


## On a supposed Inscription upon the Font at Wilne.

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 HE existence of a church (St. Chad's) at Wilne dates very far back; its parochial rights were transferred to Sawley as early as the year 822. The font is apparently the only relic of great antiquity to be found in the church. Mr. Cox, in his interesting and valuable work, *The Churches of Derbyshire*, Vol. IV., p. 399, called special attention to a supposed inscription round the base of the font, which the artist imagined to be in runes. In the *Journal of the Archaeological Association* for 1879, p. 224, Mr. Cox's engraving is reproduced, and the font is described as having "unconventional patterns of lacertine foliage, round the base of which is a mutilated inscription in a character which has been compared with the Runic and the Palmyrene." This relic, it is added, "deserves the attention of palæographers, as well as antiquarians and archaeologists." The reason assigned for its possible Palmyrene origin is stated to be the practical identity of two of its characters with a Palmyrene inscription at South Shields.

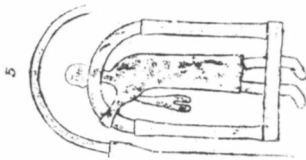
The font is shown on Plate XIII., fig. 1, where my outlined rubbing is reproduced by photography. It will be seen that some details are left unfinished, though in most cases it would have been easy to restore them. A magnifying glass may be applied to the plate with good effect. It is very probable that further study of the font would clear up some of the doubts, and if it were



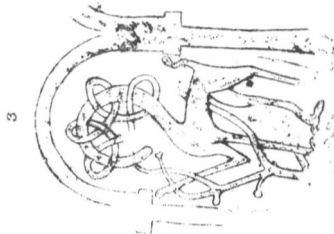
1. Font at Wilne.



2. Pillar at Wolverhampton.



3. 4. 5. Pillar at Masham.



possible to turn it the right way up the whole thing might be determined. It is a laborious business working at it upside down, hanging over it in the attempt to see the most decayed parts in their natural position. My illustration inverts the font.

This valuable relic is evidently a portion of a very remarkable pillar or column, which had a tier of six panels containing dragons and birds, admirably designed and executed, and now all complete; above them was another tier of six human figures, the whole probably representing the triumph of Christianity over the old religion. The girth is 82 inches at top and 77 at bottom; height about 23 inches. The figures may have been the Evangelists, St. Chad, and our Lord. The column has at some early time been broken off between the ankles and the knees of the figures, and then turned upside down and hollowed to form a font. It will be seen that in some cases the bottom of the panel is arched, as well as the top, so that to a casual observer the effect of the sculpture as now inverted is that of a somewhat bewildering mass of detail in panels with round heads. But for this, it would long ago have been seen that the sculpture is upside down. Those who converted it into a font may have purposely availed themselves of this feature, cutting away the human figures, which would have looked ridiculous standing on their heads. The twelve bold characters of the inscription are the inverted feet and ankles of the six figures. In one case the two feet and ankles and the hem of the garment resemble the **Ɱ** and **Ɑ** combined in the name of the Palmyrene BaRate whose monument to his wife and freed-woman Regina the Catuallaunian was found at South Shields in 1878. Hence the "inscription" has been supposed to be possibly Palmyrene. There seems less reason for the other supposition, that it was in runes. The details of the sculpture are very curious, notably the bold incisions in the columns carrying the arches of the panels, giving very much the effect of the deep grooving of the pillars at Durham. The arches themselves are similarly grooved. This method of treatment is so far as I know without parallel on early stones, and its bearing on the "Norman" grooving deserves consideration. At the head, the columns

break into irregular crosses with numerous arms proceeding from a centre, some diamond-shaped and other foliaginous. The human figures have in every case stood over the heads of the dragons or birds in the panels below, not over the crosses. Another "Oriental" inscription, supposed to be in cursive Arabic, was sent to me some months ago. It occurs on a Scoto-Irish reliquary, and is placed above a hand which is stretched over a representation of the Crucifixion. It was sent to me represented as contained within a panel. After Arabic scholars had disowned it, I explained it as the fire of the Spirit, the hand representing the Father, but with the remark that but for the panel I should have taken it as a cloud from which the hand proceeded. There is, I now understand, no panel, and the cloud theory has been accepted. I found some time after a representation of a cloud in the Caedmon Codex which very greatly resembles it.

