

## THE ICONOGRAPHY OF DARENTH FONT.

BY THE REV. A. H. COLLINS, M.A., F.S.A.

THE writer has taken an interest in Darenth font for upwards of thirty-five years, ever since he first knew the excellent outline drawings of Mr. J. Romilly Allen in his *Christian Symbolism*, where all the subjects are illustrated. There is, however, no adequate description in this book. The font is tub-shaped, bevelled and moulded at the top and bottom. Its diameter is three feet, its height two feet three inches. The separate base is not ancient. The ornament consists of an arcade of eight engaged arches, whose faces are  $1\frac{1}{8}$  inches wide ; seven of these are flat, and the eighth bears a slight decoration as described below. Each arch encloses a subject. In the spandrels between the arches are alternate circular and octagonal bosses. Some have the additional ornament of a ring of pellets, and others a sketchy whorl pattern. The material is Caen stone.

I now take the sculpture in each panel, beginning with the eastern face, and following a clockwise direction. Afterwards each separate subject will be discussed.

(1) The rite of baptism by immersion (Plate Ia). A woman stands on the left and a priest on the right, with a font in the centre containing a child. The woman's sleeves are widened at the wrists, and her skirt is full. She stands in profile. Her hair hangs in a long plait down her back. Her right hand is close to, or actually touching, the infant's head. The priest is standing in a similar manner though three-quarter face. He appears to be vested in an alb and a cope or cloak fastened at the throat. The cope falls back over the shoulders. His "braccæ" or wide trousers can be seen below the thin material of the alb. No stock can be seen. He is touching the child's forehead perhaps with one finger. His left foot is advanced on to the step of the font. The font basin is tub-shaped resting on a smaller polygon, and this on a long stem and two steps. Its scale is considerably smaller than that of the usual Norman font.

(2) A long-haired and bearded figure facing left (Plate Ib). At the neck of his tunic he has a collar extending a little down the chest, so that it might easily be slipped over his head. The skirt of his tunic seems to be drawn up over a belt. The right hand of the figure holds a club (or perhaps a bone) raised to the level of his head ; his left hand grasps the tail of a sort of dragon, whose semi-human face is turned back to the right. The dragon's forepaws seem to rest on a kind of pedestal of two projections, or may even be reflected as from water.



PLATE 16.



16.



a.



PLATE IIb & c.

(3) A lion (or pard) rampant (Plate IIa). It is hardly possible to settle which animal it is; it has a pearled and bushy tail. Conventional foliage on the left at the bottom corner serves to fill up an empty space. This is an instance of what Dr. Jurgis Baltrusaitis calls a feature of Romanesque sculpture—"l'horreur du vide."

(4) A griffin facing left (Plate IIb). It has a very bushy tail passing between the legs, and going over the back. The ears are pointed; the wings and the base of the neck and the tail are pearled. Conventional foliage again fills in the left bottom corner. The arch above has the interesting variation discussed below.

(5) A sagittarius or centaur with bow and arrow (Plate IIc). It is facing right and may be aiming at the griffin. Its forelegs are raised. The creature has long hair and pointed ears and is looking backwards.

(6) A king crowned and seated on a throne (Plate IIIa). He is striking a harp. The throne has high sides, and the seat is suspended—as in the carving of the archbishop at Barfreton—on a braced frame. The king is David in his beardless youth. The harp lacks the symmetry of the beautiful harp on Barfreton south doorway. David's bent arm emerges from a super-tunic to pluck the strings of the instrument.

(7) A composite ornamental creature with a bearded head on his chest, and a bird's head and wings above and behind (Plate IIIb). The creature has two thickish legs which might be human; the right leg is uplifted and touching a large piece of foliage. Both heads face left; there is a stumpy foliated tail. The body and foliage are adorned with pearls. The bird's head has crest and wattles.

