



Halesworth, Suffolk

Ἰαλῆσθροῦ

Church of St Mary

Sculptured stones

Grid ref .... TM 386 774

Date

Fragments of pre-Norman stone, probably of Danish origin.

*Bryant* County Churches of Suffolk: 1912

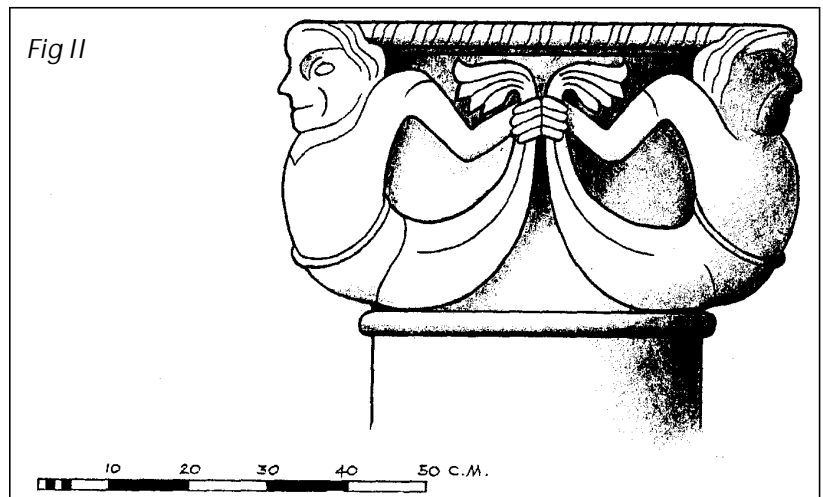
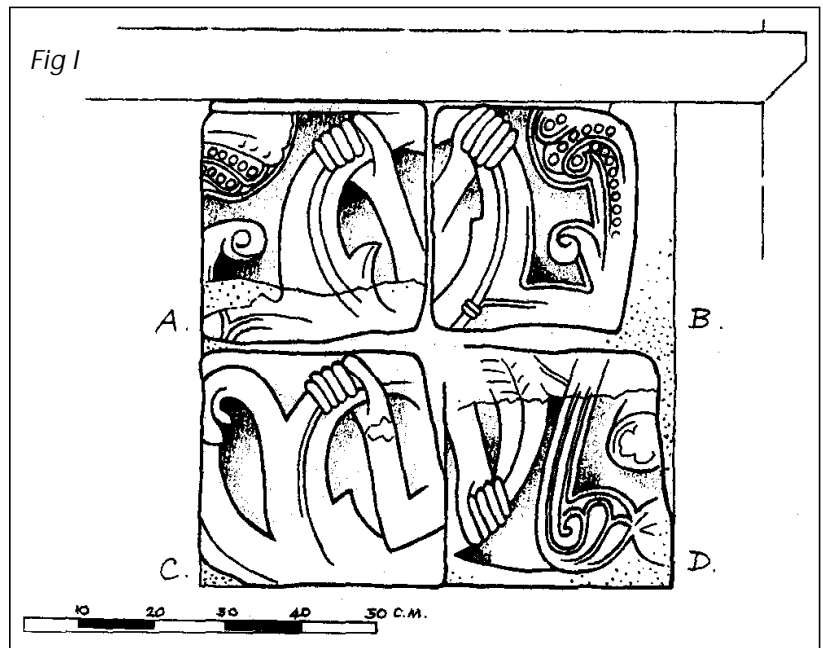
Below chancel piscina, 3 pieces of incomplete carved stone discovered in South aisle – not later than C11th but British Museum dates to late C9th.

*Cautley*: Suffolk Churches 1932

'Danestones'

St Mary's church in Halesworth looks, from the outside, like a typical fifteenth century Suffolk church, rather heavily restored and extended in the nineteenth century. Inside, the nave arcades push the date back another hundred years, but its origins are much earlier, as the base of a round tower was uncovered during one of the nineteenth-century restorations.

The only trace now visible of this earlier church is a group of five carved stones in the chancel. These were discovered during another restoration and re-set under the piscina. They are traditionally known as the 'Danestones' and popularly believed to be of pre-Conquest date. *Cautley* describes them as 'pieces of carved stone, now incomplete – but obviously all part originally of one design. Discovered buried in the south aisle, they are certainly not later than the eleventh century, but the British Museum dates them as late ninth century.' *Pevsner* says, 'Below the chancel piscina some fragments of an Anglo-



Saxon frieze fitted together. Hands gripping leaf-trails. The suggested date is the later ninth century'.

