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AND

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Inscription on the Font at Chelmorton.

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IN the Church of Chelmorton, near Buxton, there is a very ancient Font, which, including the base, is four feet three inches high, and two feet in diameter across the top. The upper part is octagonal, and there are letters or symbols upon the eight sides. Much doubt has existed as to their meaning, and many conjectures have been made, but hitherto no satisfactory solution has been offered. My attention was called to the subject some years since, and from time to time I have met with statements that have appeared to throw light upon baptismal fonts, and have helped me to the conclusion at which I have arrived respecting this font. Some of these were previously unknown to me, and possibly may be to others; but, I confess, my reading has not been considerable upon such subjects.

The first point I met with was in Camden. In his notice

of the British Coins, of which he gives representations, he says: "The thirteenth, an Octogone, seems to have been of a Christian Prince; for by it the Christians anciently figured the Font for baptism. In Gruter's inscriptions, p. 1166, are verses of St. Ambrose, upon the Font of St. Tecla (Thecla),

' Octogonus fons est munere dignus eo.
Hoc numero decuit sacri baptismatis aulam
Surgere, quo populo vera salus rediit ;' *i.e.*

The font is an Octogon, a figure (or number) worthy of that function. It behoved the place (or court) of holy baptism to be raised in this number; by which true salvation is restored to the people. And it is a common observation that as six was the number of Antichrist, so eight of true Christianity.* So far, venerable Camden. It is very remarkable how great attention was paid in the olden time to the number eight. The first Parliament of Edward the First was holden on the morrow of the utas of Easter; on which Lord Coke remarks: "It is called utas of huit, which signifies eight, viz. the eighth day after, including Easter Day for one." "And the number of eight was much respected in the ancient laws, as amongst the laws of King Edward the Confessor, Pax Regis die quâ coronatus est, quæ dies tenet octo, in die natali Domini dies octo, in Paschate dies octo, in Pentecoste dies octo, &c."† Ambrose was born in A.D. 340, and died in 397, long before Edward the Confessor's time; and no doubt the respect paid to the number eight in his time was due to the same cause as in St. Ambrose's time.

On the whole, it is clear that the octagonal form of a font is an emblem of the true faith.

We were very much puzzled for some time as to what a circle might denote, when a very remarkable book by Bishop Thornburgh was lent to us, and in the preface the Bishop informs us that the pious philosophers of old designated the blessed Trinity by the circle. His words are: "Addiscamus hinc omnes potentiam, majestatem et bonitatem Dei demirari,

*Camd. Br., XCII. † 2 Institute, 157.

qui variis modis in ipsâ creaturâ, veluti in exiguâ quâdam tabulâ, summam et sanctam suam Trinitatem quodammodo adumbravit. Cujus infinitudinem, nec loci, nec dierum spatio terminandum, Philosophi pii per circulum hieroglyphicè designare voluere, cujus centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam.”*

The circle, therefore, is an emblem of the Holy Trinity, and in nothing could that form be more appropriately adopted than in a font, where everyone must be baptised in the names of the Trinity.

The font is derived from the Baptistery, which was a building distinct from the church itself, and consisted of a porch or ante-room, and an inner room, in which the ceremony was performed, and was frequently very capacious.† According to the Roman rule, it was to be built of a round figure, with the image of the Baptist in it.‡ The circular form was, no doubt, enjoined because it was emblematical of the Holy Trinity. The circular form has been very general from very early times. In the ancient sarcophagal reliefs in the Vatican, there are representations of small detached baptisteries of a circular form.§ Baptisteries continued separate from the church until the sixth century, when their removal began into the porch of the church, and afterwards into the church itself.**

From what has been thus far adduced, nothing would seem more probable than that the octagonal and circular forms should be found exhibited upon the same font; and this is actually the case. At Eckington, Derbyshire, the font has an octagonal top standing on a circular base.†† At Whittington, an old font is circular at the top, and tapers into an octagonal shape below.‡‡ At Snelston, the top is circular, but the base octagonal,§§ and the same is the case at Chellaston. At*** Bradley, the font is circular, but the bowl outside is divided

* Conclusion of the preface to the book, entitled $\Delta\Theta\Theta\Theta\Omega\text{PIK}\Omega\text{S}$, sive Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia antiquorum Sapientium. Oxoniæ, 1621.

