

2012

### Saintly Bodies, Mortal Bodies: Hagiographic Decoration on English Twelfth Century Baptismal Fonts

Frances Altvater  
*University of Hartford*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

---

#### Recommended Citation

Altvater, Frances. "Saintly Bodies, Mortal Bodies: Hagiographic Decoration on English Twelfth Century Baptismal Fonts." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 3, 4 (2012): 45-102.  
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol3/iss4/2>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).



## **Saintly Bodies, Mortal Bodies: Hagiographic Decoration on English Twelfth Century Baptismal Fonts**

**By Frances Altvater, University of Hartford<sup>1</sup>**

“In faith, fortitude is attributed to the Christian, in the sacraments, arms; in good works, weapons for him who is to fight the devil.”

--Hugh of Saint-Victor, *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*, Book I: Part IX, viii.

In the Middle Ages, sacramental journeying and its connection to the cult of saints began at the start of life with baptism. The laity related to the saints in a complicated layering of emulation, supplication, and penitence, with spiritual experiences in the institutional sacraments and in the cultural phenomenon of pilgrimage.<sup>2</sup> Both sacraments and pilgrimage are practices of transition, made up of three phases: separation, limen or margin, and aggregation.<sup>3</sup> In the twelfth century, baptism, as a sacramental requirement, was connected to a much larger ecclesiastically-established and hierarchically-authorized framework of social and physical amelioration through the saints.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the librarians at the Conway Library at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Dr. Deborah Kahn, Dr. Clark Maines, the readers and editors of *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art & Architecture*, Harriet M. Sonne de Torrens and Miguel A. Torrens, and Melissa Shaner. This work is dedicated to my family, *Tolerabimus quod tolerare debemus*.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God* (Mahwah, 2003) as a comprehensive introduction; see also source documents in Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner and Edith L.B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York, 1978), 2-17. Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages c. 200-c. 1150* (Cambridge, UK, 1993) argues the same idea of saintly spiritual liminality from the perspective of baptism.

The pressure to understand the sacraments and their salvific context in the twelfth century is part of the well-documented systematic interests of Scholastic theology.<sup>4</sup> But our understanding of lay sacramental reception and lay piety comes not just from erudite writings that informed clerical practices directed at the laity, but also, obliquely,<sup>5</sup> through the artworks created for the sacrament itself. In the twelfth century particularly, baptismal fonts should be understood as objects at the nexus of medieval sacramental theology and lay practice.<sup>6</sup> The iconography of these fonts is a visual expression of systematic sacramentology and of the prevalent medieval anxiety about the mortal body. The preoccupation with mortal incarnation can be seen in the narrative iconographies chosen for baptismal fonts: Adam and Eve, Christ's own infancy, and images of saints.

In particular, the communion of saints provided a rich visual model based in their own physical bodies, martyred for their faith and retained as relics. Their spiritual presence transcended the limits of those mortal bodies, making them powerful

---

<sup>4</sup> The work on systematic sacramental theology is extensive: N.M. Haring, "Berengar's Definitions of Sacramentum and their Influence on Medieval Sacramentology," *Medieval Studies* 10 (1948), 109-146; Henri Cloes, "La systematization théologique pendant la première moitié du XIIe siècle," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 34 (1952), 277-329; Elizabeth Frances Rogers, *Peter Lombard and the Sacramental System* (Merrick, 1976); Marcia Colish, "Systematic theology and theological renewal in the twelfth century," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18/2 (Fall 1988), 135-156; and, perhaps the most useful as a complete contextualization, Marcia Colish, *Peter Lombard* (Brill Studies in Intellectual History Volumes 41 and 42, Leiden, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind and Christopher Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages: Western Europe 1000-1300* (London, 1984); Andre Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: religious beliefs and devotional practices* (Notre-Dame, 1993); Ann Astell, ed. *Lay Sanctity, medieval and modern* (Notre-Dame, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> The study of fonts has centered around the solely antiquarian: Francis Bond, *Fonts and Font Covers*, 1907/1985; E. Tyrrell-Green, *Baptismal Fonts* (London, 1928) to the more contextual but largely formal analytical: George Zarnecki, entries in *English Romanesque Sculpture 1066-1140* (London, 1951) and *English Romanesque Sculpture 1140-1210* (London, 1953) to the iconographic studies Folke Nordström, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts* (Umeå, 1984); C.S. Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts of Northern Europe and Scandinavia* (Woodbridge, 2002); Harriet M. Sonne de Torrens, "De fontibus salvatoris: A Survey of Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Baptismal Fonts Ornamented with Events from the Childhood of Christ," Colum Hourihane ed., *Objects, Images & the Word: Art in the Service of the Liturgy* (Princeton, 2003), 105-137. New databases (Harriet M. Sonne de Torrens and Miguel Torrens, *Baptisteria Sacra* (<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/bsi/index.html>) and the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, <http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/>) will help font studies tremendously.

intercessors for the fragility of the bodies of the contemporary faithful. Saints' paradigmatic faith and presence as a continuation of Christ's mission are thus visually inextricable from the sacrament of baptism. The presentation of saints on baptismal fonts was a strong expression of their position in an explicitly sacramental context, translating their saintly piety and power into the liturgical process of salvation and conveying the spiritual protection of a figure both holy and human for the fragile child newly baptized.

### **The Theological and Liturgical Contexts of Baptism**

A standardized understanding of baptism was clearly circulated in erudite circles as part of a twelfth-century trend towards creating a unified statement of sacramental constitution and practice.<sup>7</sup> One of the most critical and pressing priorities of orthodox twelfth-century theology was the systematic definition of the sacraments. This effort was born out of Berengar's late-eleventh-century conflicts over Christ's Real Presence in the elements of the Eucharist. Institutional anxiety over Berengar's heresy and fear of further heterodoxy caused systematic sacramental theology to be taken up by a broad range of theologians, from canonists like Ivo of Chartres and Gratian to Peter Abelard, William of Champeaux, and Robert Pullens. The writings of scholars such as Hugh of Saint-Victor and Peter Lombard framed the discussion more rigorously around the sacraments. Peter Lombard's widely disseminated *Sentences* (c. 1150) presented a systematic theology coherently ordered around the Augustinian principles of *res* (element, thing) and *signa*

---

<sup>7</sup> The following discussion of sacramental expression in the iconography of baptismal fonts of the period is based on the author's dissertation, *In Fonte Renatus: The Iconography and Context of Twelfth-Century Baptismal Fonts in England* (Ph.D., Boston University, 2003), chapter 2.

(sign) and bolstered by statements from numerous canonical authorities.<sup>8</sup> The theology that takes shape in the twelfth century and solidifies in the thirteenth, is the direct result of a much longer historical discussion and these contemporary heterodox pressures.

In the twelfth century, the connections among all sacraments were a key element of theological reasoning and articulation. All sacraments had a material substance and a divine grace; the experience of the sacraments was a hierarchy of validity based in substance, ritual, performance, and faith. Just as Augustine insisted that the faith of the minister did not stop the faithful from receiving the benefit of baptism, Honorius Augustodunensis, for instance, noted that the faithful could receive both the True Body and Blood of Christ in the elements of the Eucharist and its spiritual grace and that the unworthy might receive the elements, but not the spiritual effect.<sup>9</sup> Numerous theologians, such as Gilbert of La Porrée, Peter of Vienna, and Gerhoh of Reichersberg, emphasized the necessity of physical elements to lead the mortal to spiritual reception in the sacraments and the importance of the unity of the Church—the bond of love and community created through the faithful—that created an active effect from the sacrament.<sup>10</sup> The same Neo-Platonic philosophy that tinges Augustine’s understanding of baptism as a physical bathing that affects a spiritual journey towards God is expressed poetically about the Eucharist by Aelred of Rievaulx: “I long to be dissolved, to be with Christ” and “the sweetness of inward contemplation, so [...] short and rare because of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (Oxford, 2004), especially 144-178. See also G.R. Evans, *Medieval Commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, v. 1 (Leiden, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, Sermon 260A (trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, III/7, 187-90, Migne, *PL*, 38:0120ff), Honorius Augustodunensis, *Eucharisticon* (*PL* 1254A-1255B).

<sup>10</sup> Michal Kobialka, “Corpus Mysticum et Representationem: Hildegard of Bingen’s Scivias and Ordo Virtutum,” *Theatre Survey* 37/1 (1996), 6-7.

heaviness of the spirit, chained still by the bonds of the flesh...”<sup>11</sup> Finally, the comprehension of how sacraments worked was applied to other explanations: “[Revelations are] those which are perceived with the help of the Holy Spirit by the eyes of the heart, whereby the human spirit is led through the likeness of visible things or figures and signs to knowledge of invisible ones.”<sup>12</sup> There was a culture of logical and linguistic connection that first associated sacraments with each other through their composition and second connected those sacraments through the body of the Christian faithful, the body of the saintly exemplar, and the Body/body of Christ.

Some, but not all, aspects of the sacrament of baptism remained largely constant from the time of their elaboration by Augustine to the twelfth-century interpretations. Baptism was seen as necessary, instituted by Christ in the gospels through his assertion to Nicodemus in John 3:5: “...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>13</sup> Following Paul in Romans 5, Augustine emphasized that the mortal condition -- descent from Adam -- required the remedy of baptism.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the backbone of sacramental theology in the Middle Ages: baptism was necessary for all to cleanse inherited sin. Augustine unequivocally stated that without baptism, there can be no salvation.<sup>15</sup> Where Augustine’s candidates were primarily adult converts, in the twelfth century most candidates were infants. As baptism was understood as unrepeatable and

---

<sup>11</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, cited in “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 9.

<sup>12</sup> Richard of St. Victor (*Patrologiae Latinae* 196:686) cited in “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 13.

<sup>13</sup> John 3:5, also 1-8 inclusive. (Richard Challoner, *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, Rockford, Ill.: 1989) All Biblical quotations come from this edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* I: 21, ed. Migne, *PL* 44, 0125ff. See also *De Civitate Dei*, Book XIII: 4, ed. Migne, *PL* 41 and Sermon 213, ed. Migne, *PL* 38, 0160ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Augustine, *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*, Book 1: 26, ed. Migne, *PL* 44, 0125ff.

moved from an end of life practice for adults to a beginning of life sacrament for children, penance developed even greater sacramental importance as a remedy for committed sin. Anxiety for the soul of the innocent child in the imagined horrors of Hell, combined with interpretations of God's mercy conveyed for unbaptized people such as the crucified thief, the Holy Innocents, and those converted and martyred at the execution of a saint, lead to the development of Purgatory.<sup>16</sup> The shift from adults to infants forced the sacramental response to change as well.

The centrality of baptism in lay spirituality is revealed in both English liturgical practice and civil laws. In England, as elsewhere in the Christian West, baptism was administered by a priest (presbyter), which focused participation on a parish level, separating it from the episcopal sacrament of confirmation.<sup>17</sup> The widespread retention of twelfth-century fonts in hundreds of individual parishes in England is testimony to their importance to parish life. The English theologian Robert Pullus (c. 1080-1147/50) evidences the ecclesiastical response to baptism's importance for parishioners by listing the order of preference of celebrants: the pontiff/bishops, priests, deacons, laymen, and

---

<sup>16</sup> Jacques LeGoff, *La Naissance du Purgatoire* (Paris, 1981), especially 177-316. See Anselm of Laon, *Sentences* in Colish, *Peter Lombard*, 534 or Franz P. Bliemetzreider, *Anselmus von Laon Systematische Sentenzen, Beitrage zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, Vol. 18, pt. 2-3 (Muenster, 1919). This same anxiety is voiced in Peter Lombard's *Summa Sententiarum* IV, iv: "For if anyone having faith and charity wishes to be baptized, and cannot because prevented by necessity, the goodness of the Almighty will supply what has been lacking in the sacrament. For while he can perform it, he is bound, unless he do perform it; but when he is not able, but wishes to do so, God, who has not bound his power to the sacraments, does not impute it to him." (trans. Rogers, *Peter Lombard*, 100). The Holy Innocents, though worshipped as saints, are exclusive to Christ's Infancy cycle; see Nordström, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts*, 117 and Sonne de Torrens, "De fontibus salvatoris," 105-137.

<sup>17</sup> J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West* (London, 1965) in Britain, see 89-91; for full discussion, see 114-122.

finally the mother herself in absolute extremis.<sup>18</sup> While baptismal liturgies varied considerably by time and place, a normative framework included a verbal renunciation of sin and Satan (either by the candidate or on behalf of the candidate) and the application of consecrated water. In twelfth-century England, as elsewhere, the Trinitarian formula, “I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” plus aspersion, was considered sufficient to secure the soul; ideally, the baptism was then confirmed by a bishop should the child survive.<sup>19</sup> Further, baptism was not performed only in the prescribed seasons of Easter and Pentecost. Although the Church emphasized that exceptions should be made only in cases of danger of death, the English church seems to have practiced baptism throughout the year.

