone, and the same is required by our present canons. Durandus says the water that typified baptism in the wilderness, flowed from a rock, because Christ, who gives forth the living water, is called in Scripture the corner stone, and the rock. Fonts for the immersion of adults were divided for the different sexes.

It seems to be generally allowed that baptisms did not take place in churches until the sixth century.

There are several baptisteries remaining in Europe, and it is desirable to notice their peculiarities, as many of these would probably be transferred from the building to the font. The earliest baptistery is at Ravenna, dating A. D. 390, and is of octagonal form. The font is an octagonal bath in the centre of the building, in which is now placed a kind of vase, for ordinary use; there is also in the bath a round ambon, or pulpit, in which the priest stands to administer the sacrament. The baptistery of St. John at the Lateran Basilica dates, according to Mr. Gally Knight, A. D. 440: it is octagonal, and contains an oval bath of porphyry in the centre. This is still used, as visitors to Rome will remember, for the baptism of converted Jews during Holy Week. In A. D. 1153, Anastasius IV. made great alterations in this

building, by raising the walls, adding a second tier of pillars, and a new roof.

In the neighbourhood of Rome is another building erected by Constantine near the church of St. Agnes, circular in shape, and said to have been a baptistery; it seems immediately afterwards to have been used as the burial place for Constantia, the daughter of the Emperor. An early writer (Anastasius) says that Constantine *here* built a baptistery, and as there are remains of no other building on this spot, that could be so called, this building has been thought to be a circular baptistery.

St. Maria in Cosmedin, at Ravenna, is externally an octagon, built in the sixth century for an Arian baptistery.

The baptistery at Florence is octagonal, and owes its foundation to Grimoaldus, A. D. 671. It was at first the Cathedral of Florence. The font inside is hexagonal, and comparatively modern, being of the latter part of the 14th century. St. Stefano, at Bologna, is considered by some to be the ancient baptistery of that place, circular in shape, and built in the eighth century. The baptistery at Cremona is an octagon, built about A. D. 800, in the Lombardic style. It has five projecting porches, supported on lions; in the centre is a font, hewn out of a single block of marble.

At Ratisbon, adjoining the cathedral, and within the quadrangle of the cloisters, is a small octagonal building, stone-vaulted, in the Lombardic style, of the 10th or 11th centuries, supposed to be a baptistery. Near it, is the ancient church, of Basilican form and arrangement.

The baptistery at Parma was built about the end of the 12th century. The exterior is an octagon; the interior has sixteen sides. There are four portals towards the four points of the compass. In the centre stands an octagonal font, cut out of one immense block of marble, and, according to the inscription, made A. D. 1298.

The baptistery at Pisa is circular, and dates of the middle of the 12th century. The font is a large octagonal bath in the centre of the building, formed by a wall 2ft. 7in. high, and raised on three steps. There are smaller fonts attached inside, to each diagonal face of the great font, for the baptism of infants.

The ancient baptistery at Padua is square in plan, and circular above. A modern baptistery at Spoleto, in the *Renaissance* style, is likewise square in plan, but octagonal above.

Baptisteries occur at Verona (called St. Giovanni in Fonte), at Volterra and Pistoia, of octagonal form. Excepting the instance at Padua, all ancient baptisteries seem to have been round or octagonal, and the instances of the latter are far more numerous.

The fonts in these baptisteries generally followed in shape the outline of the buildings in which they were placed. I must here notice that some other churches, not baptisteries, were built in the octagonal form, as St. Vitale at Ravenna, St. Sophia, Saints Sergius and Bacchus, at Constantinople. It is suggested by the Rev. B. Webb, in his excellent work on *Continental Ecclesiology*, that this form may have been used in these churches to suit the dome, which had at that time been improved and adopted at Constantinople.

