BLUMKA

Medieval Baptismal Font

England, 1175-1275
Limestone
Height: 17 in. (43 cm); diameter: 25 in. (63.5 cm)

Provenance:
Blumka, New York, since the late 1940's

Baptism was a critical ritual in the formation of identity in the Middle Ages. In its spiritual function, it marked a connection and commitment between the faithful and God. Baptism was a fundamental change in the identity of the individual, sealed as Christ's own forever. But that sacrament took place within the grounds of liturgical practice of the communal Church, with norms and expectations that also influenced civic and familial roles. Medieval churches of all sizes invested in a font for their congregations. Fonts should be seen not as isolated objects, as pretty pieces of quite large sculpture. In the design and decoration of the font, a rich conversation occurs about the importance of the sacrament in the Church and in the community. This font, likely 1175-1275 in date, is no exception. Its beautiful and complete carving points to the depth of value that the faith community placed on this piece of liturgical furniture.

There is no question that this was an elaborate and expensive artwork. It is completely carved with decorative bands at top and bottom and the roundels stretched around the middle. It is evidence that the font was a valued object in its original church site.[i] This helps us connect it to the beliefs of the period—baptism was at the center of sacramental theology, as the initiation that established God's grace cleansing from the Original Sin brought to the human condition through Adam and Eve. Without baptism, the soul could be condemned to Hell. Given the primacy of baptism for salvation for all souls, the liturgical furniture of a baptismal font was a prized possession. But a large number of fonts were barely carved— just bowls. The important feature was a basin to hold the sanctified water. The elaborate decoration here extends the value of the object, highlighting its importance.

This font is a basic round tub form, with a band of decoration at the top and bottom. It measures 17 inches high, suggesting that it likely sat on a pedestal, and 25 inches across. There are traces of polychrome, which clearly suggests that it was painted as much medieval sculpture was. This would have made the bands and roundels and animals stand out even more. The bowl shows signs of having been

coated inside with a stucco, perhaps to seal it; there is no clear evidence of the bowl having been lead-lined. Many font basins were lined with lead in the Middle Ages to prevent seepage into the stone. The upper band of roundels with four-petal designs can be seen from the top, even though the very top rim is plain stone. This suggests that while the pattern is not unusual, it was part of the high-end craftsmanship to have it visible when one looked down on the font. There is damage on the rim, indicating a cover hinge; covers were a later medieval and post-medieval installation, out of a fear that someone might steal the consecrated water for witchcraft.

The CIRAM report on the font notes that it is a sedimentary stone, such as limestone, carved in the medieval period, and weathered consistent with natural wear. There is no detectable fluorine, chlorine, or sulphur, which would suggest the font had been recut. Their stone analysis puts this in England in the 12-13th century.[ii] Based on formal and comparative analysis, the font is most likely later thirteenth century. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the greatest interest in systematic sacramental definition and theology, and an attendant interest in decorating surfaces to highlight the sacrament.[iii] The decoration of English baptismal fonts in the fourteenth century tends to follow trends in architectural decoration of the period, leaning more to standardized arcades typical of the Decorated and Perpendicular English styles.[iv] Finally, the strong decorative elements that link this with other cross-Channel production suggest the stronger trade and travel connections of the later medieval period.
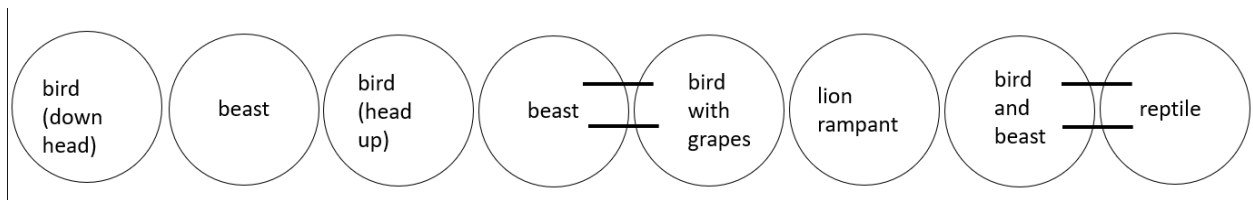
The main roundel band in the center has eight rings filled with animal imagery. Each roundel measures approximately an eight-inch circle, though the roundels are slightly irregular and each is ringed with multiple carved loops which continue to fill the space between the roundels. The animals have been carved to fill their roundels, often contorting the form to fill the space. There is a neat alternation of birds and beasts around the font, with birds appearing four times in total, a quadruped in three, a lion rampant and a reptile each once. The birds and the quadruped are meant to be read as the same across the roundels. As beautifully decorated as this font is, the animals are not explicitly a baptismal program, though they might be stretched to have bestiary or aviary connections.