It is difficult to say what the original purpose of the pillar may have been. There is a representation in the catacombs of the four Evangelists, each with a cylindrical pillar before him reaching about as high as his waist. The pillars have a flat top, and the top has a cover which works on a single hinge, like the lid of a watch. The covers are represented as lying back on the hinge, and the pillars are being used as tables, presumably altars for the consecration of the eucharistic elements, the covers indicating the care taken to protect the surface on which the consecration took place. We know that early missionary bishops in our own country carried with them portable altars, in the form of small square plaques on which they consecrated, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that local piety provided, in addition to the preaching cross, some permanent table or altar, reserved for the purpose of supporting these little altars when the itinerant bishop or presbyter visited the place. An Italian portable altar of red jasper, of the 15th century, may be seen at the South Kensington Museum (8986.—'63); it is in a maple-wood frame, the slab of jasper being about 8 inches by 5. In Archbishop Ecgberht's Pontifical, we find that in consecrating a church the proceedings with respect to the altar were as follows. First the altar was blessed and consecrated

by prayer, in which the altar was spoken of as the place for spiritual sacrifices, where prayers were to be made, and oblations were to be offered ; but there is a marked absence of any statement or implication that on this altar itself as a surface the divine mysteries were to be celebrated. Then follows the blessing of the "table," described as a stone prepared for the sacraments of life, on which the victim of the Son was to be placed and the mysteries of the sacred Body were to be consecrated, "a stone to be fitted on to the altar." This "table" we may take as corresponding to the little plaque which the itinerant celebrant brought with him where there was no church, while the locality provided the "altar" on which the "table" was to be placed. Ecgberht's Pontifical specially emphasises the fact that the prayers of the people were prayed at the "altar," and this may serve to suggest that where there was no church the "altar" provided by the locality was the praying-place of the district when no missionary was present, and that this was its ordinary use. We may be sure that all the energy of the Christian art of the district would be devoted to the beautification of the permanent "altar." The stone altar which survived the burning of King Edwin's vill at Campodunum, and was preserved in Bede's time at the Abbot Thridulf's monastery in Elmete Wood, was presumably a handsome sculptured stone, worthy of so much care and such special mention. Subjects so favourite and telling as the victory of Christianity over the powers of evil, and the submission of the works of nature, would be among the first to present themselves to the mind of the designer. The lower tier of the Wilne pillar is an admirable pictorial rendering of the triumphant song, "Praise the Lord, ye . . . worms and feathered fowls." There are no "dragons," in the sense of sea monsters, and there are no "beasts and all cattle."

It will be seen that from the bottom of this lower tier to the band or base on the upper side of which the six pairs of feet stand, is about 18 inches, the actual height of the figures in the panels being 12 or 13 inches. The men's feet are two inches long, some of them rather more than that, and taking the man to be six times

as high as his foot is long, we shall have a tier of human subjects of the same height as the bird and dragon subjects below. The two tiers may thus be fairly supposed to have occupied the same length on the pillar, as is the case on the pillar at Masham described below, and this will give three feet as the approximate height, a very convenient height for the purpose of an "altar" of the kind referred to. The diameter of the top of the "altar" may be calculated from the known dimensions of the existing portion of the pillar as having been from 23 to 24 inches.

However this may be, there are sculptured pillars of cylindrical form which can not have been altars. They have not been sufficiently considered by archæologists, if indeed they can be said to have been considered at all. The remarkable group of slightly tapering cylindrical pillars, collected from roadsides in Cheshire, and now placed in the public park at Macclesfield, deserve careful attention. They are apparently not inscribed columns, though their resemblance to the pillar of Eliseg at Valle Crucis Abbey is very striking, and cannot conceivably be accidental. The cylindrical surface is plain, but near the top they are bevelled off in triangles with curved bases, filled with interlacing bands and with well designed trefoils; in one case there is a remarkably bold example of the key pattern. Their function may have been to mark boundaries or distances. The very fine but sadly decayed example in the churchyard at Wolverhampton is a great puzzle. It stands 12 feet high on a pedestal of stones covered with ivy, which forms a very unsafe support for the ladder of the investigator. Sixty-four inches from the bottom a raised belt of rope is cut on the pillar, from which raised bands descend forming five triangles, in each of which is a large animal or a bird, about a foot high. The animal which has perished least is a nondescript. Immediately above the rope band is a remarkable tier of subjects, 19 inches wide, the girth of the pillar here being about 86 inches. By means of bars crossing one another at about  $45^\circ$ , the belt is divided into five diamond-shaped areas, in each of which a large quadruped is sculptured, the small triangles above and below the intersection of the bars also containing a bird or a beast each. Thus there are in

