

## **@d Preface**

Among the great variety of manifestations of early medieval art, the baptismal font has been strangely neglected so that when, on my retirement, I elected to read for a Master's degree in art history, it offered virtually untrodden ground for research. As a late-comer to academic study, I make no pretence of having written the definitive book on the subject. What I have sought to do, through a combination of personal research across the whole area covered and by substantial study of the relevant literature, is to bring together in one place a detailed consideration of the main groups of fonts, whether typified by their form or by their decoration, together with descriptions of the most important individual pieces which survive.

If I have been successful, the publication of my research will serve two purposes: it will provide the art historian with pointers to specific matters calling for more exhaustive enquiry; the geographical and bibliographical data provided should greatly reduce the task of generating lists of fonts to examine and of books and articles to read. Second, for the educated non-specialist who is interested in ecclesiastical art of the Middle Ages, it will open a window into a world which, until now, has been difficult to penetrate or, for many, just unknown.

One obvious area for further research is the question of dating. 'Romanesque' appears in the title rather than 'Twelfth Century' because the production of fonts in the first place followed the spread of Christianity and it is clear that in some areas fonts were being made in the Romanesque style long after it had been superseded elsewhere. Almost no fonts survive which can safely be ascribed to the eleventh century, other than a small number made of reused material, and it seems likely that the vast majority were made during the second half of the twelfth century. The dating of individual fonts generally requires extensive research into church records, to establish the date of the granting of the licence to baptise, and the scope of this work, already many years in gestation, has rendered such detailed work impractical. Readers will therefore find few references to dating, other than in the most general terms.

The sheer weight of material demanding inclusion has pushed this study far wider than I or my publisher anticipated. The result has been the amputation of the original Part I, chapters on the history and symbolism of baptism, this book being just Part II, a study of the fonts of the different countries and schools, a quasi-*catalogue raisonné*. This separation is regrettable, because an appreciation of the font as an item of liturgical furniture demands an understanding of the way its evolution followed modifications to the rite and of the messages – some overt, others hidden – contained in its decoration. The Introduction which follows will try to make good that loss, while attempts continue to publish Part I as a separate study. It is instructive to observe the way in which church visitors, however much attention they pay to roof, stained glass, memorials, shrines and sculpted capitals, so often completely overlook the font. Yet it is often the oldest object in the church, even older than the church itself. It is also of immense liturgical significance, associated with the great sacrament of initiation, and a symbolic door into the Christian Church, epitomised by its location near the entrance to the building in which it stands. It represents ideas of death and rebirth and emphasises how we are redeemed through the washing away of Original Sin and our acquired belief in Christ. And that is not all; the baptismal font is often an object of beauty in itself, while the figure

decoration in particular grants us an insight into the imagination of medieval men and women and into the important part which symbols played in their lives. The fact that today we can no longer read those signs with the same fluency only adds to the fascination. Problems of manageability dictated a definition of northern Europe and Scandinavia as the area lying west of the Oder and between two arbitrarily selected east–west lines drawn through Bergen and Freiburg, though a few examples have intruded from north and south. Although Romanesque fonts are of course to be found outside the area as defined, the majority (and the most interesting) are included and the only real casualties have been the considerable body of fonts in northern Spain, especially in Navarre. In both Italy and southern France baptisteries continued to be used (and even built) well into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Except for a small number, for which I have been forced to rely on photographs, I have examined personally all the fonts described in the text. The supplementary information in the notes comes partly from my own observations and partly from material contained in the published work of other scholars, especially the lists which divide the fonts according to form and decoration. Names which appear only in the notes and appendices are included for the sake of completeness and for the convenience of future researchers. Only for Denmark and Sweden are these lists reliable and exhaustive, for only the art historians of those countries studied at first hand all the examples of which they wrote. The lists of the Mosan and Tournai Schools are also very close to being complete and correct, being based respectively on Tollenaere and on my own dissertation, respectively. Pudelko in this century attempted to paint too big a picture on too small a canvas and the major French scholars of the nineteenth century relied too much on the work of earlier writers. Clearly, it has not been possible to validate all the lists or to confirm that all those fonts included in them still survive, especially in those parts of Belgium, France and Germany which have been seriously affected by war.

Where it is known that certain fonts have been destroyed or lost, or are now in museum collections, these facts are recorded but it must be said that the condition of some fonts in small French country churches gives cause for concern, especially in view of the current (winter 2000) state of neglect of many of the churches themselves, with a single *curé* often responsible for up to twenty parishes. Another worry is the number of fonts exposed to the elements (especially in north-east Germany), filled with flowers, used as drinking troughs for cattle, even in one case found in a château courtyard as a sink for the garden. Fonts in museum collections may usually, but not invariably, be assumed to be safe. In some parts of Holland fonts have been returned to their original churches, though title remains with the museum, ensuring their proper preservation and conservation. Other fonts are in private hands and at present treasured by their owners, but heirs and successors may not take the same enlightened view. Vigilance is required and anyone discovering a font in a position of short- or long-term risk should attempt to draw it to the attention of the appropriate authority – in itself not altogether easy!

The layout varies between chapters for the very good reason that the mix and distribution of font types is very different from one country to another. The general thread is to begin, where they exist, by examining significant groups or ‘schools’ of fonts and to end with a review of major individual pieces which have no obvious siblings. Between the two the approach may be either geographical or typological and the latter may be by type of decoration rather than by form. Reflecting the overall chronology, tub fonts are normally considered before pedestals. Although distinct types of font are almost always of a specific material, they were often copied in other material and therefore have not been categorised under the types of stone used.

Reference to line drawings will be made as [fig. 1] etc; they appear as close as practicable to the relevant text. Photographs are placed at the end of the book, normally four plates to a page, and are referred to as [1] etc. To avoid distraction, references are only included where the text makes it desirable to look at the image. Primary references are in bold, secondary in normal type.

### **@d Acknowledgements**

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Robin Ollington made all the drawings, precisely following the requirements of the text, whether to show form and volume without distracting detail, or to demonstrate the evolution of decoration. His ability to work from poor photographs, old engravings or even my verbal descriptions has been a great support. The willingness of others to allow use of their own photographs has been most generous and their work is acknowledged in the List of Plates. The British Academy awarded me funds for research, while financial assistance towards publishing costs has come from the Scouloudi Foundation, the Mark Fitch Fund and from the Norman Scarfe Trust. Failing their help this work could never have appeared in print. Pastor Stephen Glahn and his wife Inge took me, a complete unknown, into their home in Sjælland when I was lost for a base from which to work. Kirsten Sawston assisted me with translations without which I could only have gained a very superficial idea of the many Scandinavian publications which I needed to study. Anne Parry read my early chapters and at subsequent 'tutorials' taught me much about the art of clear writing and my own shortcomings. Arne Jeppesen ranged with his camera far and wide across Denmark, extending the scope of my own Danish photo-archive, and even involved his brother in the project. However my wife envisaged my retirement, it cannot have included 'font-

widowhood' during my solo research trips, or long days with route-card, notebook and tape-measure as she accompanied me in pursuit of my obsession.

All these, and many others unnamed, have played an enormous part in the process of bringing this book to fruition. Without them I could not have achieved it and I am very conscious that it falls far short of the standard that their contributions deserve. Responsibility for the faults is inescapably mine.