All of the birds are carved similarly with small round feathers on the neck and body, long wing and tail feathers. They vary slightly in head position, with one head down, one whose head is turned up and backward, one with its head below a bunch of grapes. In the remaining roundel, the bird sits on the back of the beast, its beak next to the animal's upturned head. There is no clear bestiary parallel for a bird on the back of a beast like this one, though it certainly implies a story or allegory. In general, a bird like these might be read as a dove, appearing in the Flood narrative as a sign of the world's rebirth (Genesis 8: 8-11) and as a sign of the Holy Spirit which appeared at Christ's baptism (Matthew 3:16). And while most of the birds on this font are generic and non-specific, the roundel that pairs the bird with the grapes is very clearly a referent to the two primary Christian sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.

It is hard to classify the recurrent beast in the roundels. It is a quadruped with a swishing full tail. Its head is rounded and its mouth open. There are no teeth in the mouth; rather, it is rimmed with a carved outline, suggesting a lip. The feet are also interesting as they have toe designations. Each is split to indicate a paw, not a hoof. So, while much of the beast might be a horse or donkey, the feet are decidedly not equine. This could be a dog, a much-loved beast in medieval bestiaries. There are also carved surface lines describing the belly of the beast, as if it were thin. Both possibilities of horse and dog are identified in bestiaries for their intelligence and their loyal connection to human beings. The Aberdeen Bestiary makes a parallel between dogs and clergy: "In some ways preachers are like dogs: by their admonitions and righteous ways they are always driving off the ambushes laid by the Devil, lest he seize and carry off God's treasure - Christian souls. As the dog's tongue, licking a wound, heals it, the wounds of sinners, laid bare in confession, are cleansed by the correction of the priest. As the dog's tongue heals man's internal wounds, the secrets of his heart are often purified by the deeds and discourse of the Church's teachers."[v] Even if we cannot identify the beast definitively, these small sermons certainly point out possible Christian symbolism even while not insisting on a singular, baptismally-focused program.

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Again, in sculpting the lion, the artist has fit the animal into the roundel so as to echo the form. The chest and neck of the lion follow the upper curve of the roundel, while the belly fits into the lower curve. The back legs crouch powerfully to support the beast and the front leg is raised, almost rampant. He has a clearly studded collar, which likely would have been painted. The lion's teeth are bared and the tail curves beautifully up to almost rest at its jaw. Well known as the king of beasts, medieval bestiaries had learned passages connecting it to Christ: "Thus our Saviour, a spiritual lion, of the tribe of Judah, the root of Jesse, the son of David, concealed the traces of his love in heaven until, sent by his father, he descended into the womb of the Virgin Mary and redeemed mankind, which was lost."[vi] The lioness was held to give birth to stillborn cubs that the lion then breathed on them after three days to bring them to life, "Thus the Almighty Father awakened our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day; as Jacob says: 'He will fall asleep as a lion, and as a lion's whelp he will be revived' (see Genesis, 49:9)."[vii] Here too, the roundel can be read as having connections to Christ and Church teachings, and even the idea of rebirth paralleled in baptism.