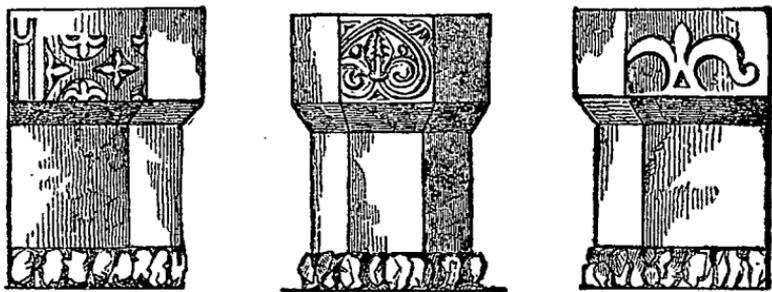
The circular form was more generally used for sepulchral edifices, as that of Theodrick, at Ravenna. The church of the Holy Sepulchre, built by the Empress Helena, being the earliest Christian example in this shape. It was probably borrowed from the heathen Romans, who used circular tombs; as the tombs of Cecilia Metella, Augustus, and Hadrian, the latter known as the castle St. Angelo.

Having thus gone through all the most celebrated baptisteries abroad, we may next examine the accounts we have of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers, and what remains we find of that period. In Spelman's *Anglo-Saxon Councils* we learn that the council of Cloveshoe (A. D. 747) commanded that the Roman ritual should be universally followed. Lingard gives the following account of the mode of baptism in his *History and Antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon Church*: "The regular manner of administering it was by immersion. The time—the two eves of Easter and Pentecost; the place—the baptistery, a small building contiguous to the church, in which had been constructed a convenient bath, called the font. The adult, after his profession, descended into the font; the priest depressed his head three times below the surface, with the necessary words of baptism. In the baptism of infants, the sponsors,

with the male children, stood on the right side of the font; those with the females on the left. The priest descended into the water which reached his knees; each child in succession was given into his hands and plunged thrice into the water, he pronouncing the proper words, and then returning it to its sponsors. Bede mentions that the missionaries did not wait for the construction of baptisteries and fonts, but baptized their proselytes in rivers and running water. After the conversion of a nation, in the course of a generation or two, the baptism of adults ceased, and none but infants, and those too of recent birth, were brought to the font at the appointed times. The single baptisms increased, and the baptisteries were neglected, and it was found more convenient to place a font of wood or stone in the parish church, for, on account of the great importance attached to this sacrament, laws were enacted by both ecclesiastical and civil authority, to secure its administration to all children soon after their birth. The parish priest was ordered to be always ready both day and night, and if through his neglect the child died unbaptized, a severe punishment awaited him, amounting to the forfeiture of his benefice and the privileges of his order. Parents were likewise commanded to present their children within 30 days after their birth in the South of England, and within 9 days in Northumbria. If the child died without this sacrament, they were variously punished in different parts of England". Such a writer as Lingard would not without good reason say "it was found more convenient to place a font of *wood* or stone in the parish church"; so in this we have a key to explain the circumstance that few if any fonts remain of a date anterior to the Norman conquest: such at least is the opinion of some of the best of our archæologists. Again, it is well known that the Normans, wherever they came, rebuilt, enlarged, and entirely changed the appearance of the cathedrals and churches of our Saxon fathers. It is not unreasonable to suppose that so prominent a piece of church furniture as the font could have escaped alteration or demolition. The *Glossary of Architecture* mentions (without description) that a remarkable instance of a baptistery yet remains in Cranbrook, Kent. Mere enclosures of either open wood or stone work, forming a canopy to the font, as at

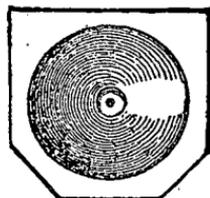
Luton, Bedfordshire, and St. Peter's Mancroft, Norwich, are not entitled to the name. Fonts occur in England of all shapes, from oval and square to the dodecagon, a nine-sided font excepted. The oldest form, according to Mr. Paley, is circular shaped, like a cylinder, and placed without any intermediate support on the ground; sometimes they are set on a mass of masonry, and sometimes on legs. The square font is perhaps the most common in the Norman period, though the octagon occasionally is met with, and this lasted until the transitional period, when the octagon form became general. The sculptures on the heavy Norman fonts are most curious and deserving of great attention. They are so numerous, and require so much explanation, that it will not be here possible to enter on the subject. Scriptural stories, legends of saints, and matters of topical interest, are often carved on them. Many sculptures are said to be figurative of the fall of man, and represent him as requiring the regenerating influence of baptism. These square fonts, when chamfered or bevilled round the edges and corners, soon advanced to the octagon form. The

FONT AT HAWKEDON CHURCH



ELEVATION

may be cited as an instance of transitional or late Norman style, where the angles are carved into engaged shafts, cushion capped, and possibly supported on legs below. On the parts remaining are some elegant Norman patterns, which first gave a clue to the original shape of the font, for the corners, where the engaged shafts remain, were entirely at that time concealed in the wall of the church, under mortar and whitewash.