Secular and ecclesiastic laws underscored this stress on baptismal necessity. The late-seventh century *Ecclesiastical Laws of Ine*, king of Wessex, imposed a monetary and penitential fine on parents who failed to baptize their child within thirty days.<sup>20</sup> Similar laws were passed in the eleventh-century *Canons of King Edgar*; the *Laws of the Northumbrian Presbyters*, also an eleventh-century document, levied a fine on parents if a child died before baptism delayed more than nine days after birth.<sup>21</sup> The exigencies of

---

<sup>18</sup> Robert Pullus, *De ceremoniis sacramentis officiis et observationibus ecclesiasticis* 1-13, ed. Migne, *PL* 177, 389. Further information on maternal/midwife baptism, see Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990), 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 1, 445. See also (though the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries), Kathryn Ann Taglia, “The cultural construction of childhood: baptism, communion, and confirmation”, in ed. Michael M. Sheehan, Constance Rousseau, and Joel Thomas Rosenthal, *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: essays in memory of Michael M. Sheehan, C.S.B.* (Kalamazoo, 1998), 255-287.

<sup>20</sup> Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 82, 86. Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550* (London, 1997), 127-128, offers some interesting burial evidence, much of it from the later Middle Ages, regarding the possibility that a number of children may not have received baptism before the age of two. Material evidence is unfortunately incomplete for the twelfth century.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 82, 86.



salvation were so pressing that they were an active part of civic practice; baptism may have been an ecclesiastical initiation, but it was also a rite of social inclusion.

### **Connections between Baptism and Saints**

There are strong theological parallels between sainthood and baptism, rooted in the medieval religious approaches to the body and its resurrection.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:3-5)

In Saint Paul's writing, we find the early establishment of the metaphor of baptism as a death to sin, a death that the catechumen shares with Christ: by extension, he or she must have a resurrection like Christ's. As Caroline Walker Bynum points out, the process of resurrection thus begins in this life.<sup>22</sup> A neo-Platonic approach, undoubtedly filtered through Augustine, to the soul's journey to God begun at baptism is present in much of the medieval theology of baptism; it is also the philosophical underpinning of Christian asceticism associated with the saints, as the austerity of the body moves the focus from the body to the needs of the soul.<sup>23</sup> The saint who surrendered her body for her faith won a

---

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York, 1995), 4.

<sup>23</sup> For a taste of Neo-Platonism as reflected in his baptismal theology, see Augustine, Sermon 216, in *Sermons III/6*, part of the series ed. John E. Rotelle, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Hyde Park, 1999) and in ed. Migne, *PL* 38, 01076ff. See also Bynum, *Resurrection*, 200.

victory more tangible than the death metaphorically suggested in baptism. The martyrdom of that body achieved an important somatic balance—the body must die in order to attain the life eternal. Baptism also achieves a moment of similar balance: without the sacrament, the body of the catechumen, tainted by the sin of its origin, is vulnerable and doomed. Baptism’s washing of that sin fundamentally changes the status of the body (though not its materiality).<sup>24</sup> In both hagiographic and baptismal accounts, the body is no obstacle to salvation if the desire is strong enough: the saint may feel no pain at death; the unbaptized child may overcome illness or even death so that the rite may occur. The rewards of salvation are strong for the individual who dies shortly after baptism and thus cannot contaminate the soul with committed sins.<sup>25</sup> The soul’s need for baptismal redemption overcomes the body’s weakness and mortality.

While the sacraments were a facet of lay spirituality, its main focus in the twelfth century was the believer’s engagement with the saints of the Church.<sup>26</sup> “Saints were those who were recognized as having experienced so much reverence and achieved such a degree of purity that they had transcended the sinfulness of ordinary existence.”<sup>27</sup> Saints functioned very specifically as a bridge in medieval Christianity. They shared both the parishioner’s mortal experience and Christ’s sanctity by lived example and/or

---

<sup>24</sup> For an eloquent discussion of the issue of material substance and resurrection, see Bynum, “The Patristic Background”, *Resurrection*, 21ff.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York, 2000). Also Bynum, *Resurrection*, 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the sources in note 2, see also Richard Kieckhefer, “Imitators of Christ” in Kieckhefer and George Bond, *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions* (Berkeley, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom 1000-1700* (Chicago, 1982), 5.

martyrdom.<sup>28</sup> Peter Brown notes a propensity in fourth-century piety for a protector, “relations with whom could be conceived of in terms open to the nuances of known human relations between patron and client;”<sup>29</sup> the same might be extended to twelfth-century lay spirituality, remembering that the laity brought a hierarchical understanding to what was by then a regularized system of divine/mortal interaction.<sup>30</sup> This practice of admiration of a figure whose spiritual power has already been made manifest through their rejection of temptations, their positive examples of Christ-like virtues, and their willingness to sacrifice their mortal bodies that leads to the second characteristic of hagiographic worship: the ongoing manifestation of saintly power through miracles in the lives of those fundamentally less powerful.<sup>31</sup>

The scholarly question has been raised whether Peter Brown’s model of the saints as a divine mirror of social interaction is useful, since it does not account for the complexity of audiences/participants within that social system. Indeed, Paul Antony

---

<sup>28</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981) remains the fullest explanation of the function of these figures. See also Paul Antony Hayward, “Demystifying the role of sanctity in Western Christendom”, in ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford, 1999), 115-142.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *The Cult of Saints*, 61.

<sup>30</sup> We might also draw the fourth and the twelfth centuries together through the institutional Church’s sanctification of the laity, a tendency most often associated with early Christianity and which diminished significantly with the cultural emphasis on hermetic sanctity; it reappeared in the later twelfth century, creating saint cults around lay figures. André Vauchez, “Lay People’s Sanctity in Western Europe: Evolution of a Pattern (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries)” in ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1991), 21-32, André Vauchez, “A Twelfth-Century Novelty: The Lay Saints of Urban Italy” in ed. Daniel E. Bornstein, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (Notre Dame, 1993), 51-72 and the articles collected in ed. Astell, *Lay Sanctity*.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, André Vauchez argues that the laity were more interested in saints’ miracles and relics, the evidence of their continued existence, than in the vita accounts of their original sanctity, inaccessibly written in Latin; see André Vauchez, “Lay Belief around 1200: Religious Mentalities of the Feudal World” in Bornstein, *The Laity*, 88-89.

Hayward suggests that “[t]his aspect of their contents is probably better understood as a projection of how certain sections of the élite felt social life *ought* to be conducted—of the kind of loyalty, obedience, and efficiency they hoped for.”<sup>32</sup> The issue is fundamentally one of the intersections between audience and ideologies, recognizing that there are mutually-reinforcing and mutually-responding perspectives among patrons, artists, and users. The ideological image is always a result of a positional dialogue of assertion, acceptance, and rejection among its users.

English baptismal fonts of the twelfth century illuminate this interaction. The iconography is largely defined by the ecclesiastical institution; it is expressed as a very small range of suitable images of saints. Further, that iconography is seldom the same hagiographic interest expressed in the *Lives*: it is often far more general, expressing saintliness rather than enumerating the qualities of a particular saint. Artistic expression is typically vernacular, not the formal equivalent of the elevated style that characterizes the prose of the *Lives*. Placement on the baptismal font foregrounds the visual depiction of saintliness. The font thus becomes one example of the intersection of official dogma and lay reception.

### **Artistic and Liturgical Context**

While the theological and cultural importance of baptism in the twelfth century is clear, the artistic context of baptismal fonts is less so. Most fonts have been moved from

---

<sup>32</sup> Hayward, “Demystifying”, 130. See also Barbara Abou-el-Haj, “The Audiences for the Medieval Cult of Saints,” *Gesta* 30 (1991), 3-15. Brigitte Cazelles, “Introduction” in ed. Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Szell, *Images*, 2. This idea that the saint is an example to be admired and not necessarily an example to be emulated has its expression primarily in the saints’ *vitae*; these works provide a topos for seeing virtue, but not instructions for achieving it, given the omissions throughout the texts. “The crises and trials in his or her life demonstrate the presence of holiness rather than the method of its acquisition.” (Hayward, “Demystifying,” 123) See also Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley, 2001).

their original sites even when retained in the church for which they were made.

Liturgically there was nothing that required their placement in a specific position; by custom, they frequently balanced the altar in the east by being placed in the west, but they might also be located near a northern or southern door or even on a porch (thus underscoring the spiritual entry into the community).<sup>33</sup> In most cases, fonts give few clues as to whether the iconographic content was deliberately highlighted by the placement within the church.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the connection made between altars and stained glass windows, for example,<sup>35</sup> most baptismal fonts cannot definitively support a reading beyond the generalized connection of the theological and the architectural entryways.

Despite the considerable regional variation in baptismal practice in the Middle Ages there were some important connections between the saints and the practices of baptismal ritual. The Roman rite, as offered in the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, was originally oriented to adults, but changes were clearly in effect by the seventh century as infant

---

<sup>33</sup> Two works address the siting of baptismal fonts particularly: J. Charles Wall, *Porches and Fonts* (London, 1912) and John Gordon Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London, 1962).

<sup>34</sup> The one clear exception to this is the fonts made in Tournai (Belgium), essentially mass-produced for an export market. Because placement could not be determined at commission or sale, these square fonts feature narrative and figures on two adjacent sides and decorative motifs on the other two consecutive sides.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Wolfgang Kemp, "Medieval Pictorial Systems" in ed. Brendan Cassidy, *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 121-137, *The Narratives of Gothic Stained Glass* (trans. Caroline Dobson Saltzweid, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Jean Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine, and Money: The Windows of the Trades at Chartres Cathedral* (Chicago, 1993), and Jean-Paul Deremble and Colette Manhès, *Les vitraux légendaires de Chartres: des récits en images* (Paris, 1988). For the roots of this discussion of perception and reading images in an oral culture, see Gregory the Great, *Letters to Bishop Serenus of Marseille*, "Sancti Gregorii Magni Epistolarum Lib. XI, Epist. 13", ed. Migne, *PL* 77, 1128-1130. Eds. Herbert L. Kessler and Marianna Shreve Simpson, *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Washington: 1985). Michael Camille, "Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Art History*, 8/1 (1985), 26-49. Lawrence Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?" *Word and Image*, 5 (1989), 227-251. Madeline H. Caviness, "Biblical Stories in Windows: Were They Bibles for the Poor?" in Bernard S. Levy, *The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art* (Binghamton, NY, 1992). Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: 1990).

baptism became the norm.<sup>36</sup> With liturgical elements such as insufflations, exorcism, anointing, and renunciation, the service reinforced the power of the baptismal ritual to counter Satan and evil.<sup>37</sup> When infants became the primary candidates, the number of scrutinies was reduced and rewritten for proxy statement by godparents.<sup>38</sup> Godparents played an important and visible role in the naming of the child, his or her future spiritual tutelage, and his or her future social relationships.<sup>39</sup> A child's name was often given, at least publicly, at baptism. Saints' names were typically also given to connect the child to the saint in a gesture acknowledging the saint's day, to invoke the saint's protection for the child and to provide the child with a holy exemplar.

While the Trinitarian statement was the only uniformly-necessary formula for baptismal acceptance, the full order for baptism, in its different regional expressions,

---

<sup>36</sup> Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism* (Aldershot, 2006), 110-111.

<sup>37</sup> For details on the Roman rite baptismal service, see Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 111; Henry Barclay Sweete, rev. by Arthur John MacLean, *Church Services and Service Books Before the Reformation* (London, 1930), 103-104. Similar discussion, though with few source notes, can also be found in A. Villien, trans. H.W. Edwards, *The History and Liturgy of the Sacraments* (New York: 1932). See also Andrew Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office* (Toronto: 1982) and, most recently, see Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, 1999). English regional variations, commonly seen in diocesan centers of York, Lincoln, and Salisbury, reflected the Roman rite in the order and service, with variations inserted by the Gallican and Irish rites. See Sweete, *Church Services*, 5-6; Sweete also mentions that Thomas Cranmer's 1549 Preface to the *Book of Common Prayer* notes other medieval traditions at St. Asaph, Ripon, Lichfield, Exeter, Wells, and Winchester.

<sup>38</sup> The discussion of godparents centers largely on their role in naming and kinship ties; godparents make their appearance as early as the second century as catechumenate sponsors (Erwin Fahlsbusch, *et. al.*, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: 2001), 442. Early medieval material can be found in Joseph Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship* (Princeton, 1986). The material for the later Middle Ages is considerably more complete, but draws from earlier traditions. See Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 1993), Katherine A. Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities 1200-1800* (Cambridge: 2003).

