

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE GOAT ON THE NORMAN
FONT AT THAMES DITTON

BY

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Introduction to the Digital Edition

This text was prepared for digital publication by David Badke in September, 2005. It was scanned from the original text.

Author: George Claridge Druce was born in Surrey, England and lived there and at Wimbledon until 1923, when he retired from managing a distillery company and moved to Cranbrook, Kent. He was a member of the Kent Archaeological Society from 1909, as Secretary from 1925 to 1935 and then Vice-President until his death. He was a member of the Royal Archaeological Institute (1903-48, Council member 1921-28) and of the British Archaeological Association, joining in 1920, serving on its Council 1921-38 and then as Vice President (1938-48). He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (F.S.A.) of London in 1912 and served on its Council 1923-6. Druce travelled extensively (by bicycle) with his camera, and built up a unique collection of photographs and glass lantern slides, which in 1947 he presented to the Courtauld Institute in London. Although interested in almost all branches of antiquarian study, he specialized in the study of the bestiary genre, and was widely recognized as an authority on the influence of bestiaries on ecclesiastical sculpture and wood carving. He also studied manuscripts both in England and elsewhere. He contributed articles to various scholarly journals, presented many lectures, and in 1936 produced a translation of *The Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc*, a Norman-French manuscript which dates from 1210-11. Druce died in 1948.

— *Adapted from an obituary written by Canon Sydney William Wheatley, F.S.A. in The Journal of the British Archaeological Association, 3rd series, 11 (1948), 80.*

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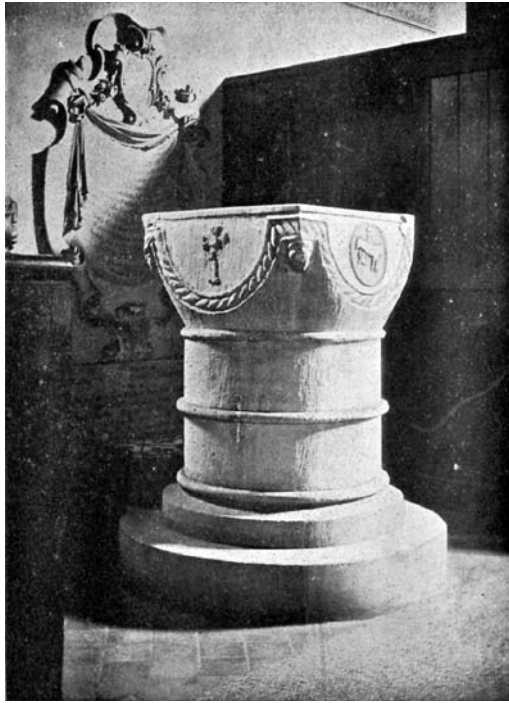
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Notes: Thames Ditton is a village about 17 miles south west of Central London (UK). The manuscripts mentioned by Druce as being at the British Museum (B.M.) are now housed at the British Library.

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Norman Font, Thames Ditton



Sculpture of Goat, Font, Thames Ditton

THE Norman Font at Thames Ditton provides one of the few instances in Surrey churches where figure sculptures occur. It consists of a bowl about two feet square upon a circular stem and base, the lower part of the bowl being chamfered off after the fashion of a cushion capital. The four faces are bordered at the top by a narrow fillet, with an irregular zig-zag pattern, and round the bottom by a string of cable moulding, supported at the corners by small bracket heads, an effective arrangement. Upon the four faces occur sculptures in relief; on the south side an ornamental cross, with four equal splayed arms upon a short-footed stem; on the west a six-rayed star, sun, or flower; on the east the Agnus Dei; and on the north another animal resembling a goat, the last three being in circular medallions or panels, about seven inches diameter.