all 15 figures in this belt, five large and ten small. A large boss is placed at the intersection of the bars, and their ends are lost under a conventional leaf; these details look late. A portion of this belt, very roughly represented, is shewn on Plate XIII, fig. 2. Next above comes a belt of acanthus leaves, 7 inches wide. Above that again a belt 19 inches wide filled with spiral scrolls, alternately branching off to left and right. Whether the scrolls carry animals in them or only leaves or fruit, cannot now be determined with certainty; many years ago birds could be discovered in the scrolls and roses. Then another belt 17 inches wide with animals much decayed, and above that another 12 inches wide with scrolls likewise much decayed. At the top is a heavy cap, on the bevelled surface of which there are signs of interlacing work. The whole column tapers gently upwards, and some  $8\frac{1}{2}$  feet from the ground the girth is about the same as that of the bottom of the Wilne pillar, which may of course have been part of a great column of this character. The absence of the Christian figures or busts which usually stand above the animals and birds and worms on English sculptured stones is a feature which calls for remark. It points, perhaps, to the erection of this magnificent column either at a period when the original meaning of sculptured stones had been forgotten, or by people who lightly regarded the Christian faith, and copied the non-Christian part of the sculptured pillars they saw in the neighbourhood. So far as I could see, the animals are not hampered and fettered as in other cases, but the quadruped whose front half is cut off at the right of figure 2 has, I think, his off fore leg raised in submission. It is necessary to say that my observations and measurements and rubbings were made in a drizzling rain, and though the Rector had kindly made full provision of ladders, and the sacristan gave me every assistance, the circumstances were not in favour of a solution of the intricacies of the patterns, now in a baffling state of decay. Three or four hours, too, are a very inadequate time to spend on such a monument as this, even in the best of weather. A second visit would no doubt enable me to correct some errors, and to solve some problems left open in the figure. For example, the animal

in the centre compartment is, I think, regarding his own tail, signs of which remain near his muzzle ; and it is possible that he has a bird's head. The two awkward jaws of his right-hand neighbour may be one side of an oval loop formed by his tail, an arrangement which exists in the case of the animal whose fore half is shown on the left side. The jaws are too awkward for anything on this or any of the English sculptured stones of any importance, where the skill and knowledge shown are very great. Even the frame of mind of a bird is shown in a graphic manner, as may be seen on the Wilne Font, where the buoyant spirits of the pair of birds which are being allowed to feed are shewn as clearly as the gloomy despondency of the pair whose beaks are sealed.

At the risk of appearing fanciful, I must point out the curious resemblances between details of this belt of subjects and the Bayeux tapestry. To begin with a coincidence no doubt accidental, they are of the same width, a little more than nineteen inches. The tapestry has an upper border and a lower, and it is to the details of these that the resemblance is striking. The borders are divided into spaces by means of lines of colour, inclined to one another in such a way, that if they were continued upwards and downwards alternately, they would form isocetes triangles. In the larger portions of these triangles which form the border there are animals and birds, one in each as a rule, while the smaller spaces, being the parts of the triangles near the vertex, have merely a small trefoil leaf, or a small cross, there being no room for a beast or bird. The birds are in many cases in curious attitudes, and their wings are curiously disposed. There is a bird above the word *castellum* in the legend . . . *ut foderetur castellum at Hestenga* very surprisingly like the bird in the lower triangle the left of fig. 2, the unusual contour of neck and the sharp angle in the outline of the wing being specially noticeable ; it is a very curious coincidence that the triangle in which the Wolverhampton bird is has the same base and nearly the same dimensions as that on the tapestry. The bird in the upper triangle to the left hand in fig. 2, of which it is literally difficult to make head or tail, is very like a bird under the scene where



William's men are cutting down trees to build the invading ships, the bird on the tapestry being engaged in eating something which springs in branches from the border line which marks out the triangle. It seems not unlikely that the Wolverhampton bird is similarly engaged ; and if I have correctly outlined his tail—it was done before I had noticed the Bayeux resemblances—it reproduces a marked feature of the Bayeux birds. The quadrupeds at Wolverhampton, in the large diamond spaces, have no resemblance to anything at Bayeux. They, like the historical belt of the tapestry, are the main theme ; the birds in the triangles above and below correspond to the upper and lower border at Bayeux. In a higher tier at Wolverhampton, where the triangles are smaller, a piece of simple ornament takes the place of the bird, as in the smaller spaces on the tapestry.