(8) A standing figure with long hair and crown (Plate IIIc). His tunic and ornamented super-tunic fall below his knees. His right hand holds a flabellum or perhaps a sceptre like a fan. This sculpture somewhat resembles one on the south doorway of Riccall in Yorkshire, where however the figure is obviously a woman with a fan.

(1) The rite of baptism. The scene here carved is capable of no other interpretation; it cannot represent the Baptism of our Lord. At Kirkburn, Yorks., and Fincham, Norfolk, it is possible that we have His Baptism. In both these latter fonts, the person baptized is upright in the basin as at Darenth, but the officiant at Darenth must be a priest rather than St. John the Baptist. At Thorpe Salvin, Yorks., we certainly have the rite of baptism, for the priest is vested in alb and stole and immersing a nude infant, while the sponsors are stretching out their hands to emphasize their vows.

The Darenth baptism has no connection with the Nativity, which is sometimes accompanied by a vessel indistinguishable from a font. In a tenth century Byzantine ivory panel at the British Museum there is a scene in the foreground of which is seated a very pensive St. Joseph,

while a midwife is bathing the child in a two-handled vessel which is not unlike a font. A carving on the west front of Notre Dame, Poitiers, much resembles the ivory panel. It represents the Child in a vessel indistinguishable from a chalice font; He has a cruciform nimbus and is attended by women on each side of Him. St. Joseph rests his face on his hand as in the Byzantine ivory.

In the disposition and form of the Darenth baptism a certain rhythm or balance of parts is noticeable; the heads of the larger figures, their arms, their shoulders and their legs are in such rough correspondence that dependence on some external ornamental form is suggested. Dr. Baltrusaitis has shown with penetration and lucidity many of the secrets of Romanesque sculpture and ornament. Romanesque ornament is always subservient to the claims of architectural construction; it is never allowed to be a mere encrustation of the fabric. And further, the attitudes which figure sculptures assume are very often based on some established ornamental design. Most of the Darenth carvings give the impression of being carefully accommodated to their architectural setting, whilst the baptismal scene in particular appears to follow the main lines of the common palmette motif. In his studies of twelfth century detail, the writer has been astonished to find how very close the connection is between the palmette, and carvings of human beings, animals or birds. The three pairs of doves on the Tournai black marble font at Winchester Cathedral are a clear example of palmette arrangement. Dr. Baltrusaitis has followed up in a fascinating manner the influence of this and of other floral forms even on the splendid Romanesque tympana of France.

(2) There seems to be no satisfactory explanation of the man attacking a dragon. The scene may perhaps symbolize the eternal conflict between good and evil. Such subjects as St. George or St. Michael killing the dragon hardly meet the difficulty, for while they are common enough in the Norman period, there is a marked similarity about their representation. It would be hardly possible for one of these figures to be represented with a club or a bone; nor can Samson be carved here, for the beast can scarcely be the lion which he slew.

(3) The lion (or pard) rampant. A pard in the Bestiaries is the male of the panther, but is lacking in the good symbolism of the latter. It is very fierce, covered with spots and of unsatisfactory lineage. In the Darenth carving the pard is in profile, and not as usual turned full face. Mr. G. C. Druce thinks that the pard is the original of the heraldic leopard, but there is no heraldic significance in the carving we are considering.

(4) The griffin. Examples of this animal in sculpture of the twelfth century can be instanced from Barfreston, Dalmeny, Iffley, Steetley, Fishlake, and St. Margaret's, York.



a & b.



PLATE IIIc.

The griffin is compounded of an eagle and a lion, and is frequently given in the medieval Bestiaries as a type of the devil, who is as strong to carry away human souls, as the griffin is to fly off with the largest creatures. The ornament of the arch over the griffin panel is worthy of examination and comment. In the pre-Norman period this form of the step ornament cannot have been very uncommon. Professor Baldwin Brown in his *Arts and Crafts of our Teutonic Forefathers*, illustrates two examples. One is on Pl. XIV, which represents a runic fibula from Charnay, and the other on Pl. XXVII, where it is the chief adornment of a tinned-bronze buckle at Brussels. A monumental example of this special type may be found as far away as Cumberland. Over sixty years ago Canon E. H. Knowles illustrated this ornament on the bases of the rectangular panels on the east and west faces of a tenth century cross at Muncaster. I hear that the design is still recognizable. A cross at Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, has this motif on the base and sides.