It is only intended here to discuss the meaning of the last, the goat, and the first thing we shall notice is its curious attitude, being nearly upside down. Any suggestion that this is due to a fancy on the part of the mason may be dismissed as insufficient, and we must enquire elsewhere for an explanation. Now, we know that there is an intimate connection between animal forms as decorative details in Church architecture and the Medieval Bestiaries, or Books of Beasts, as is proved by the series upon the south doorway at Alne (Yorks),¹ where they have corresponding titles, and if we turn to these MSS., we find accounts of different sorts of goats, with illustrations. There are Ibex and Caper, wild goats; Caprea, she-goat or roe; Hircus, [110] he-goat; and Hoedi, kids. The two last are usually represented as quietly feeding, the conventional mode being for one or a pair of goats to be reared up on their hind legs, eating the tender shoots of trees; this form is similarly represented at Barton-le-Street (Yorks.),² and does not tally with the Thames Ditton example. In the case of Caper and Caprea the illustrations show them being hunted or feeding off trees or grass, or climbing upon a steep mountain; but none of these agree at all closely with the peculiar reversed attitude of the goat on the Font. We have only Ibex left. Illustrations in the MSS. usually, but not always, show Ibex in a vertical position, with head and horns downwards, springing down an excessively steep precipice, as may be seen in the accompanying reproduction from MS. Harl. 4751 (B. M.), of the first half of the 13th century. In MS. Harl. 3244 (B. M.), of about the same date, the head and horns are so bent down as to be almost upside down. In MS. Ashmole 1511 (Bod.), Ibex is vertically head downward, descending a steep mountain. In two of these instances it is being hunted. In *The Living Animals of the World*, Vol. I, p. 234, we read of the Alpine Ibex when hunted: "The way in which the Ibex come down the passes and over the precipices is simply astonishing. One writer lately saw them springing down perpendicular heights of forty feet, or descending chimneys in the mountain face by simply cannoning with their feet from side to side."

1 Illustrated in Allen's *Early English Symbolism*, p. 347.

2 Illustrated in *Reliquary*, Vol. III (new series), Plate XVI.

Ibex.



Est animal quod dicitur *ibex* duo cornua habent. quarum tanta vis est ut si ab alto montis ad ima demissus fuerit. corpus eius totum his duobus cornibus sustentetur illesum. Significat autem eruditos homines. qui duorum testamentorum consonantia quicquid eis aduersi acciderit quasi quodam salubri temperamento tempore solet. & uelut duobus cornibus sustinetur bona quae pertinent ueteris testamenti ac euangelice lectionis attestacione sustentantur. *Yena.*

Ibex, 13th Century Bestiary (Brit. Mus.)

[MS Harley 4751 f16r, British Library]

Here we have more correspondence with the reversed goat on the Font; but a further difficulty arises in that the latter does not indicate movement, but rather the reverse. It appears to be quietly feeding. In MS. Add. 11283 (B. M.), Ibex appears simply as a horned animal upon rocks. In MS. 12 F. xiii (B. M.), Ibex is a goat-like animal, with long horns, climbing down a rocky mountain, another young one feeding upon a tree below. The points for identification are therefore [111] somewhat confusing, and would apply in one way or another to both Ibex and Caper. The identification is of some importance, because the symbolism involved in the two is different. As to Ibex, a translation of the Latin text of MS. Harl. 4751 runs as follows:—"There is an animal which is called the Ibex, having two horns, the strength of which is so great, that if it is flung down from the top of a mountain to the bottom, the whole of its body is supported on these two horns unhurt. Now it signifies learned men, who by the harmony of the two testaments are wont to treat whatever opposition may be presented to them as it were by a sound and healthy treatment. And propped on these two horns, they support the truths which they brought to light by the witness of the Old Testament and the Gospel story."

As to Caper, if we turn to the *Metrical Bestiary of Philip de Thaun*, written in Norman French about 1125³ (in which Ibex does not occur), we find the descriptions and symbolism after this wise:—"The goat is an animal which mounts high to feed, and has a proud demeanour towards those who approach. This animal shows the life which God led on earth to gain our souls; He preached lofty themes, and the 'prudume' (skilful or learned men, i.e., apostles and theologians) heard and retained them. Their ideas are lofty like the mountain peaks, they are virtuous; on them Christ rests, and he is their nourishment. God likewise is far-seeing, and interprets all men's deeds past and future; with those who wander far he is displeased and they will go to hell, but those who remain will dwell with him."

It will be seen that in the case of Ibex the symbolism turns upon the strength of the horns, whereas with Caper the general appearance and habits of the animal are made use of. On the whole, I am disposed to regard the sculpture as representing Ibex on account of its inverted position. Apart from this, it would rather correspond with Caper.

[112] It only remains to consider any other possibilities. It is easy to apply symbolic meanings to almost any subject, but the difficulty is to justify them by medieval use. Because the Lamb appears upon this Font, it might be argued that the goat may represent the "rejected." This would imply a co-ordination of the subjects, and perhaps bring in the two others, of which I do not suggest any explanation. Considering the great number of different subjects carved on Fonts, my view is that with the exception of certain obvious series, such as Zodiacs, Months, or Seven Sacraments, they are usually unconnected, and, pending further investigation, I should prefer to regard the Thames Ditton Goat as independent.

³ Wright's Ed., p. 84.