

**The 12th-century font in the Church of St John-the-Baptist at Stone In Buckinghamshire – originally from St Mary’s Church at Hampstead Norreys in Berkshire.**

## **A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE CARVINGS**

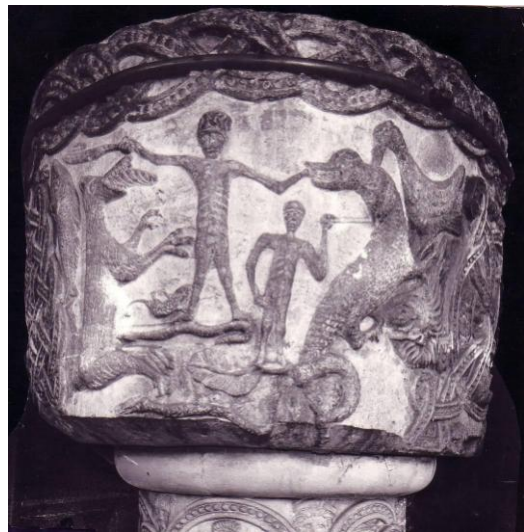
This new interpretation is set out in detail in the book *Ideas and Images in 12th Century Sculpture*, by Mary Curtis Webb (see details below\*). Her understanding of the carvings is summarised here by her daughter, Gillian Greenwood.

Mary Curtis Webb’s interpretation of the carvings on this 12th-century font has been summarised here by her daughter Gillian Greenwood.

### **THE CARVINGS ON THE FONT**

The dichotomy of the two styles of carving on either side of this font have puzzled many people but Mary Webb explains that the sculptures on the two sides of the font have to be considered not separately, but as a whole, because together, they depict God’s Creation and Salvation of the World . This was expounded by the 12th- century **Master Hugh of Saint Victor** in his *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*.

In many surviving 12th-century sculptures we find geometric designs (carved for their deep meaning) *or* pictorial carvings (illustrating the Salvation of the World, as explained in the ancient Alexandrian **Ransom theory**), but on this font we find depicted both the Creation *and* the Salvation of the World. This font is therefore a very rare and precious “summa” of 12th-century church dogma.



The pictorial carvings on the font in the Church of St John the Baptist in the village of Stone, west of Aylesbury.

**THE PICTORIAL CARVINGS** on one side of the font have for a long time been known to depict Christ’s Descent into Hades but the monsters and other details have not been fully understood because over the centuries the ancient **Alexandrian Ransom theory** has been almost completely forgotten.

At the end of the 12th century the Ransom theory – which for nearly a thousand years had been accepted by the Church as the explanation as to why God became Incarnate – was abandoned and replaced by Anselm’s exposition of the doctrine of the Atonement.

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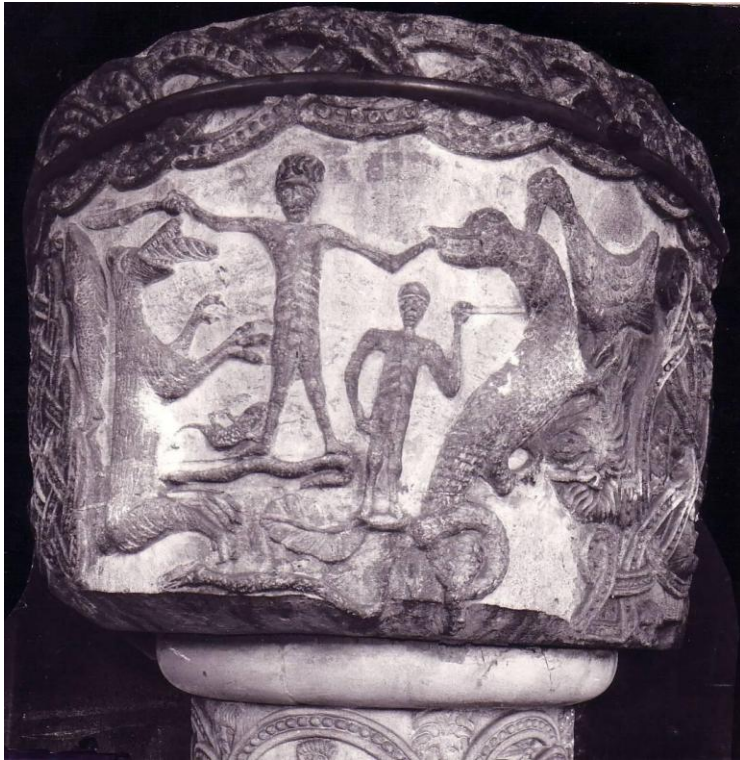
The theme of the Ransom Theory had been in currency since the 3rd century. From Jerusalem to Cappadocia, from Syria to northern Italy, it had been widely used in the writings of Christian apologists. But the man through whom it was transmitted most fully to the Latin west was **Pope Gregory the Great** in his commentary on the Book of Job, the *Moralia in Job*. It has been estimated that the *Moralia in Job* was the most widely read book outside the scriptures throughout the early middle ages. In England most monasteries kept at least one copy of this popular book in their libraries.