† At Pisa the font itself is 14 feet in diameter. Murray Handb., 430.

‡ Lond. Enc. Baptistery.

§ Withrow's Catacombs, 540. A very interesting work.

** Lond. Enc. Baptistery. †† 1 Cox's Derbyshire Churches, 224.

‡‡ Ibid., 405. §§ Ibid., 249. *** Ibid., 410.

by round-headed trefoil arches into eight compartments.* The Tirlmont font, hereafter noticed, is circular, but has eight compartments round it, which by their number may be as symbolical as if they were eight sides. It has occurred to my mind that the two emblems on the same font may have been intended to signify "the true faith in the Holy Trinity." It may suffice to leave this question for further consideration.

I now turn to such matters as bear more particularly upon fonts in churches that are dedicated to St. John the Baptist. In Italy there still exist baptisteries with statues and sculptures upon them, which refer to the baptism by St. John, his martyrdom, and other scriptural events. At Verona, the font is octagonal, and on one of the sides is the baptism of the Saviour in the Jordan.† At Pisa, the font is also octagonal, and from the centre rises a pillar with a figure of St. John, and over the eastern doorway of the baptistery is a sculpture representing the martyrdom of the Baptist.‡ At Florence, over the south door of the baptistery, which is octagonal, there is a bronze group representing the beheading of St. John, and over the east door there is the baptism in the Jordan. In the Archæological Museum at Brussels there is a brass font from Tirlmont, of the middle of the 12th century, of which there is a good representation in the 18 Arch. J., 215. The bowl is circular, but round it there is an arcade of eight arches, and beneath each of them there is a representation, and in one of them the baptism of the Saviour, who appears as a child half immersed in water, the Baptist standing at the right side, and the Holy Ghost as a dove is in the upper part of the space under the arch; and under this representation is, "Verbo accedente ad elementum fidei sacramentum"—"The Word approaching to the water, the sacrament of faith." At Liege, there is a cylindrical bronze font, with five representations upon it. One is the baptism of the Saviour in the Jordan; another, the baptism of Cornelius by St. Peter; and a third, the baptism of the Philosopher Craton at Ephesus by St. John. On an

* 1 Cox's Derbyshire Churches, 60. † Murray Handb., 260. ‡ Ibid., 430.

open book in the hand of the Evangelist is inscribed, "Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti." In the last two "the blessing of God is represented by a hand issuing from a rainbow above, with the fingers extended, according to the Roman mode of benediction, and with a triple ray of light emanating from the outstretched hand." This font is of the date of A.D. 1112.*

From the fourth to the fourteenth century, the Supreme Being (or, I should rather say, the blessed Trinity) is never represented except symbolically by means of a hand in the Catacombs.† Thus, in sundry representations of the sacrifice of Isaac, a hand stretched out from on high to seize the knife is pourtrayed.‡

For some unknown reason, the great name of Jehovah was looked upon with such awful reverence by the Jews, that it was never allowed to be uttered by any Jew excepting the High Priest, and by him only once in the year, when he solemnly blessed the people in the temple.§ To this usage applied the command, "Thou shalt not take the name of Jehovah, thy God, in vain;" and blasphemy with the Jews could only be committed by uttering that great and terrible name.**

The prohibition to utter this sacred name led to the invention of symbols by which it might be represented. One of these was the right hand with the three larger fingers extended, and the little finger held down by the thumb.‡‡ A better emblem of the Trinity in unity could hardly have been devised.

Mr. Lee says that the non-utterance of this dread name "is a mere Jewish superstition, derived from a considerable antiquity."§§ This is a complete mistake. It is as old as the 3rd chapter of Genesis; for there, throughout the conversation between Eve and the Serpent, the word Jehovah is omitted, and Elohim alone used, although immediately before and im-

* 18 Arch. J., 217. † Withrow Cat., 354, 357. ‡ Ibid., 289.

§ Numb. vi., 24, 25. ** Codex Sanhedrin, cap. 4, fol. 55.

‡‡ Moore's Lost Tribes of the Saxons of the East and West, p. 234.
§§ Hebr. Gram., 28.

mediately after Jehovah Elohim are used, and that too in the same narrative; and the only assignable reason for the omission of Jehovah in the conversation itself is, that that sacred name was too dreadful to be uttered. The commandment itself shows that the practice was as old as the time of Moses at least.