We look at this roundel and see it filled with an obvious crocodile; it has a long toothy snout, a scaly body, and a long tail. A foot is visible at the bottom of the curved body, near the head. The sculptor has curled it around inside the boundary of the scroll. While some medieval bestiaries came close to depicting the crocodile naturalistically, many more depictions showed a furry beast with a bear-like head or added fishtail and wings. Medieval dragons often look like this, though they too often have wings. Snakes too can be pictured with longish snouts and scales, with or without wings, and with or without feet. The bestiaries no doubt recall the snake in the Genesis text that walks before it is punished for misleading Eve and is cursed to crawl on its belly; since the Fall of Adam and Eve was the reason for humanity's exile from Eden and the condition of Original Sin, the connection to the need for baptism is clear. The snake is often described in bestiaries as poisonous, sinuous and never straight, and living in the shadows.[viii] The snake thus misleads; in bestiaries the dragon lies in wait to capture the dove. "Take heed, therefore, O man, and stay within the catholic faith, live within it, remain steadfast within it, within the one catholic church. Be as careful as you can that you are not caught outside the doors of that house, that the dragon, the serpent of old, does not seize you and devour you, as Judas was at once devoured by the devil and perished, as soon as he had gone forth from the Lord and his brother apostles."[ix] The reptile here is a warning, a persistent reminder of sin, the fragility of human nature to resist it, and the need for sacramental remedies like baptism and penance.

The presence of the animals can be read as both decorative and significant, though the sculptor gives neither reading more weight. Indeed, individual elements can have significance but don't need to be read as only significant. This is critical with this font and many others of the Middle Ages—it is easily possible to give it a reading that connects to Christian symbolism and equally valid to enjoy it simply because it is elaborately decorated and clearly important.
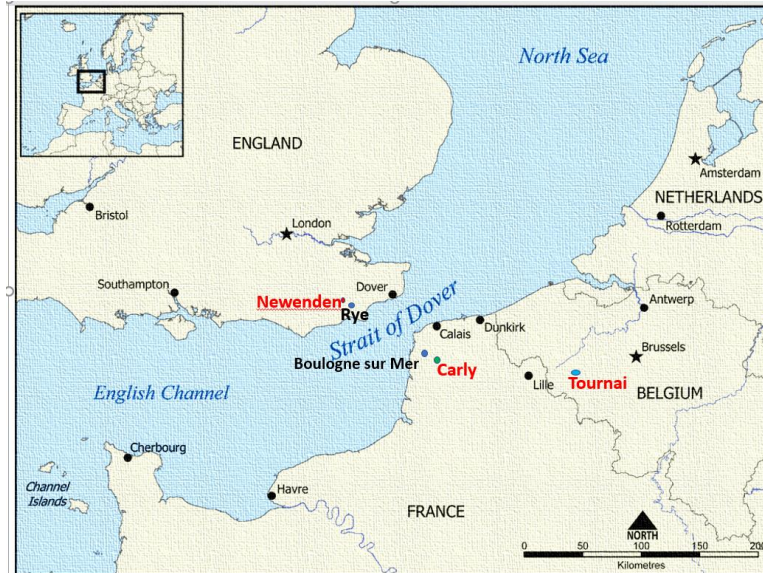
Everything about this baptismal font suggests a high-end object—detailed trim, thorough carving throughout. However, this same beautiful carving also suggests that this was a commercially produced object. It lacks common narratives, such as the story of Adam and Eve, scenes from the life of Christ, or saint's life.   These subjects might point to a donor or a program designer. Baptismal fonts were valued objects in medieval churches—absolutely integral to the soul in Christian identity, a church's service to its community, and part of the larger social fabric of family ties through godparents. A font like this one definitely spoke to the importance of the ritual; it is not lessened for being "off the rack".

Moreover, fonts like this one are an important means of understanding medieval craftsmanship and trade. There were fashionable centers throughout Europe where fonts carved show the regional carving forms (Herefordshire, England) or the regional stone (Tournai, Belgium). Apostle fonts follow maritime shipping routes. Scandinavian fonts follow some very distinct workshop forms, drawing them clearly together.[x] This font has much in common with two Romanesque fonts from roughly the same period: Newenden font[xi] (Kent, UK) and Carly (France); although these two have columns and pedestals with a squared basin, they both feature roundels with beasts and filled interspaces.