PLAN

Early English fonts are more numerous than those of the decorated period, and are generally better carved; they are for the most part octagonal, with detached shafts, deep mouldings, and often with a sunken trefoil arch on the sides. A plain specimen of this date is to be seen in Drinkstone church. A few standing on arches are very beautiful.

Decorated fonts are comparatively rare, and with few exceptions octagonal, the diapers on them are very elegant, the canopies extremely rich, and the panels deeply recessed. In this and the following perpendicular period they seem to have been generally elevated on two or three steps.

Perpendicular fonts are more common than those of any other period, and present a greater sameness in appearance; they are almost all octagonal; the sides are panelled with quatrefoils, sometimes containing a Tudor-pattern rose or shield charged with emblems of the passion, or heraldic devices; on the alternate sides are generally the symbols of the four Evangelists, those at Pakenham and Little Whelnetham are of this kind. Inscriptions are not unfrequently found on fonts of this date; one in Greek, in this neighbourhood, at Hadleigh, and one exactly similar at Harlow, in Essex may be given here:—

N.I.Ψ.O.N.A.N.O.M.H.M.A.M.H.M.O.N.A.N.O.Ψ.I.N.

reading the same backwards and forwards—"Wash away my sin, and not my face only."

The material of fonts is generally stone, though some occur of lead, as at the contiguous villages of Dorchester, Warborough, and Long Wittenham. These are transitional or early English; that at the last mentioned place is circular, ornamented with small circles of foliage and a row of small figures under pointed arches. Mr. Paley's interesting work on fonts, enumerates as many as sixteen instances of leaden fonts of various dates. The font at Canterbury is said to have been of silver, that in Holyrood Chapel was of brass; it was afterwards presented to St. Alban's Abbey, and melted down during the civil wars. All fonts were required by a constitution of Edmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, A. D. 1236, to be covered and locked, some writers say in order to avoid sorcery, but more likely that they might be kept clean. No font-cover earlier than those of the perpendicular

period remain. Two, celebrated for their elaborate workmanship, remain in Suffolk, one at Ufford, near Woodbridge, and one at Sudbury. The basins of fonts were for the most part round, and lined with lead.

In the first part of this paper the shape of the ancient baptisteries has been mentioned as octagonal, and it has been shown that generally, except in the Norman period, this shape prevailed for fonts in our country, until the time of the Reformation. It may here be mentioned that the perpendicular font at Lavenham is hexagonal, and that at Elmswell heptagonal; other similar exceptions are so rare that an excuse and cause may easily be found, either in some flaw in the stone submitted to the workman for carving, or to some accident that induced a variation from the general form. It is a matter of enquiry, why Norman fonts should so differ in shape from those of all other periods, and a solution to the question may be derived from the circumstance, that the Normans symbolised facts rather than doctrines. The reason given in early times for the number eight being symbolical of Regeneration is, that as the old Creation was complete in seven days, so the next number ensuing may be considered symbolical of the new. Whether the Normans symbolised, under the circular form, the eternal life into which the newly baptised entered, and the square form, as typifying the completeness of the change made by the waters of baptism, must be left to those versed in medieval writings, for the enlightening those who are not. With Gothic architecture came the symbolising of doctrinal truths, and henceforward, in England, almost every font was octagonal. I cannot at all say when the Hawkedon font was shorn of its fair proportions, but I should suppose it a post-Reformation work.

In the subject of fonts, every member of our Institute may contribute to raise the knowledge of the archæologists of this neighbourhood, by sending to the Secretary an accurate account of the fonts—their shape, size, panelling, material, and whatever is remarkable in them—in the churches they may chance to visit. If this short account induces any person to collect a notice of the various fonts in this part of Suffolk the writer will be sincerely gratified.

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