<sup>39</sup> There are some unusual examples of saints acting as godparents—Saint Amandus, Saint Ursmar of Lobbes, Trudonis, Fridolin, Gamalbert. As Mayke de Jong suggests in *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden: 1996), "Involving a holy man in the baptism of one's children, however, was a particularly effective method of procuring one's share of sacred power" (208). Usually the form in the hagiographies stresses the special connection this creates between the saint and the child, often at the expense of the biological/familial relation.

included references to saints.<sup>40</sup> Given the elaborate emphasis on exorcism and the devil, it is notable that there is not a similarly strong corollary in the liturgical use of the saints as protectors.<sup>41</sup> At the blessing of the font, preceding the *credo* and the anointing, a litany of saints follows the *Kyrie eleyson*.<sup>42</sup> The list proceeds from the Trinity through Mary and the angels to the apostles and evangelists; the saints at the beginning of the litany are the most powerful, the most universal. It then continues with specific lists of martyrs, confessors, hermits, and holy virgins, and concludes with “all saints.” The baptismal litany included the overall holiness of the saints without emphasizing them as particular models.

In the twelfth century, there was clearly flexibility within the liturgical list for changes, as not all lists feature the same saints. The *York Manual* tends to use more common saints while the *Rede Boke of Darbye* includes a number of pre-Conquest, specifically English saints like Dunstan, Sexburga, and Eadgitha, as well as a longer list of other saints.<sup>43</sup> The responses clearly indicate the supplicatory relationship of the worshipper to the saint: after *miserere nobis* (have mercy on us), the response is *ora* (pray

---

<sup>40</sup> Strikingly, the baptismal service contains a number of references to Old Testament figures and typological references that have little corresponding expression in the sculptural decoration of baptismal fonts either in England or on the Continent. Exceptionally on the fonts at Hildesheim and at San Frediano in Lucca, two fonts which deliberately and consciously adapt the baptismal liturgy for visual decoration, the parting of the Red Sea appears. This is not a commonly-adopted iconography; it does not appear on any extant English fonts of the period. In England, the Old Testament iconography is almost completely reserved for Adam and Eve, further suggesting the split between the erudition of the liturgical service and the institutional use of images to reinforce baptismal theology for the laity.

<sup>41</sup> See O.B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1965) and Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Ithaca, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> Rev. Dr. Henderson, *Manuale et Processionale ad Usus Insignis Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, Publications for the Surtees Society, Vol. LXIII (Durham, 1875); also includes texts of the Sarum manual, and a number of eleventh-century sources, including the Sacramentary of Leofric of Exeter, the Missal of Robert of Jumieges, and the *Rede Boke of Darbye*.

<sup>43</sup> Henderson, “Rede Boke of Darbye” (Corpus Christi Cambridge, Saec XI. Med), *Manuale*, 138-140.

or entreat) and finally, at the end of the litany, *libera* (deliver or liberate). Saints are thus present in the baptismal service in a specifically intercessory manner, though they are not invoked in the immediate formulas for the actual initiation. Saint imagery on baptismal fonts of the twelfth century is similar: present, but often loosely-defined, drawing on freer associations of divine intercession rather than of specific connection.

Beyond the baptismal role, the connection between saints and children is widespread.<sup>44</sup> The protective role of the saint in miracle stories begins before the birth of the child<sup>45</sup> and certainly, in some Byzantine examples, extended into the birth process itself.<sup>46</sup> Charms written out for pregnancy and childbirth assistance evoke a long litany of saints as well as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup> Saints formed a part of the miraculous remedy for everything from infertility to the expulsion of a stillborn fetus; they are as integral as any medicinal recipe or professional assistance.

All of this—the theological emphasis on baptism for salvation even of infants, the changes in baptismal practice to accommodate the child catechumen, the social network created generally by communion and specifically by baptismal sponsorship—argues for

---

<sup>44</sup> R.C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London, 1977) and Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event* (London, 1982). Though later in focus, Diana Webb's "Friends of the Family: Some Miracles for Children by Italian Friars" in ed. Diana Wood, *The Church and Childhood: Papers read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford, 1994), 183-195, provides the example of Louis of Toulouse who intervened specifically so that a child might live long enough to be baptized.

<sup>45</sup> Fiona Harris Stoertz, "Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth" in *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*, ed. C. Jorgensen Itnyre, (New York, 1996), 101-20.

<sup>46</sup> The use of images of saints on talismans for childbirth can be seen in Byzantine objects like amulets decorated with the holy rider motif (which was often then hung on a cradle to protect the child); a particularly fine example, the Virgin and Child (Theotokos) faced with the rider saint Sisinnios trampling the child-killing demon Gylou, and discussion of these Byzantine images can be found in Ioli Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Women and Their World* (Cambridge, MA, 2003). Hystera amulets were also adorned with saint images.

<sup>47</sup> Stoertz, "Suffering," 105-106.



the consequence of the child in medieval society. Childhood in the Middle Ages has been the focus of considerable recent scholarship, which posits that it was a distinct and highly-valued social construct despite a high rate of infant mortality and the close involvement of children with adult work and adult responsibilities.<sup>48</sup> Baptism was compelling for the protection of these infant souls, judged innocent of any committed sins, but marked by their mortal condition. The saint is a moral exemplar for the candidate undergoing a ritual of cleansing from mortal sin. The saint is a spiritual power for the helpless candidate, interceding on behalf of the supplicant with Christ for the removal of obstacles, healing, and granting of favors. The saint is a penitential model, connecting the baptized to the act of repentance and the rite of penance for redemption. The saint thus receives, materially assists, guides, and corrects the layperson. Therefore portrayal of saints on baptismal fonts establishes that relationship within the sacramental life of the church from the earliest moment of Christian introduction.

### **Unidentified Saints: Generalized Sanctity**

The decoration of medieval English baptismal fonts includes a large number of figures who cannot be identified reliably as saints. They are often imprecisely represented, simply holding a book or a crosier.<sup>49</sup> The twelfth-century lead font at Childrey (Berkshire) (**Figure 1**) is one such example where the figures are clearly

---

<sup>48</sup> On childhood in the Middle Ages: Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick, (New York, 1962), although this work tends to take a very conservative view of medieval childrearing. See the more recent works of Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990), Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages, Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries*, trans. Jody Gladding, (Notre-Dame, 1999), and Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> A number of English fonts are traditionally identified in the scholarship as having bishop figures, including Dunkeswell (Devonshire), Overbury (Wiltshire), Avington (Berkshire), North Grimston (East



**Figure 1** Baptismal Font, Childrey (Berkshire), twelfth century. Photo: University of Kent.

---

Riding, Yorkshire), Cowlam (East Riding, Yorkshire), Cottesmore (Rutland), Kirkby (Lancashire), Childrey (Berkshire), and possibly Belton (Lincolnshire). This identification is a tradition of imprecision in both the carving and the discussion, since the attribution is generally made on the strength of carrying a crozier and not on whether the figures wear miters so as to distinguish them from abbots. At Dunkeswell, for instance, the figure with a crozier is clearly tonsured, indicating monastic identity; at North Grimston, in contrast, where the figure has a halo but no miter, and a prominent and elaborate crozier, the literature consistently identifies the figure as a bishop. On the Kirkby font, the status of clergy was clearly important to the sculptor and two figures are differentiated with miters, three are tonsured, and two are bare-headed (Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 17). Clearly, the antiquarian discussion has emphasized those who bear croziers as bishops, not abbots, because of the connection between baptism and confirmation performed by a bishop but medieval carving seems less clear and less specific.

depicted in miters, dalmatics, albs and chasubles, holding crosiers and books; they are without halos. Are they saints? The standing bishop, saint or not, creates a linking image to the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Reinforcing this connection was clearly desirable: confirmation was part of the developing systematic theology but, as it was separated from baptism by ecclesiastical necessities, was less frequently performed and a matter of institutional concern. In the perception of the laity, these two sacraments—cleansing and sealing—were unified in the image of the standing bishop; this association was heightened by the performance of the baptismal ritual. Without more definite attributes—a halo or an inscription—it is difficult to tell whether these figures are meant as saints or ecclesiastics. The visual fusion is important: the saint is inseparable from the Church in the matter of salvation and ritual practice.

The Coleshill (Warwickshire) font (**Figures 2 and 3**) may be considered typical of the pattern, with many figures but insecure attribution. John stands with Mary in the Crucifixion scene; on the other side of the basin are four other figures. The figures are intended to be read as holy because of their prominent haloes, but any other argument for their identity must be taken carefully. Two recent scholarly approaches demonstrate the interpretive difficulties. The *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland* sticks to a neutral description, identifying all four simply as men.<sup>50</sup> Notable elements, like the tonsure of the saint with the abraded face and the long plait of the beardless saint, have been omitted from the description; no explanation is given for the prominent floral-topped staffs that two saints hold. In contrast, C.S. Drake reads these figures as more

---

<sup>50</sup> Entry for SS. Peter and Paul, Coleshill, Warwickshire in the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, <http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/crsbi/frwasites.html>, April 2, 2007.



**Figures 2, 3** Baptismal Font, Coleshill (Warwickshire), c. 1140-1160. Photo: Baptisteria Sacra.

specific saints, seeing one as Peter holding his key and the woman holding a covered jar as probably the Magdalene. One of the figures with a staff is read as possibly Paul holding a flabellum, but Drake admits that the reading is not secure, nor can he identify the figure dressed as a cleric.<sup>51</sup> Neither reading is wholly satisfying.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> George Zarnecki has argued that the Coleshill font Crucifixion scene is so close to the stained glass window at Châlons-sur-Marne that “the figures on the font were copied from a pattern-book so faithfully that individual pen-strokes were repeated in stone” (*Later English*, 53). By local tradition, the Crucifixion glory was embellished with precious stones (Entry for SS. Peter and Paul, Coleshill, Warwickshire in the

The salient information about the Coleshill figures—that they are saints—remains clear regardless of their original legibility and we must wonder whether their identity as particular saints was as important as their general holy status. If we approach the figures as iconographers, intent on identification, we must be disappointed. For the faithful parishioner, the generic representation might indeed be preferable as a way to project the specifics of each catechumen and his or her own particular saint onto the figure. The



**Figure 4** Baptismal Font, Stoneleigh (Warwickshire), c. 1150-1175. Photo: Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland ([www.crsbi.ac.uk](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk))

---

Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland, <http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/crsbi/frwasites.html>, April 2, 2007.) suggesting that paint may have solidified identifications for these figures. Flowering staves, as seen here, could also suggest Hebrew Testament figures such as Moses and Aaron or Isaiah, though I hold that saint iconographies are far more common in both English and Continental Romanesque font decorations.

single saint can thus be many saints; the single can represent the whole communion. The idea of generalized approbation in the rite and on the font may have been more powerful than any single saintly representative.

### **The Apostle Type**

A distinct type of iconography within the presentation of saints on baptismal fonts is the apostle font. The apostle type appears more frequently than other saint images in England and is not limited in geographic area. In form, it is generally anonymous, with little identifying dissimilarity between figures. They may be seated or standing, and are often shown with books or scrolls. The definition of these as apostle types comes from examples like Stoneleigh (Warwickshire) (**Figure 4**) where the names of the apostles appear in the arcades above the standing figures holding scrolls or books; Peter holds his key. Most examples labeled as the apostle type do not have the names of the apostles; for example, on the font at Rendcomb (Gloucestershire), the figures appear generic and undifferentiated.<sup>53</sup>

The surviving extant lead fonts from twelfth-century England suggest the prominence of the saint design (16 out of 30); indeed, the lead casting process may have lent itself well to this kind of design.<sup>54</sup> Six of the fonts are from Gloucestershire and are all cast in the same pattern of haloed figures dressed in elaborate robes, their hands

---

<sup>53</sup> Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 15 n. 27, adds the note that the Rendcomb font has twelve arcades and eleven figures, though twelve sets of feet on the base, speculating that the empty arcade may have been for Judas. Many other programs of the apostles actually replaced Judas in order to maintain twelve figures.