The Ransom Theory was based on the assumption that a deception had been practised by the Devil upon Adam and Eve into committing the original sin of disobedience to God's command, in consequence of which the human race fell under the absolute power of the Devil. God's love for his creatures determined that their ransom must be paid but the price required by the Devil was nothing less than the blood and soul of the Son of God. Since divine justice must allow this claim it must also allow a method of quid pro quo in the form of its payment and thus God in turn was able to deceive the Devil, who, being deceived, brought upon himself his own destruction. God being the fisherman with Jesus as bait, the Devil, unaware that the human flesh offered was divine, was caught like a fish on the "barb of divinity".

Besides the hooking of Leviathan and the deception of the Devil there was another theme with which these carvers were especially concerned, and which was also associated with the Descent of Christ into Hades. This was the metaphor of the Descent of Christ as a bird (often a vulture) which had also been in currency since the beginning of the third century. The pictorial carvings on the font depict Christ not only as a man but as a bird which is pecking the monster. Gregory the Great had long before referred to Christ as "the Dear Bird".

In addition to Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*, there was another popular work in the 12th century. This was the *apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus* and it was largely this book which was the literary source of the pictorial carvings on this font. The carvers have followed their literary source in minute and careful detail, each according to his own imagination, and this suggests that, besides being craftsmen, these were men of education.

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## THE PICTORIAL CARVINGS

### The Redeemer

Christ is shown as he descends into Hades, naked and alone, to stand between the two regents of Hell, Death as a wolf and Satan as a dragon. Christ offers his left hand as a bait to the jaws of the dragon while he points his knife at Leviathan rising for the triple bait, "whose flesh shall be sold as meat in the streets of Jerusalem at the coming of the Messiah." So Christ is shown wielding the traditional form of a butcher's knife.

### Adam

The small man who stands naked except for a helmet is Adam on whose behalf the debt must be paid. (Ransom theory). Jesus was described in the *Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus* as "both soldier and commander, a marvellous warrior in the shape of a servant", while **Hugh of Saint Victor** referred to the army of Christ whose soldiers included all who had gone before. Adam, as the first redeemed of that great army, is therefore given the "Helmet of Salvation" by the carver.

Adam stands upon a leaf between God Incarnate and the Devil.

### The Large Leaf beneath Adam and the Serpent trampled by Christ

The serpent is the Tempter by whom Adam fell. The large leaf is without doubt part of the original didactic scheme for since the earliest years the Tree of the Fall had been compared with the Tree of the Cross. As Origen

(2nd century) had put it: "Through the Tree came Death, and through the Tree comes Life because death was in Adam and Life in Christ".

But since the carvers were obviously familiar with Gregory's *Moralia* they would also have known his very apt question :

“What is man but a leaf who fell from Paradise from the tree ?

What but a leaf is he who is caught in the winds of temptation and lifted up upon the gusts of his passion?”