When the symbol of the extended hand was invented, it is impossible to say; but it existed in the time of Abraham. In Genesis* we find that "Abraham said to the King of Sodom, I have lifted up my hand to Jehovah;" that is, I have sworn by Jehovah. For the way in which the Jews took an oath was to hold up the right hand extended in the manner above described. And this explains the numerous passages in the Bible where holding up the hand to Jehovah is mentioned. This is still the mode of taking an oath in Denmark.† And in South Wales a witness, as we have often noticed, places his three fingers at the top and his thumb under the book, whilst his little finger does not touch the book; which is, no doubt, derived from the original practice of holding up the hand, and, like it, is a symbol of the Trinity.

The extended hand with the three rays of light, which no doubt issued from the three larger fingers, is thus fully shown to be an emblem of the Trinity.

It is very remarkable that the symbol of the extended hand appears constantly on the ruined buildings of America, and always upright, as the emblem of power,‡ and so it does on the Carthaginian monuments. §

* xiv. 22 † Boelen *v.* Melladew, 10 C. B., 898. ‡ 2 Wils. *Preh. Man*, 231.

§ The other symbols consisted of particular words, which contained twelve and forty-two letters respectively. These were confided only to the most trustworthy priests, to be preserved by them in the strictest possible secrecy. The symbol of twelve letters in Hebrew was "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." The other of forty-two letters was "Father (is) God, Son (is) God, and Holy Ghost (is) God; but not three Gods but one God." This rests on the statements in the book, "De arcanis Catholicæ Veritatis," chap. 11, 12, by Peter Galatin, a Franciscan, who was living in 1532. (See Buxtorf *Hebrew Lexicon*, under Jehovah.) It has been our lot on several occasions carefully to consider the Athanasian Creed; and when the controversy as to the date of the Utrecht Psalter was going on, we had before us the two remarkable Greek copies of that Creed, which Mr. Rawdon Brown had found in St. Mark's Library at Venice (see them in XXXIII. *Rep. Dep. Keep. Records*, p. 274), as well as

The church at Chelmorton is dedicated to the Baptist, and there are no less than 359 pre-reformation churches in England so dedicated;* and where a church has been so dedicated, it is but reasonable to suppose that any representations, whether in figures or letters, upon the font, would refer to the Baptist; and the facts that have been adduced render it highly probable that the baptism by St. John, his martyrdom, and the blessed Trinity, would be referred to in an inscription on a font in a church dedicated to the Baptist. Hitherto no such inscription has been met with; but on the 4th bell in Tideswell Church, which is so dedicated, there is inscribed:—

“Missi de coelis nomen habeo Gabrielis,”†

and on the 2nd bell at Norbury:—

“Sonat hec coelis dulcissima vox Gabrielis,”‡

Sir Duffus Hardy's two very able Reports on that Psalter; and we were not a little surprised to find in the Greek Creed so accurate a representation of the longer Hebrew symbol—omitting the verb, as it does—that it can hardly be doubted that it is a translation of it. The Hebrew symbol did not by any means include all the attributes of Jehovah, nor did the Greek version, and no Greek word existed that could represent that great name; and it seems that the framer of the Creed took very great pains, by means of the several triads, to indicate all the attributes of the great Jehovah. The fair inference is that the Hebrew symbol was the origin of the first part of the Creed; if so, its author must have known the symbol, and probably was a Hebrew Priest who had been converted to Christianity, and not only translated the symbol, but added the attributes of the great Jehovah, whom it represented; and in his favour it must be said, that he in no way disclosed the symbol, but rather concealed it amongst the other triads. And it is remarkable that the early Christians kept their creeds secret and unwritten, and that one Marcellus wrote a profession of faith to Julius, a bishop, in A.D. 338, which consisted of three parts, the first and third plainly being his own composition, and the second relating to all the three persons of the Trinity, which is supposed to be the creed then in use in the Church of Rome; and that this course was taken in order not to betray the secret. (Dr. Salmon, *Cont. Rev.*, Aug. 1878, p. 61.) Both the Hebrew symbols are founded upon Deut. vi. 4: “Hear, O Israel, Jehovah, our God, is one Jehovah,” which in the Prayer Book of the Polish and German Jews is rendered, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one;” a very remarkable translation, in which the word Lord represents Adonai, which the Jews used in writing for Jehovah. Dr. Wolf says that this passage is the password between strange Jews when they meet each other. The Venice Creeds show that the Latin Creeds are translations from them, and they strongly confirm our English Creed. If the Hebrew symbol be the origin of the Creed, the interest in it is much increased; and I have written this note in order to assist anyone, who may investigate that origin, with facts that have cost some labour to collect.