Left: Font, St. Peter's, Newenden (Kent, UK) by Creative Commons license by Julian P Guffogg
Right: Font, St. Martin, Carly (France); by C.S. Drake

Newenden and Carly are almost directly across the Strait of Dover in the English Channel from each other, and traffic would have likely gone through the main French regional port, Calais. Cross-Channel trade also linked Boulogne-sur-Mer with England. The city was a long-standing port, from Roman times, and continued to be active through the Middle Ages, as military partner in the Norman Conquest of Britain in the eleventh century, a fishing and whaling center, and a later point of contention in the Hundred Years War. Boulogne-sur-Mer is less than one hundred miles from another medieval sculpting center known for its fonts, Tournai. Much has been studied about the traffic from Tournai,[xii] especially to English centers such as Winchester Cathedral, and the roundels seen here with animal and bird designs also appear in those Tournai imports. Objects circulated more widely than we give them credit for, since medieval standards are so far from modern forms of trade and shipping. And sculptural ideas—whether shipped on the furniture or carried in the imaginations of artists and patrons—are clearly traveling.

This medieval English font tells us so much about the work of the period. Since the sacramental preparation of the soul through baptism was the fundamental aspect of identity in this Christian society, works made to perform the liturgy were valued. The size and decoration of this font suggest this was an expensive piece. The font is carved beautifully with carefully laid-out trim and animals in well-proportioned roundels; while many fonts were simply bare stone or sparsely decorated, this one is fully realized. The animals are captivating in themselves but they might also be read symbolically, suggesting that the sculptor and patron considered the placement of the font visibly in the church, part of the religious experience even when not in use. Most importantly, this baptismal font points to design, sculpting, and patronage connections, reminding us of the vibrancy of life and culture in Europe in the later medieval period.

[i] The font has been in the Blumka family for more than 75 years, with no clear indication where it came from prior to that. Given the lack of specific saint-oriented program or baptismal specific program, it was less likely to have been created for an individual church to tie into their liturgical decoration.

[ii] Drs. Olivier Bobin and Camille Guilleux, CIRAM report 1223-OA-8IN-2, February 2, 2024. In CIRAM's reports they are carefully to date only as an estimate (https://www.ciram-lab.com/our-services/art-market/stones-minerals.html); they place the font as English 12 – 13th century.

[iii] For a full discussion of sacramental theology as presented in these works, see Frances Altvater, *Sacramental Theology and the Decoration of Baptismal Fonts* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

[iv] English Romanesque and Gothic fonts are significantly different in design. While English Gothic fonts do show mostly decorative bands like the top and bottom of this font, they often lack a central ring design, or fall back on an overall tracery arcade. See Francis Bond, *Fonts and Font Covers*, London: Waterstone and Co. Ltd., 1985 reprint of 1908 original.

[v] Aberdeen Bestiary, f. 19v, "De natura canum", https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f19v

[vi] Aberdeen Bestiary, f. 7r, "De Leonibus", https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f7r

[vii] Aberdeen Bestiary, f. 7v, "De Leonibus", https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f7v

[viii] Aberdeen Bestiary, f. 65v, "De Serpentibus" , https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f65v

[ix] Aberdeen Bestiary, f. 65v, https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f65v

[x] C.S.Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts of Northern Europe and Scandinavia,* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 2002), 131ff.

[xi] The entry for the Newenden font in the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland suggests local tradition believes that the font was made for a larger site and transported here (https://www.crsbi.ac.uk/view-item?i=12135). This changes the case in no way—Rye is also on the coast, less than eight miles from Newenden.

[xii] On the Tournai fonts alone, George Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture 1140-1210* (London: Tiranti, 1953), C.S. Drake, "The Distribution of Tournai Fonts", 1993 *The Antiquaries Journal* 73: 11–26, and C.S. Drake, *The Romanesque Fonts of Northern Europe and Scandinavia,* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 2002). The production from Tournai also included tomb slabs (Elizabeth Schwartzbaum, "Three Tournai Tombslabs in England", 1981 *Gesta* 20/1: 89-97) and other works (Freda Anderson, "The Tournai Marble Sculptures of Lewes Priory", 1984 *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 122: 85-100).