### **The Dragon (Satan)**

The Dragon is shown by the carver with its back turned to the figure of Jesus because in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus Satan refuses to recognise the incarnation of God in Man. The dragon therefore only looks back to attack the Christ and is shown swallowing “the mortal bait”- the hand of Jesus.

In one claw the dragon clutches a screaming soul whose hair is enveloped in the flames of Hell. This is an apt illustration for in one version of the apocryphal gospel Satan boasts, “I have become a furnace to the sons of men!”.

### **Death as a Wolf**

The monster which the carver has placed on the right hand of Jesus is Death, shown as a wolf. Such a figure was already familiar in Anglo-Saxon poetry: “The accursed wolf, the dark shadow of death, has scattered thy flocks, O Lord”. (The Exeter Book).

Once more the carver has displayed with extraordinary economy the fact that Satan refused to recognise the mighty power of Christ in raising Lazarus from the grave. Death is shown facing towards the figure of Christ whereas Satan is shown literally turning his back upon the Redeemer.

**A Salamander**, symbolising the power of Christ to withstand all the fires of temptation, nestles against the leg of the Redeemer who tramples the serpent underfoot.

### **The Vulture**

A vulture is pecking the head of the Satanic dragon. Gregory the Great had written in the *Moralia*, “Rightly is the Mediator between God and Man called a Vulture”. And in an Anglo-Saxon poem ascribed to Cynewulf of the 8th century, the Descent of Christ for the Salvation of mankind is described as “the flight of the Dear Bird from heaven to earth”. The knot in the monster's tail suggests that the monster is under stress!

### The Fish, Leviathan and the Triple Bait

The large fish which appears below the point of the butcher's knife wielded by the Redeemer is an illustration of Leviathan rising for the Triple Bait, shown here as three tiny rosettes. The source of this is Gregory's *Moralia in Job*. Gregory had emphasised the ancient doctrine of the Church by stating that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was the work of the whole Trinity in common, and that Leviathan must be snared by the triple power of the Godhead and his jaws pierced with a three-fold cord. In rabbinical literature Leviathan, the monster of the deep, was the power of Evil which would be slain at the coming of the Messiah. "The Holy One, blessed be he, will in time to come make a banquet from the flesh of Leviathan....and the rest of Leviathan will be distributed and sold in the markets of Jerusalem".

### The interlaced bands carved upon the font bowl

Mary Webb explains that this interlacing is not a space filler but represents the **entanglements of Hell**. She compares the carved interlacing on this font with that on the font of Eardisley, Herefordshire, because on the Eardisley font we see the figure of Christ, holding his Cross before him, dragging Adam "by the right hand" as he "leaps out of Hell" (*Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus*) and rescues Adam. Adam is shown being actually dragged off his feet for they are shackled by the entanglements of sin.



THE EARDISLEY FONT: Christ, accompanied by 'the Dear Bird', rescues Adam.

### The Bread snatched from the mouth of Death

The large bread roll which is being regurgitated from the jaws of Death is a reference to a 4th-century hymn of Ephraim which was incorporated into the liturgy of the Syrian churches. This illustrated Death's complaint at the raising of Lazarus by Jesus: "To others he multiplied bread but my bread from my mouth he steals it".

A volume of Ephraim's writings was listed in the Reading Abbey library list in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, for Reading had indirect connection with Edessa.

From stylistic and other evidence there is reason to suggest that the font from Hampstead Norreys, now in the church of St John-the-Baptist at Stone was made in a **Reading Abbey workshop**.

## THE GEOMETRIC CARVINGS

On the opposite side of the font are the intricate geometric designs which have in the past been misinterpreted as mere decoration. They in fact illustrate the Work of Foundation and allude to the numerical ratios representing the cosmic harmony of the Creation. The chief literary sources for this were the translation into Latin by Boethius of Nicomachus of Gerasa's *Introduction to Arithmetic* and Plato's *Timaeus* - both standard works commonly found in monastic and cathedral libraries in the 12th century.