<sup>54</sup> George Zarnecki, *English Romanesque Lead Sculpture* (London, 1957), remains the authority on this material; see 4 for a discussion of casting technique.

holding books and raised in blessing.<sup>55</sup> The Wareham (Dorset) font, unusual for being a hexagonal font cast in one piece, presents an arcade with apostles; the figure of Peter, identifiable because of his key, is repeated but the subsequent casts were altered so the figures hold only a scroll.<sup>56</sup> As with fonts in stone, the figures are generally undifferentiated except for Peter and their number varies considerably, suggesting that the iconography of the apostle was an abstract concept in these contexts.<sup>57</sup>

The appeal of the apostle iconography is in their group identity. The apostles are an easily recognizable form of saints; they form a coherent group without necessarily needing differentiation. Singled out by Christ, they are the first witnesses to his ministry; more importantly, they are the founding link between the historical figure and the emergent cult. As such, they are a powerful statement of the continuing institution of the Church. All (except Judas, obviously) were represented by cults, and were known for having performed miracles and having suffered bodily for their faith/teaching. Their representation on a baptismal font taps into all of these connotations: they become representatives of the Church that offers the saving sacrament of baptism; they become the embracing whole of the holy communion, directly connected with Christ whose function is to intercede for weaker humanity.

---

<sup>55</sup> Frampton-on-Severn, Oxenhall, Siston, Tidenham, Sandhurst, and Lancaut (now in Gloucester Cathedral).

<sup>56</sup> George Zarnecki, *English Romanesque Lead*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> One of the earliest, Walton-on-the-Hill (Surrey), has twelve figures, but others (Sandhurst and Lancaut of the Gloucestershire group) have fewer and the c. 1200 font at Ashover (Derbyshire) has over twenty.

The representation of the apostles in a baptismal context has a long tradition that might further explain the presence of these figures on fonts.<sup>58</sup> Both the Neonian Baptistery and the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna (from the early fifth century) incorporate the apostles around the central motif of Christ's baptism, thus emphasizing Christ's establishment of the rite and the (apostolic) continuation of the rite within the Church. One possibility for their popularity as a form on baptismal fonts of the twelfth century is the Gregorian reforms of the late eleventh century;<sup>59</sup> the push for apostolic renewal, in both the actions of ecclesiastics and in the authority of the pope, might indeed have renewed visual attention to these figures. Apostle fonts may appeal then on a number of different levels: the iconographic tradition established in earlier forms and the artistic practice drawing on artistic authority, the visual and spiritual coherence of this group of saints, and the resonance of these saints as establishing the (sacrament-giving) Church, particularly at a time of reform. The choice of the iconography may rest on a number of ideas circulating at the same time, rather than on a single, exclusive reason.

### **Peter as Ecclesiastic Authority**

Of the apostles, St. Peter is one of the few frequently singled out, shown with his keys.<sup>60</sup> In the instances of Peter's differentiation, it is as "first among equals."<sup>61</sup> Peter has

---

<sup>58</sup> I am again grateful to the anonymous reader for *Peregrinations* for this suggestion. Any errors made in the explanation of this evidence are, of course, my own.

<sup>59</sup> See Ute-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia, 1988), Auguste Fliche, *La réforme grégorienne*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1924-37), ed. Schafer Williams, *The Gregorian epoch: reformation, revolution, reaction* (Boston, 1964).

<sup>60</sup> The others may be distinct by label but seldom by attribute. One notable exception is the late twelfth-century font at Coleshill (Zarnecki, *Later English*, 53, pl.6). For a lengthy discussion of the iconography of St. Peter, see Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Aspects of the Iconography of Saint Peter in Medieval Art of Western Europe to the Early Thirteenth Century* (Dissertation, Case Western University, Ohio, 1978).



a specific salvific context: “he held the keys of Heaven and was thus the doorman who admitted the saved and excluded the damned...”<sup>62</sup> Peter’s presence on a font thus underscores the disposition of the soul after death, inextricable from the baptismal rite -- “...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>63</sup> Peter is situated in the two contexts of lay and ecclesiastic emphasis: his identity as gatekeeper may indeed have been more important to the lay audience, concerned with their own salvation, but it is the authority of his position, directly received from Christ, that spoke to ecclesiastics concerned with the institutional sacraments. Peter’s presence is a reference explicitly to ecclesiastic authority to administer the sacraments; the text of Matthew 16:17-19 establishes the imagery of the scene, its authority from Christ, and its binding and loosing power both here and in heaven.<sup>64</sup> Peter’s keys are also specifically a reference to papal authority, which may in fact relate to other, Gregorian, concerns of the period, making Peter’s appearance simultaneously resonate for different audiences.

While Peter appears with the keys on a number of fonts, the scene of Christ charging Peter with the keys is rare, appearing distinctively on the mid-twelfth century font at Kirkburn (East Riding, Yorkshire).<sup>65</sup> **(Figure 5)** The figures stand, hands extended, on either side of a massive set of keys. The full program on this roughly-

---

<sup>61</sup> AA SS June V, Dies 29, 0398B. Carr, *Aspects of the Iconography of Saint Peter*, 35-36.

<sup>62</sup> Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 6.

<sup>63</sup> John 3:5, relevant discussion includes John 3: 1-21.

<sup>64</sup> Numerous medieval authors, among them Tertullian, Augustine, Leo I, and Isidore of Seville, take up the key symbolism as a source of the Church’s jurisdictional prerogatives. For a lengthy discussion of the iconography of St. Peter, see Carr, *Aspects*, particularly 54-60, 67-68; her discussion of the amplification of Peter’s authority under Gregory VII and Innocent III seems relevant to the twelfth-century understanding.

<sup>65</sup> The iconography of the charge to Peter also appears on the late twelfth-century Swedish font at Lyngsjö, but it is unusually paired with Christ handing a book to James. See Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 146 and



**Figures 5, 6** Baptismal Font, Kirkburn (East Riding, Yorkshire), c. 1150-1175, (left) detail of the Charge to Peter and (right) detail of the Baptism. Photo: author.

executed font is complicated, entailing a narrative band separate from a band of isolated and non-narrative elements. The upper band might at first glance be read as the baptism of Christ, (**Figure 6**) the charge to Peter, and Christ in Majesty, either as in a resurrection/ascension from Jesus' mortal life or as a Second Coming; all three scenes are interspersed with images of standing figures, many with books, some with crosiers or other ecclesiastical equipment.

The elided elements in the program on the Kirkburn font emphasize key contemporary ideas about the sacraments. If this is the Baptism of Christ, the dove of the Holy Spirit descends as expected from the Gospel texts, but the baptism occurs in a font

---

pl. 316. For the discussion of the Kirkburn font, see Rita Wood, "The Augustinians and the Romanesque Sculpture at Kirkburn Church," *The East Yorkshire Historian*, 4 (2003), particularly 40-55.

rather than the Jordan. The attendant figure holds an aspergillum and the celebrant has a cross behind his head, a shorthand reference to Christ.<sup>66</sup> If this is a mortal baptism, the dove rests in Augustinian theology about the nature of all sacraments as *res* and *res sacramenti*; the sacrament consists of elements (simple water and chrism) and the word (the Trinitarian formula which transforms them into a sin-dispelling bath).<sup>67</sup> The figure of Christ as celebrant embodies Peter Lombard's exposition of Augustine's Sermon 210: "Christ ... baptizes the Christian, and shows himself to be greater than John as well". Peter Lombard further summarizes Augustine's belief in Christ's presence as a justification for the purity of the baptismal rite despite the impurity of a minister: "the Lord retained for himself the power of baptism, but he gave the ministry to his servants."<sup>68</sup> The image of Christ handing the keys to Peter adds that the Church carries out the sacraments at the direct command of Christ. Finally, the *Maiestas*, with its display of the hands of Christ, underscores the idea that the sacraments, particularly baptism, are an imperative in the salvific hopes of the Christian. These scenes are visually inextricable from the company of other figures who may be saints or ordinary ecclesiastics. The scene

---

<sup>66</sup> The use of a font in place of the River Jordan is not particularly unusual and can be seen in the contemporary English fonts at West Haddon and Fincham and in the late-twelfth-century Swedish fonts at Bjäresjö and Gumlösa. This is by no means an exhaustive list of this type of presentation of Christ's baptism. Rita Wood suggests that this shape is a lighted candle, rather than an aspergillum, in "The Augustinians," 42.

<sup>67</sup> The discussion of sacramental components can be found throughout Augustine's work, including *In Joannem*, Tract LXXX, Sermons 229 and 229A, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Sermons*, ed. John Rotelle (Hyde Park, 1999), III/6. This discussion is at the heart of the Eucharistic controversies of the tenth century, particularly Berengar of Tours (d. 1088) and his argument against transubstantiation. Discussion of the elements of sacramental theories can be found in Rogers, *Peter Lombard*.

<sup>68</sup> The text here is Peter Lombard's summary of the Augustinian material, largely from the material against the Donatists, especially *De Baptismo contra Donatistas*. See Rogers, *Peter Lombard*, 107. Similarly Hugh of Saint-Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, II:6:13, 300.

and the additional figures form a conjoined narrative about Christ's life, the life of the Church, and the life of the faithful.

A font such as Kirkburn may also illustrate the way these objects operated in several religious spheres at once. Its style is decidedly rough -- clearly local production in a familiar formal vocabulary. Its composition speaks to a Romanesque interest in images such as grotesques and knotted designs and to a narrative interest in Christ's life. The layer of erudition in the program may also situate the parish church in the ecclesiastic scene. While absent records obscure the extent of contact, we do know that Kirkburn was part of the original endowment of Robert de Brus to the Augustinian priory at Guisborough in 1119.<sup>69</sup> The present building, like the font, dates to 1150-1175, with later additions and renovations, again suggesting the possibility of contact between the parish church and the priory owner. The connection may have been no stronger than the priory collecting tithes and confirming the vicar to the holding, but could have been as strong as one of their own monks serving at the altar.<sup>70</sup> The possibilities presented in the iconography here suggest at least some involvement between a more educated audience, interested in the issues of sacramental theology, and a lay audience, interested in the practices of sacramental salvation.

---

<sup>69</sup> R. Gilyard-Beer, *Guisborough Priory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh, 1980), 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> The range of monastic involvement is at question here in the parish of Kirkburn and, indeed, elsewhere throughout the Middle Ages. Rita Wood, "The Augustinians," 3-59, suggests close involvement and that monks might have stayed in the room in the tower to serve the altar; in contrast, K.A. MacMahon, in *The Church of St. Mary Kirkburn* (Severley, 1953), argues that the twelfth century might have set the precedent for the thirteenth century, for which records exist, where the canon of St. Peter's in York held positions at Kirkburn, Catton, Seamer, Nafferton, Holme, Calverton, Brightwell and Langford and was therefore unlikely to have actually lived at the church in Kirkburn. Two works on the larger issue of monastic involvement with parish churches are Donald Matthew, *The Norman Monasteries and the English Possessions* (Oxford, 1962), especially 58-65, and the contrary position, Marjorie Chibnall, "Monks and Pastoral Work: A Problem in Anglo-Norman History," *Journal of Ecclesiastic History* xviii (1967), 165-172.

## Michael

Like Peter,<sup>71</sup> Michael is an example of the link between hagiographic imagery and sacramental beliefs about death and resurrection. Michael has a number of different roles and was very popular during this period.<sup>72</sup> While considered a saint, Michael is more properly an archangel, lacking the bodily substance key to a saint's identity. Michael was a psychopomp, a conductor of souls.<sup>73</sup> His presence on a font would resonate with audiences connecting baptism, mortality, and salvation.<sup>74</sup>

Baptism was connected to death both in the Gospels, as in John 3:5, and in Paul's letter to the Romans 6:4-5. *The Shepherd*, written before 200, expresses the interconnection fully:

They had to ascend through the water in order to be made  
alive...For before a man bears the name of the Son of God  
he is dead; but when he receives the seal he lays aside his

---

<sup>71</sup> Nordström, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts*, 69.

<sup>72</sup> AA SS, Sept. VIII, Dies 29, 0004B. For a concise introduction to the cult of St. Michael, see Daniel F. Callahan, "The Cult of St. Michael the Archangel and the 'Terrors of the Year 1000'" in *The Apocalyptic Year 1000: Religious Expectation and Social Change 950-1050*, eds. Richard Landes, Andrew Gow, and David C. Van Meter (Oxford, 2003), 181-204. More complete, and more specific only to England is Richard F. Johnson, *Saint Michael the Archangel in Medieval English Legend* (Woodbridge, 2005). Also useful are H. Roe, "The Cult of St. Michael in Ireland" in *Folk and Farm: Essays in Honor of A.T. Lucas*, ed. C. Ó Danachair (Dublin, 1976) and Barbara Raw, *Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion Iconography and the Art of Monastic Revival* (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, v. 1, 1990). St. Michael's importance in the period as a militant figure, a psycho-pomp, and as an eschatological figure can also be traced in the following primary sources: Pseudo-Dionysus, *De caelestia ierarchia* (ed Migne, PL 122, 1035-1070, especially 1057-8) which discusses Michael's position in the ranks of angels, the eleventh-century writing of Ademar of Chabannes, the c. 1014 Sermon of the Wolf to the English by Wolfstan, and the Vercelli and Blickling Homilies, both from the late tenth century.