The stones have clearly been set together at random, and one is obviously upside-down. There are three right hands and one left, so this suggests at least three figures, the bodies now missing. In an attempt to make

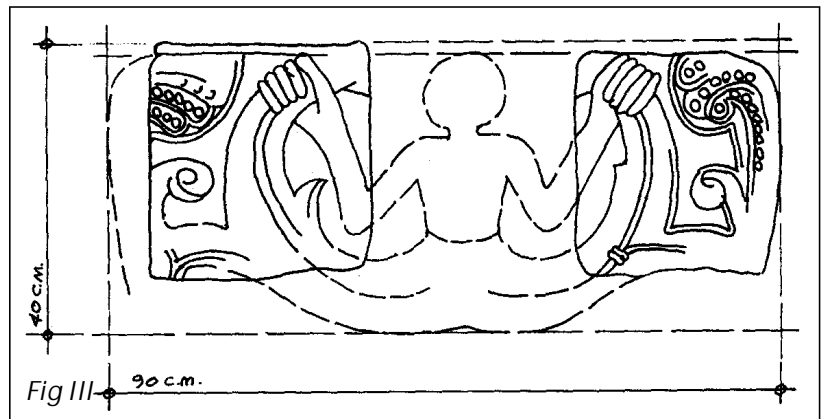
sense of these fragments, we cut our drawing into four pieces and shuffled them around. Two of the fragments, IA and IB, seemed to fit together, assuming a figure between based on the grotesque 'mermen', some with the double fish tails but some foliate, which are widely found in Romanesque work in France, Spain and Italy (see fig. III).

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Figures of this type exist, for example, at Kayserberg in Alsace, where the main portal of the church has capitals each with six mermen grasping double scaly tails, and at Le Puy cathedral porch where there are two mermaids grasping double fish tails, ascribed to the twelfth century. In Spain, double-tailed mermaids occur at Zamora and Fuenteduena, while in Italy there is a double-tailed mermaid between two lions on a capital from S Maria d'Aurora, now in the Sforza Castle in Milan. All these images probably derived from the classical Triton.

English examples are much rarer, but there are two in the Eastern counties, both fonts. In St Peter's church, Cambridge, the square font has four mermen at the angles with bifurcated foliate tails, and is ascribed by the Churches Conservation Trust to the eleventh century. At Anstey in Hertfordshire is a very similar but more crudely carved font, again with four mermen. Bond, however, in his exhaustive study of fonts over the whole of England, has only these two examples with mermen.

Trying to make a similar font from fragments A and B, we found snags. Firstly, each side of the font would be about 90 cms long, compared to 66 cms at Cambridge. This would make it, according to Bond's list, among the largest square fonts in the country, though not impossibly big (cf. the massive Tournai font in Lincoln Minster at 110 cms square, or a local example at All Saints South Elmham, 84 cms square). More importantly, the supposed figure is not central on the whole, being 3 or 4 cms off centre, and the foliate scrolls on



panels C and D are entirely different from those on A and B. At Cambridge and Anstey, each side is symmetrical and virtually identical.

We then looked at Pevsner's suggestion that the stones are 'fragments of an Anglo-Saxon frieze'. The only examples we have found are at Fletton, near Peterborough, and Breedon-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire. At Fletton, these fragments, possibly from Peterborough Abbey, are now re-set below the east window. They are dated to the early ninth century and consist of one tall panel with human figures, and fragments of friezes about 18 cms high with birds and beasts entwined in foliage. At Breedon the friezes are ascribed to the late eighth century and are much more extensive, adding up to about 18 metres total length. Here again are tall panels with figures and narrow friezes about 20 cms high with geometrical ornament, or scrolls mingled with grotesque birds and beasts. If our supposed merman pattern is correct, any frieze would have to be twice as high as those at Fletton and Breedon.

This article therefore ends inconclusively - with more Queries than Notes. If any

reader knows of comparable stones, especially with the 'grasping hands' motif, or indeed has any opinions on the origins and significance of the Halesworth stones, we should be very grateful.

Sheila and Michael Gooch  
Suffolk Inst. of Arch. & Hist.  
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### Sources

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