While the step ornament in its Darenth form is probably unique for the first half of the twelfth century, yet other varieties of this same motif are not uncommon on capitals and hood-moulds in Norman work. We find it, for instance, on the capitals of three Norman doorways at Stow in Lincolnshire, and also on the hood-mould of the north doorway of Stewkley in Buckinghamshire. The nave arches at St. Margaret's-at-Cliffe have excellent step work on their hood-moulds too. In all these latter examples the ornament consists of two flights of steps, one up and one down, repeated at will. On the capitals of the Norman south doorway of Bulley, Gloucestershire, the steps are repeated, upside down. Probably all these forms have their origin in Teutonic jewellery where the cloisons or compartments are constantly outlined in this way.

(5) The sagittarius is the sign of the Zodiac for November-December but the representation of this sign gives no indication that other signs will be represented close by. Indeed it is very rare in Anglo-Norman sculpture for the Zodiac to be carved as a whole. Do we know why the archer is represented so often alone? Mr. F. A. Paley was of the opinion that, as the sagittarius was the badge of King Stephen, its presence indicates that the fabric dates from his time. On the strength of a sagittarius being carved on the west doorway of Porchester, the writer of the short guide to that church suggests a date in Stephen's reign for the construction. But the creature certainly appears in later Norman as well. It may be popular because of the medieval Bestiaries. It is said to live in India where it is at enmity with the savage man. The savages symbolize souls which long to live in peace with their Creator. On the font at West Rounton and on the south doorway of Bishop Wilton (both in Yorkshire) the combat

of the two enemies is carved ; but elsewhere as at Darenth the sagittarius is attacking a griffin or a monster.

(6) The frequent appearance of David in Christian art hardly needs explanation ; he is common in architectural representations because he is popular in the manuscripts. The Irish crosses have many carvings of many events of his life, but it is difficult to recall another Norman example of David with his harp. It is more usual to find him fighting the lion.

(7) Such two-faced and two-headed creatures are not uncommon in French Romanesque, where the mason's inventiveness surpasses even that of his colleague in England. On a voussoir at Aulnay (Baltrusaitis, *La stylistique ornamentale*, Fig. 763) is a strange monster, half-bird, half-man, where the human head is on the breast of a bird-like creature as at Darenth ; but the bird's head at Aulnay is set on a long curved neck like a swan's. The single prototypes of this composite monster at Aulnay may be found on neighbouring arch stones. At Tarragona, too, is an equally absurd bas-relief ; but there the human head is at the end of a longish neck, and a second head acts as a terminal to his plaited hair.

(8) It seems impossible on the evidence before us to identify this king with any certainty. He may be David carved once more.

This article could hardly have been written without the help of the writer's old friend, Mr. G. C. Druce, F.S.A. He has been most helpful with suggestions, and also with the loan of two of his photographs which had to be taken by flashlight. Miss Mary Fair, D.Sc., has most kindly paid a special visit to Muncaster to ascertain whether the step pattern can still be found on the cross there. She is of the opinion that it is only on the west face, and that the ornament on the east face is a chain motif.

Books specially referred to :

*La stylistique ornamentale dans la sculpture romane*, par Jurgis Baltrusaitis (Paris, Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1931).

*Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland*, by J. Romilly Allen (London, Whiting & Co., 1887).

*Arts and Crafts of our Teutonic Forefathers*, by G. Baldwin Brown (T. N. Foulis, 1910).

"Fonts with Representations of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist", article by Dr. Fryer in *Arch. Journal*, LX, 1903.