<sup>73</sup> For St. Michael in the liturgy as a psycho-pomp, see Knud Ottosen, *The Responsories and Versicles of the Latin Office of the Dead* (Aarhus, 1993). Well known twelfth-century examples that show St. Michael include the tympanum of St. Lazare at Autun with the weighing scales and the separation of the blessed and the damned and the north portal jambs of St. Gilles-du-Gard with the beast trampled underfoot.

<sup>74</sup> In the later account of Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, 1993), 201, in addition to St. Michael's well known End Time functions, there is a miracle with clear baptismal overtones, recounting the story of a pregnant woman unable to reach shore as the tide rushed in on her return from the Mont. St. Michel who is delivered of her child and kept safe from the waves. A similar "baptismal" miracle is also associated with various St. Nicholas sources, when a woman leaves her child in hot water to see the archbishop but the child is saved from burns by his intervention.

deadness and obtains life. The seal then is the water; they descended into the water dead, but they rise alive.<sup>75</sup>

Christian writers like Ambrose, Augustine, and Leo the Great all specify that the three-fold immersion is like Christ's three days dead and that baptism is a resurrection, bringing the cleansed soul to God.<sup>76</sup> These sentiments continue in the contemporary twelfth-century sources. Hugh of Saint-Victor, for example, writes of the baptismal service, "After this response of faith, he is washed of the stains of age with a three-fold immersion, and having put on the new man, he is buried with the three-day death of Christ..."<sup>77</sup> In some ways, then, baptismal fonts that draw on saint iconography operate in a circulating current of theology about death: the fear of death without salvation that permeates the culture of baptism in the twelfth century, the theological death of Original Sin with the sacrament, the rhetoric of joining with Christ in both death and resurrection, the saint's death that exemplifies Christian commitment, and the presence of the saint after death as an intercessor and helper. The power of the saints is again most potent in their generality than in specificity.

The connection between Michael and the dead would have resonated with baptismal theology—the font as a tomb for sin, baptismal practice—the necessity of baptism for salvation from Hell, and medieval bodily anxieties over the commonplace death of infants. On twelfth-century baptismal fonts, however, Michael is fundamentally

---

<sup>75</sup> The material idea of baptism and death may come most directly from the passage in Romans 6:3: "We are baptized into His death." *The Shepherd* is quoted in Walter Bedard, *The Symbolism of the Baptismal Font in Early Christian Thought* (Washington, D.C., 1951), 4. Bedard's chapter, "The Font as Tomb" addresses this motif particularly.

<sup>76</sup> Bedard, *The Symbolism*, 13-16.

<sup>77</sup> Hugh of Saint-Victor, *De Sacramentis*, II: 6: xi, 299. Hugh follows his references to death with a quotation from Romans 6:4-5.

represented as an eschatological figure. His appearance in the Hebrew Scriptures (Daniel 10:13, 21 and 12:1) and in the Christian Testament (Jude 9, Revelation 12:7) is as a champion. Despite a few accounts of the intercessory power of Michael, images of Michael on twelfth-century baptismal fonts universally reference the Revelation text of Michael and his angels battling the dragon; Michael is a reminder of the need for baptism as a condition of salvation.

Unlike the Scandinavian fonts of the period, which tend to be more specific in their handling of St. Michael, the English fonts tend to avoid clear reference to his



**Figure 7** Baptismal Font, Thorpe Arnold (Leicestershire), c. 1125-1150. Photo: Adrian Fletcher [www.paradoxplace.com](http://www.paradoxplace.com).

identity. On the fonts of Thorpe Arnold (Leicestershire) (**Figure 7**), Avebury (Wiltshire), East Haddon (Northamptonshire), and Stone (Buckinghamshire), a figure is shown battling with a dragon. Each is handled very differently. None of the figures is specifically detailed to suggest an angel; they show Michael as a warrior with helmet and shield with a cross (Thorpe Arnold),<sup>78</sup> with a staff stabbing the head of the dragon (Avebury),<sup>79</sup> or as one of two figures fighting a dragon and other quadruped beasts as described in Revelation 12 (Stone). These images are in the same iconographic interest seen on many contemporary English tympana, including St. Michael's church, Ipswich (Suffolk) or Southwell Minster (Nottinghamshire); the tympana tend, however, to identify the figure as Michael by giving him wings.<sup>80</sup>

The baptismal figures are undifferentiated; they might be read as a more generalized battling of evil. They may thus stand as both St. Michael and the mortal individual. They represent the final struggle as envisioned by the Revelation text; their presence on a baptismal font is a suitable reminder of things to come and sacramental necessity. Eschatological imagery—St. Michael battling the dragon, Christ Harrowing Hell, the Raising of the Dead—has a relatively high incidence in medieval baptismal

---

<sup>78</sup> The Thorpe Arnold figure has also been read as St. George, although the multiple heads of the dragon are part of the Revelation narrative and the composition lacks other notable elements of the St. George narrative. Finally, the other decoration on this font is an elaborate cross, also suggesting a Christological focus. This iconography is wrongly attributed to the East Haddon (Northamptonshire) font by E. Tyrrell-Green, *Baptismal Fonts*, 58. The St. Michael reading is confirmed in Zarnecki, *English Romanesque*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Zarnecki, *Later English*, 53, offers a contrary reading suggesting that the font actually illustrates Psalm 90 "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder"; the physical evidence for two separate beasts similar to a lion and an adder is difficult to read. The choice of a Psalm as iconography is also unusual. However, should Zarnecki's identification be correct, it does not necessarily invalidate the eschatological reading offered here because of the Psalm's typological resonance with the Revelation text. The Avebury font is also addressed by A.G. Randle Buck, "Some Wiltshire Fonts," *The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* LIII( 1950), 463-64.

<sup>80</sup> For St. Michael's Church, Ipswich (Suffolk), see Zarnecki, *English Romanesque*, 164-165. For Southwell Minster (Nottinghamshire), see Zarnecki, *English Romanesque*, 165.



iconography. Twelfth-century theologians thought of the sacraments in a framework of a Christian history with a definite conclusion. Hugh of Saint-Victor and Peter Lombard, in their popular collections, emphasized the idea of baptismal necessity and further stressed the importance of the sacraments for salvation by adding their own comments on Revelation. In these texts, the sacraments are an integral part of the Christian continuum, beginning with the history of the world, continuing through the contemporary institution of the Church, and culminating in the End Time.

### **“Universal” Saints**

In general, the saints presented on baptismal fonts are what are known as universal saints, venerated throughout Christendom and powerful intercessors wherever invoked.<sup>81</sup> They are not local saints, particular to a geographic area and a small cult. A relatively small number of those saints are depicted on baptismal fonts, however: Nicholas primarily, with a few isolated others such as Andrew, Lawrence, and Margaret. Although John the Baptist is a universal saint, his appearance on fonts is never independent from Christ’s baptism; John the Baptist is present as baptizer, not intercessor.<sup>82</sup> The evangelists also appear, primarily as their symbols; these depictions emphasize not their role as intercessors but their veneration as the Gospel writers. For the

---

<sup>81</sup> These saints are also known as “universal” saints, venerated throughout Christendom, in contrast to “local” saints; see Catherine Cubitt, “Universal and Local Saints in Anglo-Saxon England” in eds. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe, *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), 423-453, who notes the importance of this distinction.

<sup>82</sup> Sentence collections emphasize that Christ’s baptism is the establishment of the need for the mortal practice as well so John the Baptist is stronger in this context than in his own right as an ascetic or religious leader.

purposes of this article, I have focused on universal saints whose depictions appear independently of these other narrative contexts.

## Nicholas

St. Nicholas was one of the most widely popular saints in England and on the Continent.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, he is infrequently depicted and is the central focus on only four surviving twelfth-century fonts (Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire; Brighton, Sussex; Zedelgem, Belgium; Lyngsjo, Sweden). These fonts share some of the narrative characteristics of illustrated hagiographic texts, with an emphasis on the miracles of the saint in recognizable format.<sup>84</sup> Their images strive for both hagiographic veracity in their visualization of these well-known scenes from the saint's life and affective piety in which the viewer relates to the mortal situation. St. Nicholas is clearly identifiable on two twelfth-century baptismal fonts made in Tournai (Belgium), one now in Winchester

---

<sup>83</sup> For a general account of the popularity of the Nicholas stories, see Charles W. Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan* (Chicago, 1978). Veronica Ortenberg, *The English Church and the Continent in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries: Cultural, Spiritual and Artistic Exchanges* (Oxford, 1992), 71-73, accounts for it with the active dedications of Empress Theophano and her connections in the Ottonian-Salian Empire, the translation of Nicholas' relics in 1087, and the connections between England and Lotharingia in the eleventh century. To this we should probably add Norman connection to the saint through Italian holdings that would have strengthened an already-present devotion. J. Romilly Allen, cited in Cecil Eden, *Black Tournai Fonts in England* (London, 1909), 10, adds that the mystery play by Hilary and the poems of Wace would have been another exposure to the saint for English audiences; see F.T. Ronse, *Les Fonts Baptismaux de Zedelghem et les Fonts Romains Tournaisiens du XIIIe Siècle* (Bruges, 1925) for detailed background on the source material as he discusses the imagery. Finally, see also William Schipper, "The Normans and the Old English Lives of Saint Giles and Saint Nicholas," *International Christian University Language Research Bulletin* 1 (1986), 97-108, who connects the saint to England through the Normans particularly.

<sup>84</sup> The text of the Nicholas stories comes from a variety of sources, both in Greek and Latin. AA SS Feb. 1, Dies 4, 0539F. One of the most popular was the Vita by Symeon the Metaphrast, c. 912; there were a ninth-century Latin translation by John the Deacon and another Vita written in the early twelfth century by Jean of Saint Ouen in Rouen. Hymns such as the eleventh-century Congaudentes 47 (*Analecta hymnica medii aevi*, ed. G.M. Drevés and C. Blume (1886-1922), 95ff, no. 66) also recount tales from the Nicholas story, especially the dowry story. The stories appeared in a number of vernacular sources, most notably the romance poems by Wace in the mid-twelfth-century and in dramas such as those in the twelfth-century Fleury Playbook. On narrative issues in pictorial hagiography, see Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart*.

Cathedral (**Figure 8**) and the other in Zedelgem. The two were both made from Tournai “marble” and are part of the large market production from around 1150.<sup>85</sup> The Tournai fonts are consistent in composition and iconography and the focus on St. Nicholas, a saint who appealed to a large, non-geographically-specific cult, may be a direct function of this wider market production. Both the Winchester font, which devotes two faces to the subject, and the Zedelgem font, which devotes three faces, depict the saint in the context of recognizable stories from the biography; there is no question which bishop saint is intended here. The Winchester font was likely purchased by Bishop of Henry of Blois (1129-1171), who introduced other Tournai fonts into the area.<sup>86</sup>

On Winchester, one side clearly relates the story of St. Nicholas giving dowries from his own money to the daughters of a destitute noble. It is complete with textual details such as the man at the feet of the saint, shown before a magnificently-carved Romanesque-style church that represents the episcopal seat at Myra but must also visually remind the viewer of the Heavenly city.<sup>87</sup> The figures, though handled in the

---

<sup>85</sup> On the Tournai fonts, see Eden, *Black Tournai Fonts*; P. Rolland, “L’expansion tournaisienne au 11e et 12e siècles: art et commerce de la Pierre,” *Annales de l’Académie royale d’archéologie de Bruxelles*, LXXII (1924) and LXXIII (1925); Ronse, *Les Fonts Baptismaux*; L. Tollenaere, *La Sculpture sur Pierre de l’ancien diocèse de Liège à l’époque romane* (Gembloux, 1957); C.S. Drake, *Tournai Marble Baptismal Fonts of the Twelfth Century* (M.A. thesis, University of Essex, 1992), as well as *The Romanesque Fonts* which incorporates and updates his earlier research. The Winchester font, linked to the patronage of Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester from 1129-1171, established a fashion for the works in England (St. Mary Bourne, East Meon, Southampton, as well as elsewhere). For Henry’s fondness for colored marbles in the antique fashion, see George Zarnecki, “Henry of Blois as a Patron of Sculpture” reprinted in *Further Studies in Romanesque Sculpture* (London, 1992), 386-398.

<sup>86</sup> “Winchester: The cathedral,” *A History of the County of Hampshire: Volume 5* (1912), pp. 50-59.

