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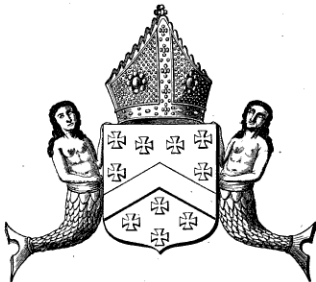
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THE MERMAID, AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE FISH, IN
ART, LITERATURE, AND LEGENDARY LORE.

BY LLEWELLYNN JEWITT, F.S.A., ETC., ETC.

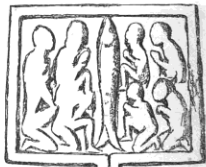


At the outset, let me disclaim all intention in the present paper of writing a dissertation on Mermaids, either historical or otherwise. My intention is simply to put on record a series of notes upon the subject, culled from various sources, and to connect them together in such manner as may seem most meet or convenient for future reference. So little has ever been done in the way of collecting together these various fragments, that the subject may almost be regarded as a new one—or, at all events, as one to which only passing attention has

usually been paid ; I may be pardoned, therefore, I trust, if I occupy a brief space with some of them, and endeavour to show, that what we are now apt to look upon simply as absurd evidences of the extent to which human credulity *will* go, had at one time deep allegorical and emblematical meanings, and were used as symbols by very ancient nations and peoples.

From the very earliest periods some gods and goddesses have been, from certain attributes and the peculiar powers attributed to them, represented in the form of fish, and the fish has also been used as a Christian emblem from the early days of Christianity. We may surely, therefore, trace connecting links between the Mermaiden legends and sculptures of the middle ages, and their prototypes in the long-past generations of the "old world."

Vishnu [*Fish-nu* !] the Indian god, is said to have become incarnate in the form of a fish, so that he might recover the Sacred Books lost in the Deluge ; and the same legend—doubtless, it would seem, derived from this source—obtains in Ireland, where, in their primeval religion, Fin, or Finian (said to be identical with Bar-en-de, "The Son of the One God"), as recorded in the ancient annals of Ireland, was an antediluvian who escaped drowning in the Deluge by being transformed into a salmon, and afterwards lived, restored to his original human form, till the time of St. Patrick, who converted him to Christianity. He was said to be "one of the four men who lived before and after the Deluge, who afterwards divided and possessed themselves of the four quarters of the world." The fish was thus a divine figure in ancient Ireland, and the gods who were transformed into its shape did many wonderful acts of recovery of treasures. It (the Divine-Fish) surrounded by men in act of adoration is carved on the famous Cross of Kells, and it also forms a part of the pattern of other of the richly-sculptured crosses so characteristic of that early seat of art.



A figure of the god Vishnu, as given in *Maurice's "India,"* is here reproduced. He is shown rising from the sea as a joint god and fish, crowned, and holding the sacred book he had recovered from the waters, in his right hand. In Hindoo legends, the god Brahma is said to have appeared to Noah, in the form of a fish, for the purpose of instructing him in the preparation of his ark, and informing him as to the approaching Deluge ; and he (Brahma) is said, in that form "to have conducted the ark of Menu [Noah] through the waters of the Deluge to a place of

safety at the summit of the Himalayas."* Dagon, or Oannes, the god of the Philistines, was represented in the form of a fish, much the same as Vishnu, and Fin, or Fintan, or Finian, and all had evidently one common origin. Oannes and Dag-on (the fish On) says Baring-Gould are "identical. According to an ancient fable, preserved by Berosus, a creature half man and half fish came out of 'that part of the Erythræan sea which borders upon Babylonia,' where he taught men the arts of life, 'to construct cities, to found temples, to compile laws, and, in short, instructed them in all things that tend to soften manners and humanise their lives ;' and he adds, that a representation of this animal Oannes was preserved



FROM KHORSABAD.

in his day. A figure of him sporting in the waves, and apparently blessing a fleet of vessels, was discovered in a marine piece of sculpture by M. Botta, in the excavations at Khorsabad. At Nimroud, a gigantic image was found by Mr. Layard, representing him with the



FROM NIMROUD.

fish's head as a cap, and the body of the fish depending over his shoulders, his legs those of a man ; in his left hand holding a richly-decorated bag, and his right hand upraised as if in the act of presenting the mystic Assyrian fir-cone.

This Oannes (or Dagon) is the Mizraimite On, and the Hebrew Aon, with a Greek case-termination derived from the root signifying "to illumine." Aon was the original name of the god revered in the temple of Heliopolis, which in Scripture is called Beth-Aon, the house of On, as well as by its translation Beth-Shemesh, the house of the Sun. Not only does his name indicate his solar origin, but his representation with horned head-dress testifies to his nature. Ammon, Apis, Dionysos, are sun-gods ; Isis, Io, Artemis, are moon-goddesses, and are all horned. Indeed, in ancient iconography, horns invariably connect the gods represented with the two great sources of light. Apparent exceptions, such as the Fauns, are not so in reality when subjected to close scrutiny. Civilising gods, who diffuse intelligence and instruct barbarians, are also solar deities, as the Egyptian Osiris, the Nabathæan Tammuz, the Greek Apollo, and the Mexican Quetzalcoatl ; besides these, Oannes [or Dagon] takes his place as the sun-god, giving knowledge and civilisation. According to the fable related by Berosus, he came on earth each morning, and at evening plunged into the sea ; this is a mythical description of the rising and setting of the sun. His semi-piscine form was an expression of the idea that half his time was spent above ground, and half below the waves.