* 1 Cox's *Derbyshire Churches*, 201.

† 2 *Ibid*, 297.

‡ 3 *Ibid*, 247.

which plainly allude to the Angel Gabriel appearing to Zachariah to foretell the birth of the Baptist;* and at Mugginton the third bell has:—

“In multis annis resonat campana Johannis,” †

which carries us a little nearer; but still we desiderate inscriptions where each letter is the beginning of and represents a word. There is no doubt that the Jews used such symbols. Thus the awful *AGLA*, the most potent of all exorcisms, is formed from the initials of the Hebrew words, *Atha gebir leilam Adonai*—“Thou art mighty for ever, O Lord!” ‡ This word was found written on a slip of parchment in a cavity in the stem of a wooden crucifix, which formerly belonged to the Priory of Gisborne, Yorkshire.§ Around medals stamped with “the Cross of St. Benedict,” ran the legend *VRSNSMVS MQLIVB*, which are the initials of the quatrain:—

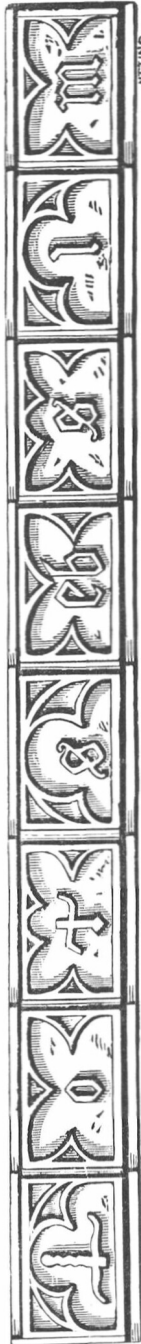
“Vade retro, Satana,
Ne suade mihi vana.
Sunt mala, quæ libas;
Ipse venena bibas.” **

Christian inscriptions, in fact, were often formed from the initials of words.

The engraving here given very accurately represents the eight sides of the Chelmorton font, with the engravings upon them, and it is the largest size that the length of a page would allow in order that the best representation of the engravings might be shown. It was impossible to represent the octagon and all its sides at one view, and it was the best course to represent it as it is here, and to request the reader to bear in mind that each compartment represents one of the sides of the octagon, and that the last compartment at one end adjoins the first at the other end upon the font. The place for the division was selected because one part of the inscription will be shown to end there. It should be noticed that the inscription on each side of the octagon does not occupy the whole of it, but has a small space on each side of it free from any

* Luke i. 11-19. † 3 Cox's Derbyshire Churches, 223. ‡ XXVI. Arch. J., 229.
§ XXIV. Arch. J., 68. ** XXVI. Arch. J., 230.

Inscription on



The Font at Chelmorion.

engraving; so that each inscription is within and surrounded by the side on which it is engraved.

We are now in a position to consider the inscription. The figures are very rudely cut, but are very plain. The first and third are clearly hilts of swords, and the one differs from the other not only in being reversed, but in shape, and the one has ribs round the part to be held by the hand, whilst the other is plain. Mr. Waller, so high an authority on such matters, informs us that swords with hilts of this form were used very early in the East, and that he should expect to find something typical in the hilts of swords used as these appear to be. As the Baptist was beheaded in Palestine, it may well be inferred that an Eastern sword was used. No such hilts were used in England, if at all, until long after the font was made; and consequently these hilts are typical. But it may be asked, how could such hilts be known at Chelmorton? Two answers may be given. There are gravestones of warriors in the churchyard there of very ancient date, with swords engraved upon them. These warriors may have been Crusaders, and may have brought Eastern swords home with them. The hilts on the tombs are, no doubt, like those of their own swords, and they differ entirely from those on the font, as may be seen from their representations,* which supports the opinion that the latter are typical.