The theory of number as the basis of existence was developed by Pythagoras and his followers but its more elaborate expression was expounded by Plato in his *Timaeus*. By the beginning of the Christian era it had been incorporated into Neo-Platonic philosophy. The early Christian Fathers, who had inherited this cosmology, made use of it to explain the Work of God's Foundation of the Universe. So from then until the twelfth century theologians inherited a strange mixture of mathematics and theology.

The geometric carvings carved here had long been familiar to scholars, and were also to be seen carved in stone in cathedrals and churches across England and France. They were visual instruments designed to be understood independently of the texts with which they had been associated. In manuscripts such as the influential encyclopaedic treatise *De Natura Rerum* by Isidore of Seville they are used as a framework for arithmetic series and relationships.

The circular design (A) on the font bowl illustrates the Harmony of the Macrocosm (the Universe) and incorporates four heads representing Plato's four elements - air, earth, fire and water. The next circle (B), though damaged, probably shows the Harmony of the Microcosm, the four humours of man - blood,



A: CIRCLE interlaced with its arcs: The Macrocosm with the four elements.



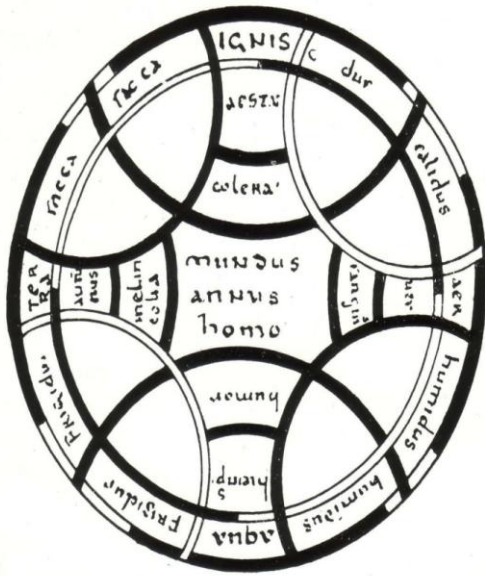
B: CIRCLE with its arcs double-looped, probably the Microcosm.



C: SQUARE on a square, the perfection of number, a cube shown as two superimposed squares.



D: RHOMB on an oblong: probably harmonic proportion, reconciling good and evil.



A page from the 8th-century  
DE NATURA RERUM by Isidore of Seville:  
The diagram shows the Universe,  
the Year and Man  
with the Four Elements,  
the Seasons and the Humours.

phlegm, choler and melancholy. (For centuries it was held that these gave rise in varying combinations to the basic personality characteristics - sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic).

These geometric designs appear on many 12th-century fonts, and were appropriate for the place at which infants and others were initiated into the faith. Priests and itinerant preachers presumably expounded their meaning to the laity.

However, at the end of the 12th century the renewed study of Aristotle's writings replaced the reading of the *Timaeus*, and the Platonic cosmology was largely abandoned. Thus this font depicts two theological views, both of which were shortly to be superseded, so that by the end of the 12th century such a Summa of the Creation and Salvation of the World would no longer be depicted. The font is indeed very interesting and precious.

## \* THE BOOK

*Ideas and Images in 12th Century Sculpture* was written by Mary Curtis Webb, who died in 1987.

The book was rescued and printed in 2010 by her daughter, Gillian Greenwood, but it will be too expensive to publish due to the many illustrations needing copyright clearance. It has, however, been well received in university libraries and has also been highly commended by Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, Kt, DD, FBA, Faculty of Theology, Oxford who most kindly found time to read and comment on it.

Professor MacCulloch writes: "This book is a remarkable piece of scholarship whose conclusions will be of interest alike to theologians, historians and students of medieval architecture. I commend it to as wide a readership as possible".

- A revised version (2012) of this book in CD format is available at cost price from [gillyflower123@googlemail.com](mailto:gillyflower123@googlemail.com).
- The full text can also be seen on line at <http://search.ugent.be/meercat/x/view/rug01/001879684>