In precisely similar manner the Semitic moon goddess, who followed the course of the sun, at times manifesting herself to the eyes of men,

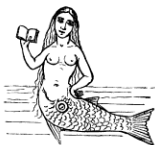
* Keene.

at others seeking concealment in the western flood, was represented as half woman, half fish, with characteristics which make her lunar origin indisputable. Her name was Derceto, or Atergatis, and she was identical with Mylitta, the universal Mother, or source of life.

This goddess "was esteemed by her votaries the same as Venus or Cupris;" she "was worshipped by the Phigalians, in Arcadia, by the name of Eurunome Diana; her statue was of great antiquity, and represented a woman as far as the middle, but from thence had the figure of a fish." Macrobius makes her "the mother of the gods;" and Bryant wisely concludes that this mermaid figure was a hieroglyphic of the Ark.

On the coins of Ascalon, Semiramis is represented as half woman and half fish, and at Joppa she is also represented as a mermaid; the story being that she fled from Typhon, plunged into the sea, took the form of a fish, and thus preserved her incognito! The goddess of moisture (the Syrian Targata, and the Derceto of Palestine), was also depicted as a mermaid.

The various references to the Syrian Mermaid Goddess, says Mr. Keane, in an able summary, "correspond in a remarkable manner with our Irish legends, sculptures, and hagiology." Bryant informs us that the Ark was styled Cetus ($\kappa\eta\rho\sigma$) which, with the prefix Der (the Oak), makes the Goddess Dercetus identical with our Irish Saint Darerca—the Oak of the Ark. The figure of the Arcadian Mermaid,



MERMAID OF CLONFERT.

Eurunome Diana, corresponds exactly with the Mermaid of Clonfert—"a woman as far as the middle, but from thence had the figure of a fish." In the metamorphoses of Dercetus into a fish, and of her daughter Semiramis into a pigeon, we have the Arkite tradition corresponding with the stories of the Irish Saints Culm, Dagan, Fintan, Liban, and Shanaun (the ancient Ana, the mother of the gods)—the same heathen legends preserved, though in a different form. It seems very clear that

the Cuthite hieroglyphics of ancient historical facts were made the foundation of a corrupt mythology; and, subsequently, all of the mythology which here survived the lapse of ages, was metamorphosed into what we now call Irish hagiology.

In summing up the foregoing, we find evidence that the figure of a mermaid was anciently used as a hieroglyphic of the Ark of Noah. Bryant notices several emblematic devices, both male and female, which refer to the Deluge and its attendant circumstances. The female, in his opinion, represents the ship, the Ark, the mother of the gods, under various names; and the male, the man, Noah, etc. The



BABYLONIAN SEAL.



ox and cow, as well as the mermaid and merman, are thus interpreted by him. We find the Irish Mermaid Saint known by two names, the first, Liban, answering to the name of the crescent moon, a type of the Ark, the same as Cybele, Damater, etc. Next, we have her name Muirgen, answering to Moriogan, a female Tuath-de-Danaan divinity in Ireland. Then we have Fintan, the Antediluvian, whose appearance as a heathen Irish Druid answers exactly to the representation of the Assyrian Dagon; and we have his connection with the great Deluge, a matter of record in Irish historical legend. We have the supposed Saint Darerca corresponding with Derceto, the Syrian goddess and mermaid—both names signifying The Oak of the Ark. The Mermaid Liban, answering to the goddess Labana, the Moon, Cybele, or Damater, and the goddess Derceto being the same as Damata, we may reasonably conclude that the Irish Saints Liban and Darerca represented the same original, *i.e.*, the mermaid, as a hieroglyphic of the Ark, whose emblem was the crescent moon.

In classic iconography the Tritons, and in later art the Sirens, are represented half fish, half human. Originally the Sirens were winged, but after the fable had been accepted, which told of their strife with the Muses, and their precipitation into the sea, they were figured like mermaids; the fish-form was by them borrowed from Derceto. "The prevalence of tales of mermaids among Celtic populations indicates these water-nymphs as having been originally deities of those peoples; and I cannot but believe that the circular mirror they are usually represented as holding, is a reminiscence of the moon-disc. Bothe, in his *Kronecke der Sassen*, in 1492, described a god, Krodo, worshipped in the Hartz, who was represented with his feet on a fish, a wheel to symbolise the moon in one hand, and a pail of water in the other. As among the Northern nations the moon is masculine, its deity was male. Probably the Mexican Coxcox, or Teocipactli (*i.e.* Fish-god), was either a solar or a lunar deity. He was entitled Huehuetonacateo-cateo-cipactli, or Fish-god-of-our-flesh, to give him his name in full; he somewhat resembled the Noah of Sacred Writ; for the Mexican fable related that in a great time of flood, when the earth was covered with water, he rescued himself in a cypress trunk, and peopled the world with wise and intelligent beings. The Babylonish Oannes was also identified with a flood. The Peruvians had likewise their semi-fish gods, but the legend connected with them has not descended to our days. The North-American Indians relate that they were conducted from Northern Asia by a man-fish."*