Again, there is a tradition that a Biddulph, of Biddulph, in Staffordshire, which is, perhaps, some fifteen miles from Chelmorton, brought home with him from one of the crusades a number of Saracens, whose descendants still remain, and by their strange manners testify to their foreign origin, and they naturally would bring their swords with them. Either way, therefore, the knowledge of such hilts as are upon the font may be explained. It hardly need be added that no emblem could more appropriately represent a martyrdom than the hilt of a sword by which it was effected. Similar emblems are by no means uncommon.

* XXVI. Arch. J., 262.

Turning to the letters, we begin with the capital S, which is next to the second hilt. Baptism has always been considered as the means, or, perhaps it would be more correct to say, one of the means of salvation. "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved."* So on a tomb at Tideswell, "Qui baptizatus fuerit, salvus erit;"† and we have seen in St. Ambrose's verses that salvation is said to return to the people by means of baptism. To such an extent did this doctrine prevail amongst the early Christians, that the term *salus* was commonly used in lieu of *baptisma* itself.‡ S, therefore, may well be taken to represent *salus*, salvation. Then b, in the next compartment, may well stand for *baptisma*.

In our Church the Baptist is regularly called St. John, Sanctus Johannes; and in a church dedicated to the Baptist it is highly probable that an inscription on the font would contain that designation. S. I., therefore, may represent Sanctus Johannes.

The capital letter M is used in inscriptions for Martyr. Thus at Cologne there is an inscription to Ursula and eleven virgin martyrs, "Ursula et XI MM. VV.;"§ and, as the martyrdom of the Baptist is represented on the baptisteries, it may safely be inferred that M on this font denotes Martyr, and the hilts of the swords support this conclusion. It is quite true that this St. John is commonly called "the Baptist," and not "the martyr," but it might be considered right to state that he was a martyr, in the same way as it was thought right to represent his martyrdom on the baptisteries. On so short an inscription also it would have been a waste of valuable space to call him the Baptist, especially after having spoken of his baptism. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that a church might have been dedicated to him both as Baptist and Martyr.

It remains to explain the letter e. It may be the first letter either of *est* or *ex*. In the former case, the inscription would be, "Salus est baptisma Sancti Johannis, martyris"—"The baptism of St. John, the martyr, is salvation." In the latter

* Mark xvi. 16. † 2 Cox's Derbyshire Churches, 301.

‡ Ency Lond. Baptism. § Withrow Cat., 107.

case, it would be, "Salus ex baptisate Sancti Johannis, martyris"—"Salvation (is) from the baptism of St. John, the martyr." This seems to be the more appropriate rendering, as it more closely represents the generally accepted meaning of baptism.

It is some confirmation of these solutions, that either of them agrees exactly with the capitals and small letters. For in either, e b would be small letters, and the rest capitals.

The only difficulty that occurred to us in this solution, was that we were impressed with the supposition that the Christian baptism rested altogether upon the express mandate of the Saviour Himself. But the representations of the baptism of the Saviour by St. John upon the baptisteries and fonts seemed to show that the Baptist was considered to be the author of baptism, so far as to have churches dedicated to him in that character; and all doubt has been removed by notes to "The Newe Testament of our Saviour Jesu Christe," 1552, on which the *Saturday Review* of Feb. 2, 1878,* thus comments: "The Reformers have asserted in these notes, as many of them do in their works, that the baptism of St. John and the baptism instituted by Christ are absolutely identical; that therefore the latter no more conveyed grace than the former, and that neither of them in this respect differed at all from the rite of circumcision. On this point the following note is sufficient—'Acts xix. Baptism in this place is taken for the doctrine, and not for the laver of baptism. For the baptism of Christ and the baptism of John, which is done in the water, is all one; else Christ, who was baptised by John, ought to have been baptised again.'" This completely explains the reason why churches were dedicated to St. John as the author of baptism; and in churches so dedicated the same reason would naturally lead to his being treated as the author of baptism in any inscription on the font; indeed, it would only be by such means that a complete harmony would be created between the church and the font.