To point out a resemblance is much more easy than to suggest any reason for it. The Bayeux tapestry was not unique. At the time when the Church of Wolverhampton was being founded by the widow of a great lord of the Midlands, the valiant deeds of Britnoth were being wrought on a curtain for the Church of Ely by the widow of the great Ealdorman of the East Saxons, who was killed A.D. 991. In 1013, the description of the pictorial sails and the ornaments of Swegen's ships reads like a summary of the Bayeux borders—birds and dragons and lions and bulls and dolphins. All our knowledge goes to show that the use of these figures was no invention of that age ; and so far as they are concerned, the Wolverhampton birds and beasts are as likely to date from the times when the famous Lady of the Mercians expelled the Danes, and Tettenhall witnessed their great slaughter, as from the time when the Bayeux tapestry was wrought or later. But, as I have remarked, there are some details which seem late, perhaps only because other early examples have all perished.

An even more striking example of a cylindrical pillar is found in the churchyard at Masham. Of this remarkable monument three complete tiers and at least half of a fourth remain. It is quite worthy to be compared with the Wilne pillar, but unfortunately its state of preservation is not nearly so good. The lowest

tier consists of seven panels, six of them containing single quadrupeds, the seventh a pair of quadrupeds. These animals are beautifully designed and executed, their bodies deer-shaped, in some cases almost resembling the body of a giraffe, legs long, necks very long and curved so as to follow the form of the Romanesque arch which forms the head of each panel. These proudly arched necks had been supposed to be maned, but after careful examination I found that the appearance of a mane was due to the fact that they were all constrained by halters looped five or six times round the neck, and eventually bringing the muzzle close in to the chest. In each case one of the forelegs is raised, as with the "worms" at Wilne, this foreleg, as also the remaining legs, being hampered and fettered by bands. These bands appear—but at the critical point the surface has been destroyed—to spring out of the ground, and there are several indications that they represent the stems of growing plants or creepers. Photo-lithographs from rubbings of one of these quadrupeds and the neck of another, in which those parts which are fairly clear are filled in, will be found on Plate XIII, fig. 3, 4. These are the "beasts and all cattle" which are missing at Wilne; at Masham there are no "worms and feathered fowls." Each of the single arched panels is about a foot wide, and the tier is about 22 inches high. In the arched panels of the two-and-a-half tiers above are the figures of men; in one is seen our Lord in the attitude of benediction, in another Samson, with a Romanesque gate of Gaza hung on his left shoulder and reaching nearly to his feet, "bar and all," as the Old Testament is careful to tell us. (Plate XIII., fig. 5). The girth is 80 inches at bottom, 76 at top; height 80 inches. Almost all of the subjects have gone so far to decay that imagination has to play a large part in their identification. Any one of the tiers would have made a beautiful font, if it had occurred to the early ecclesiastical lords of the vast parish of Masham to use for that purpose a part of a monument which must many centuries ago have been famous in all the vale of Yore.

It is difficult to look at some of the early *situlae* (holy water

vessels) without noticing the resemblance they bear to these circular columns. There is a tenth century *situla* in the treasury of the Duomo at Milan, cylindrical, but contracting downwards, with a Romanesque arcade and a Scripture subject in each arch, the rim at the bottom carrying a well designed key pattern. A cylindrical German *situla* of the eleventh century has two tiers of Scripture subjects, running continuously round with no arcade. These interesting vessels are only seven or eight inches high by about five inches across, but they look strangely like a piece of a great column in miniature. The same may be said of the pyxes, some of which are much earlier than the dates mentioned. They are exceedingly like circular fonts in miniature, or portions of cylindrical columns. This is particularly the case with an Italian pyx of the fifth or sixth century at the Vatican, representing the miracles of our Lord, while the very early pyx in the treasury of the Cathedral of Sens has a lion hunt, in which a shield, a fallen man, and a lion's head with the paws on a branch, might have served as a copy for a sculptured fragment at Jarrow.