<sup>87</sup> The reference to the church comes most directly from Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 21-22, but as Charles W. Jones notes in *Saint Nicholas* there was sufficient emphasis on the saint’s episcopal role in the earlier versions of the story to warrant the church’s inclusion here. The medieval imagining of heaven’s architecture as a church can be seen in other art of the period, perhaps most notably on the twelfth-century tympanum of St. Foy at Conques and the mid-tenth-century image from the Morgan Beatus.



**Figures 8, 9** Baptismal Font, Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire, c. 1129-1171. Photo: Baptisteria Sacra.

typical Romanesque abstraction that emphasizes heads and hands over proportion, are depicted with assurance and clarity; St. Nicholas is repeatedly distinguishable by his ecclesiastical garb and his crozier.

On the second narrative face (**Figure 9**) the saint appears twice. He clearly appears on the far left with a short male figure; there is no immediate identification. In the center, two scenes show the murder of three boys by an innkeeper and the saint's

raising them to life.<sup>89</sup> The last scene shows a prostrate figure holding a cup at the base of an elaborate ship with three passengers; the figure of St. Nicholas stands prominently so as to be part of both the scenes of the murdered boys and of the cup-bearer, placed directly at his feet. The image is likely of the son born after prayer to St. Nicholas and the cup pledged to the saint in thanks; after falling overboard, the boy is miraculously preserved by the saint.<sup>90</sup> The story illustrates three key points of lay spirituality regarding saints: the saint grants the prayer for a son (supplication); the boy is miraculously saved (intervention); the father makes and fulfills a thank offering to the saint (adoration). The depictions of St. Nicholas on the Winchester font make clear that the saint is absolutely involved in the lives of his faithful.

The font at Brighton (c. third quarter of the twelfth century) also has the St. Nicholas elements. **(Figure 10)** Unlike the Tournai fonts, the focus of the narratives is not on St. Nicholas. There are three scenes here: the Baptism of Christ, the Last Supper, and the Nicholas scene. As a program, they illustrate the strong connection between the imagery on these baptismal fonts and the ideas of sacramental theology current at the

---

<sup>89</sup> Eden, *Black Tournai Fonts*, 12-13.

<sup>90</sup> The eleventh-century version of this story of the substituted cup can be found in a Battle Abbey manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Tiberius V) as well as collected in the later Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 26. Charles W. Jones notes that the story was not overly popular; “Though doubtless helping to intensify N’s patronage of children, *Substituted Cup* 62 does not appear in children’s exercises—drama or song, for instance. Rather, deceit and fraud apparently were regarded as the point of the story, and it traveled together with *Broken Staff* 61 throughout the West and even to parts of the East where Crusaders penetrated.” (*St. Nicholas*, 230) There is some possibility that the image might be the story of Adeodatus, son of Getron, whose abduction by the Muslim Marmorinus and then return by the intervention of Saint Nicholas was used in portal decoration in Tuscany; see Dorothy Glass, *Portals, Pilgrimage, and Crusade in Western Tuscany* (Princeton, 1997). While the story was better known, possibly through the work of the twelfth-century *Fleury Playbook* or that of the Anglo-Norman poet Wace (c. 1115-c. 1183), the visual representation here is markedly different from the story’s appearance on the facades of San Salvatore in Mustiola (Lucca) and Barga Cathedral, both of which emphasize the narrative details of feasting and of Adeodatus being pulled by the hair back to his family. Further, as Glass elaborates, the anti-Muslim aspect of the story would have resonated for its Italian viewers very differently than for viewers from Northern Europe.

time. The baptismal scene, with an attendant angel and John the Baptist dressed as a contemporary priest holding either a chrismatory or ciborium, links the historical past of Christ's baptism with the liturgical present of the candidate's baptism, all with a recurrent theme of the role of the sacraments within the Church institution.<sup>91</sup> The Last Supper establishes the Eucharist within the Church and must be seen as a reference to it here. These two scenes alone create a visual statement consonant with contemporary sacramental systems.



**Figure 10** Baptismal Font, Brighton (Sussex), c. 1150-1200. Photo: Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland ([www.crsbi.ac.uk](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk))

<sup>91</sup> This idea is advanced in greater detail in Altwater, *In Fonte*, chapter 4.

The last scene on the Brighton font is traditionally identified as St. Nicholas. On the left stands the saint in full regalia; in the detailed depiction of a boat are two men on either side of a mast. The leftmost man holds up a jar. On the far right stands another male figure. It is difficult to determine which of the saint's stories this might refer to; it could be the story of seamen who are saved from a violent storm because they pray to Nicholas, who appears to them and who is recognized by them when they land safely.<sup>93</sup> The saint's inclusion draws us back to contemporary ideas about supplication and penance, making a third sacramental connection. The three narratives are presented, therefore, as a concise statement of sacraments open to all. The font, as object where the baptism is enacted, becomes the forum for sacramental and salvific education.

### **Other Saints<sup>94</sup>**

Some saints, despite having a wider cult, are depicted on baptismal fonts only regionally. This is particularly the case with St. Stephen, whose martyrdom appears on fonts at Stenkyrka, Stånga, När, and Vänge (Gotland), Hajom in Västergötland, and

---

<sup>93</sup> Drake, in *The Romanesque Fonts*, 21, suggests this might be the scene where jealous Diana seeks revenge on the saint by giving sailors some oil designed to kill them and the saint then rescues them. E. Tyrrell-Green, *Baptismal Fonts*, 61 also offers this identification. The details of the stories are not a matter of sculptural concern, making precise identifications difficult.

<sup>94</sup> Because the focus here is on England, some unique hagiographic programs are not discussed here: St. Olaf of Norway on the font of Löderup in Skåne; see Nordstom, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts*, 122; Tryde (Skåne), dated to around 1185 shows either St. Stanislaus or St. Fridolin (Nordstrom *Medieval Baptismal Fonts*, 69-70). Both interpretations have their adherents, as both legends relate to the ideas of resurrection and baptism. In the case of St. Stanislaus, Johnny Roosval has shown the possible connection between the Polish queen of Sverker the Elder (d. 1156) which might have brought the cult to Sweden. In the case of St. Fridolin, the "apostle of the Upper Rhine" according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, there is little to connect the cult to areas outside of the main cult locations of Säkingen and Poitiers. Regardless of the saint's identity, the Tryde font is a unique example and bespeaks a particular experience of patronage rather than a wider appeal to lay sanctity.

Simris in Skåne, but not at all on English Romanesque fonts.<sup>95</sup> St. Thomas Becket, despite being an important English saint, appears only on the related Swedish fonts at Lyngsjö in Skåne and Nora in Angermanland.<sup>96</sup> Both of these fonts emphasize the idea of martyrdom as a sanctioned equivalent to baptism, also presenting either the Baptism of Christ (Lyngsjö) or other saints (the Massacre of the Innocents at Nora; Christ “authorizing” Peter with keys, John with a book, and the Virgin with a crown at Lyngsjö). St. Pancratius, though a saint listed in the Roman martyrologies of the fifth century, appears only on the German fonts at Vellern, where he is identified by inscription, and on the Stockum font; in each, he appears in the standing saint model, not as part of a defining *vita* moment.<sup>97</sup> St. Lawrence appears on a few Scandinavian fonts, but only once on an English font (Cottam). While the function of these saints follows the same theological priorities of other hagiographic images on baptismal fonts, it is difficult to place the reasons why their influence is more limited; undoubtedly, patronage and church dedications played a strong correlative role.

### **The Cottam Font: A Complex Presentation of Piety**

The Cottam font is unique because it presents the martyrdom of three saints in considerable detail as a program of belief about sacramental theology and practice. All three saints—Andrew, Lawrence, and Margaret—were universally popular, but also had

---

<sup>95</sup> Nordström, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts*, 117-118.

<sup>96</sup> Nordström, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts*, 120-121 and Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 146. Nordström credits connections between the saint and Swedish recipients of his miracles and relics as reason for the unusual representation. The lack of representations of Becket in England could also be due to their destruction during the Reformation.

<sup>97</sup> For St. Pancratius’s appearance on baptismal fonts, see Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts of Northern Europe and Scandinavia*, 83-84.



an active presence in English hagiographic sources.<sup>98</sup> Their specificity and the detailed connection between these saints and the theology and practice of baptism are startling. I argue that this is evidence of an undercurrent of theological concerns that takes shape as an iconography of the saints, and of which the Cottam font is the fullest extension. Cottam is a fully-realized example of the role of saints in the expression of lay piety and anxiety around the human body presented in baptism.

The Cottam font is a large cylindrical basin of about three feet in height and diameter. Currently moved to the church of St. Peter's in Langtoft, in its original parish church of Holy Trinity in Cottam, it would likely have been installed near the western entrance. Dating to around 1135-1145, the Cottam font is carved from local limestone in a style linked to other contemporary works in the East Riding.<sup>99</sup> The figures are typical of twelfth-century untutored production: the finish is rough and unpolished; the anatomy is marked by simplification and distortion, particularly of heads and hands.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Lawrence, AA SS Aug. II, Dies 10, 0485B; Andrew, AA SS Feb. II, Dies 10, 0379C; Margaret, AA SS July V, Dies 20, 0024B. All three saints appear in a number of sources, including the mid-to-late ninth-century Old English Martyrology (George Herzfeld, *The Old English Martyrology*, London, 116, 1900) and the South English Legendary (Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, *The South English Legendary*, London, 1956). Lawrence and Andrew appear in Old English homilies in Trinity Cambridge MS B.14.52 (Rev. R. Morris, *Old English Homilies of the Twelfth Century*, London, 1873). On St. Andrew, see *Praxeis*, the Blickling Homily, and *Andreas*. For St. Margaret, see Aelfric's account in Paris BN lat. 5574 and Cambridge Corpus Christi College 303 (these works and others, as well as an excellent discussion of Margaret's cult in Anglo-Saxon England, are discussed in detail in Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret* (Cambridge, UK, 1994). Lawrence was well-represented in Latin writings—Ambrose (*De Officiis*, cf PL XVI, 89-92) and Prudentius (*Peristephanon*, Hymnus II); in addition to these well-known accounts, there were also Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies* and the late-twelfth century poems of Nigel of Canterbury (*The Passion of St. Lawrence, Epigrams and Marginal Poems*, ed. and trans. Jan M. Ziolkowski, Leiden, 1994). If indeed the saint represented was St. Vincent instead of Saint Lawrence, his hagiography was equally well-known in the work of Prudentius and in the *South English Legendary*. All four saints appear in the later collected writing of Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan.

<sup>99</sup> Faith Mann, *Early Medieval Church Sculpture: A Study of 12<sup>th</sup> Century Fragments in East Yorkshire* (Beverly, 1985), 28-29, 41.

<sup>100</sup> See for example font decoration in the East Riding at Kirkburn, North Grimston, and especially Cowlam; the portal decoration at Kirkburn, with the exception of the quite fine beakheads, is also part of



**Figure 11** Baptismal Font, Cottam (East Riding, Yorkshire), c. 1135-1145, detail of the Tree. Photo: author.

The distinctive touch of the sculptor, however, is also evident here: the figures all have a firm profile with large triangular noses and jutting chins. Finishing details such as breasts and ribs are included as important, but regularized so that there is little anatomical individualization. A thick Anglo-Norman style cable is carved around the upper rim, a

---

the same rural style. It can be seen elsewhere in Northern England, such as at Durham in the castle crypt capitals.

rough ground line is carved along the bottom rim, and there are a few sketchy architectural elements designed to set the scenes apart from one another in the main band of decoration. There are six scenes on the Cottam font.

I read the image of the tree (**Figure 11**) as an aniconic delineation of the larger program of baptismal theology on the Cottam font. Other English baptismal fonts from the period have depictions of an isolated tree.<sup>103</sup> It appears as well in other medieval artistic settings. This tree is frequently read as a representation of the Tree of Life or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Garden of Eden.<sup>104</sup> Here the reading of the tree as a short-hand reference to Eden is bolstered by its position next to the scene of Adam and Eve. The power of this aniconic image is that it stands out on a circular font as both beginning and end: the need for baptism is because of the Fall that proceeds from Eden, and the baptismal promise suggests the ability to return to a paradisaical relationship after the Last Judgment.

Typical of Romanesque sculpture, there is a panel with a composite beast, (**Figure 12**) described variously as either a bird or a dragon with a looped tail;<sup>105</sup> careful examination suggests a bird's head with a wattle, a bird's body with looped claws, and a long coiled tail.<sup>106</sup> This panel is positioned between the two martyrdom scenes of the man

---

<sup>103</sup> Notably, Hutton Cranswick, Harpole, Oxhill, and Belton, all available in both Bond, *Fonts* and Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*.

<sup>104</sup> Bond, *Fonts*, 181.