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It only remains to explain the capital O between the two hilts. For a long time this seemed to be a very serious difficulty; but as soon as it was discovered that the circle was used by the ancient Christian Philosophers to represent the blessed Trinity, all our doubts were removed. We have given abundance of proof that the emblem of the blessed Trinity, in the shape of the extended hand, did appear upon fonts; and what is more reasonable than where it did not appear a similar emblem of the circle should be used instead? It is obvious that the circle is cut off by the hilts of the swords from the rest of the inscription, and it may be that this was intended to denote that the Deity is unapproachable by any and everything in His absolute perfection; and the hilts may have been placed in different directions, as they may be in allusion to "the flaming sword, which turned every way to keep the way" into Eden.* At all events, the circle is so manifestly separated from the rest of the inscription, and the letter O, as such, is so wholly inexplicable, that the circle here must be an emblem of something, and vain has been the search for any other than that of the Trinity.

As the number eight represented the true faith, eight figures forming that number of compartments would denote it just as well as an octagonal shape, and the eight compartments on the circular Tirlmont font were doubtless intended to represent the true faith; and the Chelmorton font has also eight compartments, one within each of the sides, and they are in some degree similar to those on the Tirlmont font.

Every figure upon the Chelmorton font has now been explained in a manner, which appears to be perfectly consistent with all its surroundings, and, as far as we are able to judge, there are no objections that can be reasonably urged against the solution that has been offered.

A statement appeared in the *Times* some time ago, that at Poulton-le-Field, near Preston, there is an ancient pulpit of oak, octagonal in shape, each panel of which is richly carved

* Gen. iii. 24.

and square-cut out of the solid. The main division in each contains a very beautiful Norman arch, and each of the lower divisions is filled with a representative head in the centre, surrounded by a floral design in one case, and foliage in another. On the frame-work round the top is cut, "Crie aloud, spare not, lift up the voyce, lyke" * * * If we mistake not, many pulpits are octagonal; and a more appropriate emblem could not adorn the place from which the true faith was to be delivered, than the octagon.

In the course of our researches we have met with so many arches on fonts, that it has occurred to us whether they may not also have some symbolical meaning. We have seen that the emblematical hand issued from the rainbow, and the Charter of Cuthwolf, Bishop of Hereford, A.D. 840, begins, "In nomine arci poli conditoris," "In the name of the Creator of the arch of Heaven," or "rainbow of Heaven."* These things tend to show that an arch on a font may be the emblem of the rainbow or of the arch of the heavens. The matter deserves further consideration.

In considering such questions, it must be borne in mind that in the early times of the Church all sorts of symbols and emblems were adopted, and the more far-fetched and difficult of interpretation they were, the higher appreciation they seem to have obtained; for their object was to be intelligible to the initiated, and enveloped in mystery to everyone else.

We have now done. We crave every indulgence from those who are more learned in the history of our ancient Church than ourselves, and every correction will be pleasing. If some greater interest should be excited in our ancient fonts, and greater respect paid to them in consequence of what we have written, and the sacrilegious usage, to which they have but too frequently been subjected, be checked thereby, we shall indeed be gratified.

N.B.—On the reading of this paper, it was asked why, if the

* A fac-simile of this remarkable Saxon Charter is given in the *Archæological Journal*.

letter between the hilts was meant for a circle, it was not a circle, instead of being angular? The reason is perfectly clear. From at least as early as A.D. 840* down to long subsequent to the date of this Font, our old Records and Deeds had many of their letters formed of longer or shorter straight lines. In Sleigh's History of Leek,† the Charter of the first Abbot of Deulacresse Abbey, about A.D. 1215, is an example, and I have twenty-four more records and deeds of that Abbey written in a similar manner. Now in this inscription every letter is formed by straight lines, and is similar to letters to be seen in old deeds and records. A precisely similar S occurs in the Abbey Deeds, and the identical e b I M in the examples given in Wright's Court Hand Restored, and similar figures of those letters in the Abbey Deeds, and O is constantly written angularly, though generally with four lines only. The figures on the Font, therefore, represents a circle, whether that circle be the letter O, or an emblem, and it can represent nothing else. No doubt the engraving was made from a copy, which had been written by a monk, and possibly he may have been of Deulacresse Abbey; and even, if that copy had given a circle, the engraver would probably make it angular on the Font, to correspond with the other letters. The perfect circle is the correct form of the letter; for it is derived from the Phœnician Ayin in its original form, which was circular.

It was also suggested that the letter between the S and M looked more like an l than an I in the engraving, but this was due to its being too carefully finished by the engraver, and on the Font itself it is undoubtedly an I.

* Charter of Cuthwulf, Bishop of Hereford, 30 Arch. J. 174.

† p. 12.