<sup>105</sup> E. Maule Cole, "Ancient Fonts on the Wolds of East Riding," *Transactions of the East Riding Antiquarian Society* x (1902), 107-117, and as a dragon in a short note in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 38 (1952-55), 6.

<sup>106</sup> I am grateful to Ms. Rita Wood for her clear photographs and assistance in identifying the elements. She suggests the specific reading of the basilisk; see T.H. White, *The Book of Beasts* (translation of Cambridge Ii. 4.26) (New York, 1954), 168 ff. See also: William B. Clark and Meredith T. McMunn, *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: the Bestiary and its Legacy* (Philadelphia, 1989).

on the grill and the crucified figure and is notably smaller than the other sections on the font, suggesting that perhaps the unequal layout of the design was a problem of execution



**Figure 12** Baptismal Font, Cottam (East Riding, Yorkshire), c. 1135-1145, detail of the beast. Photo: author.

and that this element—for all of its sculptural creativity—may not have been planned in this program. Although it stands outside a narrative iconography, the presence of the monster here may be associated first with the broader sculptural traditions of the Romanesque that fill margins and liminal spaces with monstrous ornament, with a general sentiment of pervasive evil characterized by strange un-godly creations,<sup>109</sup> and

---

<sup>109</sup> The literature on the grotesque or monstrous is extensive; useful discussions in a variety of disciplines may be found in Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: the margins of medieval art* (Cambridge MA, 1992); Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France: Towards the Deciphering of an Enigmatic*

ultimately and specifically with the idea of the lurking presence of the demonic countered in the baptismal exorcism. Exorcism of the baptismal candidate was an important part of the early liturgy of baptism and remained part of twelfth-century practices.<sup>110</sup> The presence of the beast here is undoubtedly a visual reminder that within the baptismal liturgy is a renunciation of Satan and his works, either by the candidate or on behalf of the candidate.

To the left is the image of Adam and Eve. **(Figure 13)** Another tree occupies the central position in the composition; a serpent, handled in the best Scandinavian-influenced form,<sup>111</sup> wraps around it. Eve, on the right, reaches her right hand up to take the forbidden apple; simultaneously, her left hand holds an immense leaf to cover her nakedness. Adam stands on the left, apparently having already eaten the apple, his own genitals already covered. This kind of synoptic narrative is very common in medieval art in general and on twelfth-century baptismal fonts in particular.<sup>112</sup> It is a style for those already familiar with the events of the story, able to sort out the sequencing despite the

---

*Pictorial Language* (Brookfield VT, 1995), David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter, 1996); Thomas Dale, "Monsters, Corporeal Deformities, and Phantasms in the Cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa" *The Art Bulletin* 83/ 3 (September 2001), 402-436; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001); and, most recently, Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons* (Los Angeles, 2004).

<sup>110</sup> For a discussion of the early roots of exorcism and baptism, see John Bowman, "Exorcism and Baptism" in ed. Robert H. Fischer, *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment* (Chicago, 1977), 249-264. For the later medieval discussion, with insightful text analysis, see Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: ritual, theology, and drama* (Ithaca, 1985).

<sup>111</sup> For the Scandinavian influence on English art, see Signe Horn Fuglesang, *Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style: A Phase of 11<sup>th</sup> Century Scandinavian Art* (Odense: 1980), especially 77-81.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, the fonts at Cowlam, Fincham, Kirkby, Walton, and the Tournai font at East Meon.

simultaneous nature of its visual depiction. The scene on the Cottam font participates in a long and stable tradition of applying this iconography to baptismal font decoration.<sup>113</sup>

This image of Adam and Eve effectively summarizes Christian anxiety about the relationship of God’s grace to mankind and the ever-present weight of human knowledge of sinfulness. In the twelfth century, orthodox theology adopted the Pauline belief that “as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law was given...”<sup>114</sup> and the very complete Augustinian formulation that this sin of origin is unavoidably passed through human procreation.<sup>115</sup> Both of these positions are thoroughly discussed by Hugh of Saint-Victor in the section on the “Fall of the First Man” in *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*, a work composed around 1134 and thus contemporary with the Cottam font.<sup>116</sup> Baptism, therefore, was a necessary sacrament, which with its elements of water and the *res* of the Holy Spirit removed this sin and allowed the mortal soul to begin its journey through Christ to God.

The norm for twelfth-century English font decoration is this focus on the stories

---

<sup>113</sup> Indeed, one of the earliest extant contexts for the imagery of Adam and Eve in their Fall is the baptistery at Dura Europas, Syria, before 256. The fresco, which includes the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd directly over the scene of Original Sin, appears in the lunette directly above the font. See Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europas Final Report: The Christian Building*, VIII/2 (New Haven: 1967).

<sup>114</sup> Romans 5: 12-13.

<sup>115</sup> Augustine states this position over and over again in his anti-heretical writings, perhaps most clearly in his letters against the Pelagians. In the section where Augustine explains that all men share in Adam’s sin by generation, not merely by imitation, he asserts both the principles of sin through procreation and the need for baptism, even in infants who can have committed no sin; see *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*, Book 1, 9-11, ed. Migne, *PL* 44:0123ff.

<sup>116</sup> Hugh of Saint-Victor, *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei* 1: 7, ed. Migne, *PL* 176, 322. See also: *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge MA, 1951).



**Figure 13** Baptismal Font, Cottam (East Riding, Yorkshire), c. 1135-1145, detail of the Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve. Photo: author.

of Adam and Eve or on Christ's life, particularly the incarnation and baptism.<sup>120</sup> Three of the six scenes on the Cottam font depart from this general pattern. One scene (**Figure 14**) shows two figures on either side of the third haloed man, stripped to the waist with clear surface marks of his nipples and ribs, whose arms and legs are stretched and attached to the X-shaped cross behind him. In the neighboring scene (**Figure 15**), a roughly-executed figure, his face prominently featured with a large upturned mouth, lies on a row of horizontal bars; his hands are bound in front of him and he is visibly restrained by the crooked staff of the standing robed figure at the edge of the grill. In the third scene, (**Figure 16**) the artist has depicted a central figure of a dragon, its maw etched with scales and open to show rows of teeth. On the back side of the dragon's head extends the upper torso and head of a clothed figure, a long plait of hair down her back. From the jaws come the dress and feet of the same figure. They are hagiographic images of three popular "universal" saints: St. Andrew (**Figure 14**), St. Lawrence (**Figure 15**), and St. Margaret of Antioch (**Figure 16**).

St. Andrew appears in his martyrdom, his hands and feet tied to the decussate cross so as to prolong his suffering, as in the textual accounts. In the next martyrdom scene, the Cottam sculptor focuses on the details of the torturer, the grill, and the saint's alert face. The scene is an inexact translation of the Prudentius' text: while the torturer holds the hooked pole that might be associated with the flayed body of St. Vincent, the gridiron lacks the flames potently associated with Vincent and reflects the vapors of Lawrence's death. Vincent, though not unknown in England, was not as popular in

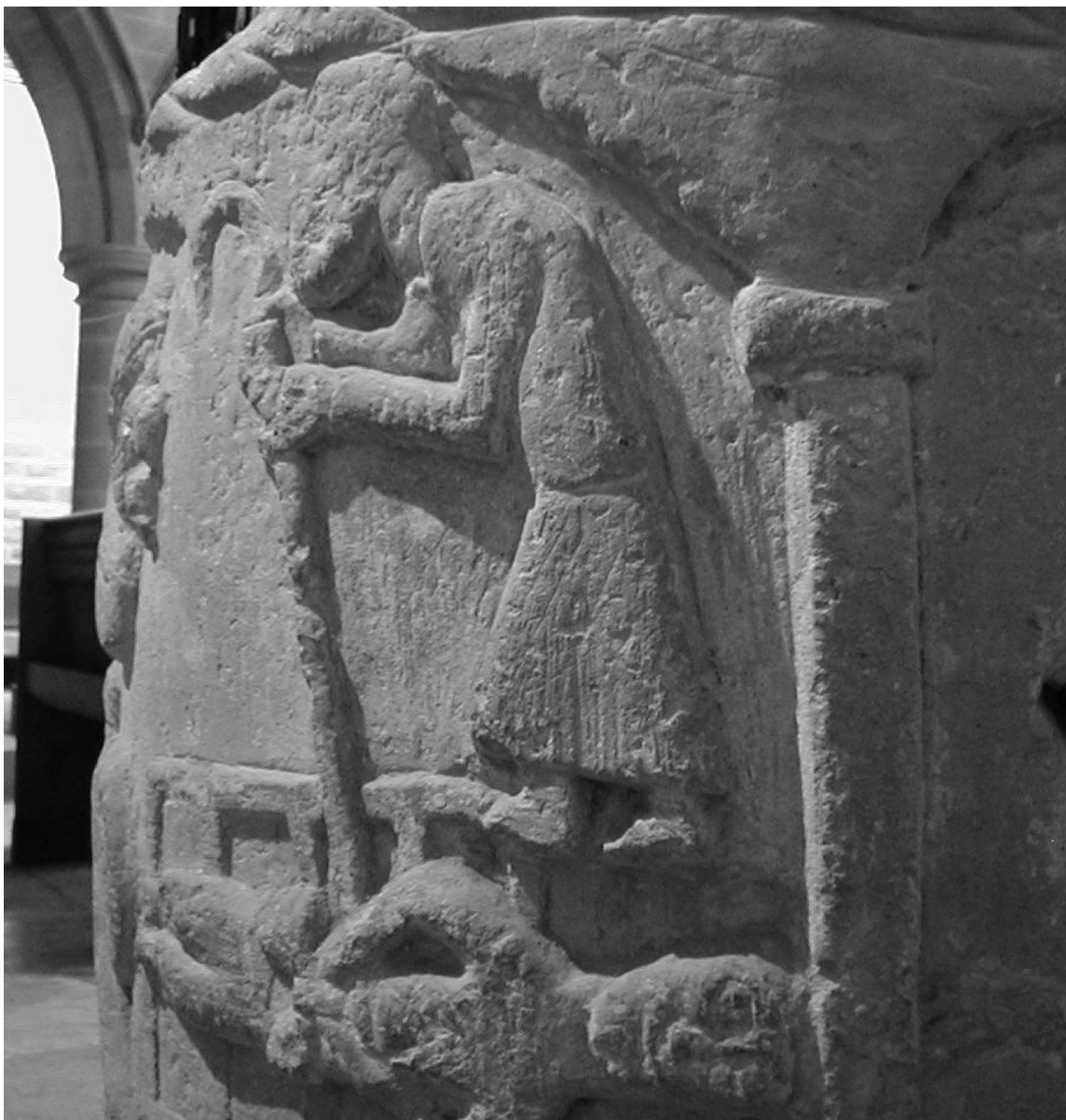
---

<sup>120</sup> Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts*, 4.





**Figure 14** Baptismal Font, Cottam, detail of St. Andrew. Photo: author.



**Figure 15** Baptismal Font, Cottam, detail of St. Lawrence. Photo: author.

England as Lawrence was.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> Both Lawrence and Vincent could be characterized as universal saints and conflation of the two is not undesirable, given baptismal naming and sponsorship connotations. St. Vincent never achieved St. Lawrence's popularity in English art or in the numbers of church dedications. R.L.P. Milburn, *Saints and Their Emblems in English Churches* (London, 1949), 248, and N. D'Anvers and Mrs. Arthur Bell, *Lives and Legends of the Evangelists, Apostles, and Other Early Saints* (London, 1901), 232; see also Frances Arnold-Forster, *Studies in Church Dedications* (London, 1899) for a general look at England's "patron saints" and church dedications. For an excellent examination of the iconographic development, see Gillian Mackie, "New Light on the So-Called Saint Lawrence Panel at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna," *Gesta* 29/1, 54-60.



**Figure 16** Baptismal Font, Cottam, detail of St. Margaret. Photo: author.

Finally, in a scene of her imprisonment from her vita preceding her actual martyrdom, Margaret has been swallowed by Satan in a dragon disguise; he is forced to spit her back up because of the cross she carries.<sup>122</sup>

These saint images offer a complex and layered response to medieval concerns about physical embodiment. The depiction of these martyrdoms foregrounds the visceral nature of the destruction of one's mortal body in the service of one's immortal belief. This deliberately draws out the saints' emulation of Christ's suffering on the cross; martyrdom is perhaps the explicit statement of salvation played out on the mortal body. Its presentation on a baptismal font is further reinforcement of the idea that the average mortal body, brought to its necessary baptism, is just as much an arena for salvation; the fragile infant body in times of high illness and mortality has a contested soul as much as the strong, breaking bodies of the most holy.

The textual discussion and the visual representation often concentrate on the saint's physical suffering. Various English vernacular sources from the late ninth and early tenth centuries, including *Praxeis*, the Blickling Homily, and the poem *Andreas*, wherein Christ tells Andrew of the dangers ahead in the cannibal city of Mermedonia: "They will scatter abroad your flesh in the streets and alleys, and your blood will flow upon the ground, but they will not be able to kill you. But endure, since you know they struck, insulted, and crucified me, for there are some who are about to believe in this city."<sup>125</sup> Visually, Andrew reminds the medieval viewer of Christ's incarnation and

---

<sup>122</sup> AA SS, July V, Dies 20, 0024B. John J. Delaney, *Dictionary of Saints* (Garden City, 1980), 380-381. This is only one of the scenes of Margaret's torture; she is eventually beheaded.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Boenig, *Saint and Hero: Andreas and Medieval Doctrine* (London, 1991), 36-38.

bodily sacrifice, reenacted in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and of the importance of living in Christ's example. Moreover, St. Lawrence might be said to exemplify the sheer bodily commitment of a saint to his faith; the writing about him tends to focus on the amount of suffering he underwent. Prudentius' hymn makes an extended catalogue of Lawrence's virtues in the face of torture; later, Jacobus de Voragine writes, "It may be noted that the passion of St. Lawrence is seen to stand out above the passions of the other martyrs... The first aspect is the bitterness of his sufferings..."<sup>126</sup> Jacobus continues with a numeric cataloguing of the saint's punishments and virtues. There is ample evidence in medieval sacramental theology that martyrdom might be considered a substitute for actual baptism, as in the case of the Holy Innocents and with a number of examples in saints' vitae of former persecutors who convert and are martyred alongside the saint.<sup>127</sup>

Beyond the simple fact of their identities, these saints also have particular bodily associations that might be tied to sacramental theology and practices. At a time when theologians were trying to develop a comprehensive system of sacraments and to link together the seven sacraments held by the Church, iconographies that could draw on multiple sacramental allusions were valuable.

In addition to the visual connections between Andrew and Christ extending to the Eucharist, Andrew had a close association with the sacrament of penance. Penance was

---

<sup>126</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 70.

<sup>127</sup> For example, see Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book XIII, c. 7: "Whoever die for the confession of Christ, even though they have not yet received the washing of regeneration, yet it suffices to remit their sins, as much as if they were washed in the sacred font of baptism." See also Peter Lombard, *Summa Sententiarum*, Book IV:iv. For a discussion of baptism as a ritualization of martyrdom, see Peter Cramer's discussion of the third-century *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, in *Baptism and Change*, 48, 73-86. On the Holy Innocents, see fifth-century Peter Chrysologus's sermon that connects baptism and martyrdom by referring to the mothers' tears over the martyred sons in A. Olivari, *CCSL 24B* (1979-1982), 947-957. Interestingly, the metaphor does not seem to have worked in reverse: baptism is not a physical danger but a death to sin, emphasizing only the spiritual and not the physical elements.

linked to baptism in its cleansing the penitent from sin, though it was repeatable where baptism was not. The period between the tenth and twelfth centuries saw an increase in the acceptability and codification of private penitential penalties as it moved more clearly into the sacramental institution of the Church. Peter Lombard writes, using Jerome, “The first plank is baptism, where the old man is laid aside and the new put on; the second {plank}, penance, by which after a fall we rise again, while the old state which had returned is distained, and the new one which had been lost is resumed.”<sup>128</sup> The English *Andreas* explicitly associates Andrew with penance: Christ sends him to the cannibals of Mermedonia to free Matthew, not for his sins but for doubting Christ’s power and fearing for the mission; Andrew’s suffering has been described as an example of contemporary ideas of graded penance proper for a priest -- penance as medicine -- and the language of the poet is the sacramental language used by a priest to a penitent.<sup>129</sup> The *Andreas* poem and its hero are part of the contemporary dialogue on sacramental definition and systematic theology. Visually, with the placement on an object of specific liturgical function, Andrew appears as a saint who connects the two Church practices of baptism and penance.

St. Lawrence’s *vita* mentions specifically the many baptisms he performs while in jail; healing miracles even result directly from Lawrence’s baptism of fellow prisoner Lucillus. As the archdeacon of Rome, even at the risk of his own life, Lawrence emphasizes the Church’s position on the importance of the baptismal sacrament. The narrative also holds sacramental power; with the words, “Confession of faith washes all

---

<sup>128</sup> Peter Lombard, *Summa Sententiarum*, Book IV, distinction xiv, 1; trans. Rogers, *Peter Lombard and the Sacramental System*, 151.

<sup>129</sup> Boenig, *Saint and Hero*, 49-54.

clean.” Lawrence’s baptisms offer both cleansing of Original Sin and the promise of future penitential grace. The *vita* can be used to reinforce key points in sacramental theology—the position of the sacrament within the institution of the Church—while simultaneously upholding first the Church’s doctrinal position that baptism is first a cleansing of the soul, second, the connection between baptism and penitential confession, and third, the lay belief in the power of the holy to use the sacraments as an opportunity for truly miraculous cleansing.<sup>130</sup>

Part of the reason Lawrence’s martyrdom was held in such esteem was his position as archdeacon of Rome and head of the church there after the martyrdom of Pope Sixtus II. The combination of his ecclesiastic status and the defining moment of his *vita*—giving away the treasures of the Church to the poor—make him an embodiment of Christ, a point made explicitly by Augustine. Finally, Lawrence’s humor plays on the other critical sacrament, the Eucharist. Various authors give him a sense of baiting humor with his executioners; in one account, when on the grill, Lawrence says, “It is done; eat it up, try whether it is nicer raw or roasted.”<sup>131</sup> The saint, living in the example of Christ with his dedication to the poor and downtrodden, dies for his faith, offering his own body as food, a joke that works because of its direct reference to the Eucharist.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>130</sup> It could be noted that this cleansing of soul and body is something fostered even in liturgical and theological writing on a most erudite level. The Bath of Naaman was occasionally taken as a baptismal type, where the immersion cures him of leprosy; the baptismal reference to the bath of Naaman, from 2 Kings 5:1-14, comes specifically from Ambrose’s *De Sacramentis*.

<sup>131</sup> Prudentius, “coctum est, deuora/ et experimentum cape,/ sit crudum an assum suauius!” Peristephanon, II lines 406-408, although 401-408 inclusive are relevant; see also Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 67.

<sup>132</sup> Rachel Fulton, “‘Taste and see that the Lord is sweet’ (Ps. 33:9): The Flavor of God in the Monastic West,” *The Journal of Religion*, 86/ 2 (April 2006), 169-204.

Margaret's social position also makes her resonate with her audience. Noble by birth, she is discovered by Olybrius while tending sheep. Her virgin body upholds the high value the Church placed on purity. As a lay woman about to be martyred, she prays that she be granted the power to intercede for a healthy child on behalf of any woman who invokes her name in a difficult labor. She thus emphatically fuses the Church's lawful positions on female sexuality as virgin herself and maternal protector. Margaret becomes one woman who exists in both Church contexts.<sup>133</sup>

In one Old English account (Cambridge Corpus Christi College 303), Margaret prays that the cauldron of boiling water prepared for her become the bath of baptism; an angel appears and consecrates the water as a font and leads her unharmed out of the boiling water.<sup>134</sup> More significantly, in the twelfth century, St. Margaret was hailed as a patron saint of childbirth both for her "probably apocryphal" bursting forth from a dragon and her martyr's prayer for women in labor.<sup>135</sup> In a culture that understandably feared the harrowing experience of childbirth and the real possibility of a child's early death, Margaret's visual presence on the font is a powerful reminder of the intercessory abilities visibly present for a child offered up for baptism.

That these were three universally-recognized saints, that they were of both genders, that they represented three different backgrounds as apostle, deacon and

---

<sup>133</sup> This ambiguity of position may have been part of why Margaret was a saint received with ambivalence; Jacobus de Voragine is anxious about the vita elements that he cannot verify. In 1969, Margaret was removed from the lists of saints by the Vatican.

<sup>134</sup> Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret*, 167. There is a more elaborate and more explicitly baptismal prayer in the Latin *Passio S. Margaretae*, 213 of the same text.

<sup>135</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 368-70. While Latin versions refer to the story even in the prayers, one vernacular account, the *Old English Martyrology*, is considerably embarrassed by the dragon scene, omitting the popular story and emphasizing the intercessory effects (Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret*, 4, 11).



laywoman is critical to their ability to speak to mortal existence. Their saintly piety, described by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell as “active, world-denying, and God-seeking” imbues them with a supernatural power that can directly affect lay piety, which was “passive and favor-seeking, blurring those goals of purification and reverence with those of petition and covenant.”<sup>136</sup> In twelfth-century England, the baptismal rite is a mix of these pieties: theologically the goal is purification and reverence for the Church’s salvific role but within the context of petition for the mortal life of the child. The community of saints intercedes powerfully for those without power—the penitent sinner and the infant—and the portrayal here on the Cottam baptismal font asserts their spiritual presence in the world of sacramental practice.

These are all, on one level, very erudite readings of the relationship of these saints to contemporary sacramental theology. Given how little we know about the actual specifics of the Cottam font and its commissioning, or indeed of the Cottam parish during the twelfth century, we can only speculate at how direct the program was intended to be. On another level, however, the Cottam font images must be seen as participating in a circulating dialogue about sacraments and mortal bodies that was much more culturally-pervasive. We can track easily the Church’s efforts through the twelfth century to create a standardized definition of the sacraments and to limit those sacraments to seven; we can track through secular edicts and church accounts the emphasis that was placed on the priests’ role in performing these sacraments and performing them correctly within their parishes. Both clerical and lay culture used the saints as spiritual touchstones for different contexts. The contemporary lay emphasis on the power of prayer performed at saints’ relics was at a peak in the twelfth century and the visual presence of saint imagery on the

---

<sup>136</sup> Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 8.

baptismal font served to heighten the importance and relevance of the baptismal sacrament. That this contemporary emphasis on relics was also connected to a penitential movement would have added a penitential connection to the presence of the saint imagery on the Cottam font, underlining the theological assertion of a link between these two sacraments. Finally, as seen in other art of the time, particularly tympana, the ideas of Christian salvation in the face of the End Time and the Last Judgment were pervasive enough to resonate in the figural images on this font.

Although seen on no other English fonts, the three saints combined on the Cottam font lie within the larger twelfth-century dialogue on baptism as a sacrament and the role of the saints in the lives of the faithful. The saints are presented in their moments of bodily suffering, which makes a statement not only of sacramental connection to baptism but also of Christian commitment. Their presence in a program that also includes the Fall of Adam and Eve reminds the viewer that these spiritually-pure figures are also mortal, born with the same failings; the candidate in the font belongs to a continuity of humanity from its mortal beginnings to its Christly exemplars. Their martyrdoms heighten the message of baptism itself as a salvific and victorious act. The presence of those saints who are so committed to their faith stands in sharp relief to the infant candidates who are so innocent and helpless -- and yet condemned without baptism.

## **Conclusion**

We can think of the iconography of baptismal fonts in the twelfth century as having been conceived within relatively narrow theological parameters that resulted nevertheless in a dynamic range of images. The institutional concern seems chiefly to

have been to draw attention to the fundamentals of baptism as a sacrament within a sacramental system. The iconography first focuses on the necessity for baptism through the images of Adam and Eve, the baptismal remedy through the images of bodily incarnation of Christ, and the baptismal formula through the images of Christ's own baptism. It then draws on iconographies that connect the important sacrament of baptism to other sacraments within the Church's emerging structured definitions of sacraments. Images are thus chosen that draw particular attention to Christ's bodily sacrifice through their visual connections to the Eucharist and that draw particular attention to saints through their visual connections to the sacraments.

The iconographic power of saints is, however, not merely that they express the sacrament of penance. The imagery of saints is directly connected to a spiritual belief in their real presence in the world and intercessory power. As the candidate is being baptized, the saint serves as an example of behavior, a source of inspiration and assistance, and a means of reception into the Christian community in a way that shows the intimate connection between Christ and his faithful. Peter Lombard followed the Augustinian definition that "...a sacrament not only signifies, but also confers that of which it is the sign or signification."<sup>137</sup> We might also place the hagiographical decoration of baptismal fonts in this context. The saints are not themselves a sacrament, but their function in medieval spirituality is sacramental; their imagery not only tells the story of the power of sanctity and commitment but also conveys the protection, assistance, and guidance so vividly associated with these figures.

---

<sup>137</sup> Peter Lombard, *Summa Sententiarum*, trans. Rogers, *Peter Lombard*, 55-56.