We have seen that the Mermaid has in various countries, and in very early ages, been used as a hieroglyphic of the Ark, and as such had a Scriptural origin. Later on, as a Christian symbol, the fish came much into use, and from it, doubtless, arose, to some extent, the adoption of the fish-maiden and fish-man as Christian decorations. Of the fish, as a Christian emblem, it will be necessary to say a few words. The word ἸΧΘΥΣ (Ichthus), is a symbol or acrostic, and is formed, as will be seen, of the initials of the five words—

* Baring-Gould.

Iesus Christos Theou Uios Soter ;

(or, as it appears in more than one instance in the Catacombs of Rome)

Ἰησοῦς that is "*Iesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour,*" and is said to
 Χριστός have been invented by the Christians of Alexandria, and
 Θεοῦ to have been used till about the time of Constantine. St.
 Ἰσίδωρος Clement of Alexandria, and St. Augustine, both allude to
 Σωτήρ it, as do also Tertullian and Origen. The fish (says Walcott) "represented man in the troublous waves of this mortal life ; the fish, which had the tribute-money, typified, according to Optatus of Milevi, the offering of Christ for the world ; and the fish broiled on the lake side of Galilee, in St. Augustine's and Bede's explanation, the suffering of Christ. Sometimes the fish bears on its back in the Catacombs, bread and wine, the ship of the Church, or the elements in two chests ; or, when it is connected with baptism, a little child. When it represents a Christian it hangs on a hook, as if caught by the Apostolic "fishers of men ;" or is attached to the anchor of the cross, or sacred monogram. Sometimes two fish, symbolical of the Churches of the Jew and Gentile, are portrayed. Portable fish were worn as marks of their profession by the newly-baptised." The *Vesica Piscis*, the well-known mystical symbol and form for ancient ecclesiastical seals, although literally "the bladder of the fish," is often used for, and is actually given, as the fish itself ; it was so described by mediæval writers. Emblematically, of course, the symbol is significant of the letters ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthus), a fish just named as containing the initial letters of the titles of our Saviour. It has, therefore, the same general origin as the other emblems of the fish.

The fish itself is often represented on the Sarcophagi of the Early Christians in the Catacombs of Rome, where, in some instances, it occurs in connection with the Sacred Monogram. Of this, Mr. Withrow, in his able work on the Catacombs says—"It is one of the oldest symbols in the entire hieratic cycle. It is found accompanying the first dated inscription which bears any emblem whatever (A.D. 234), and nearly a hundred examples occur which are attributed to the first three centuries. It also occurs in a Christian Catacomb at Alexandria, and at Cyrene, in Upper Egypt ; and is said to be first mentioned by Clement of Alexandria. There appears (he continues) to have been an allusion in this figure to the ordinance of baptism." "We are little fishes," says Tertullian, "in Christ, our great fish. For we are born in water, and can only be saved by continuing therein," *i.e.*, through the spiritual grace of which baptism is the visible sign. "This sign," says Clement, "will prevent men from forgetting their origin ;" and Optatus says—"He [Christ] is that fish which in baptism descends, in answer to prayer, into the baptismal font, so that what was before water, is now called, from the fish (*a pisce*) *piscina*." "This sacred sign was also regarded as an emblem of the sufferings of our Lord, and the benefits of his Atonement. The Saviour, the Son of God, is a fish prepared in His passion, by whose interior remedies we are daily enlightened and fed," says

Prosper of Aquitania; and Augustine—"IXΘΥΣ is the mystical name of Christ, because He descended alive into the depths of this mortal, as into the abyss of waters;" and Jerome—"The fish in whose mouth was the coin paid as tribute money was Christ, at the cost of whose blood all sinners were redeemed." Thus, as Dr. Northcote observes, this symbol became a sacred *tessera*, embodying with wonderful brevity and distinctness a complete abridgment of the Creed, a profession of faith, as it were, to these both in the two natures and unity of person, and in the redemptorial offices of Our Blessed Lord. The three engravings on Plate XVIII., figs. 1 to 4, will show some of the forms of this very common, and more than usually expressive, symbol; and in connection with these I give a representation of a lamp (fig. 5, on the same plate), from the Catacombs. It bears the ichthyic symbol repeated, and on the handle is the sacred monogram of our Lord. I also give a representation, on fig. 6, of a bronze fish bearing the inscription, ω CAIC, Salva ("Save us"), which, taken in conjunction with the fish itself, as hieroglyph of Christ, reads "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, Save us," as an invocation.

It is not needful, however, now to write more upon the fish as a Christian emblem; but I have desired, by the bringing together of these various matters, to show there is an undoubted affinity between it and the fish-emblem of mythological deities.

The *Vesica Piscis* to which I have referred is, as every one is aware, "a pointed oval figure, formed by two equal circles cutting each other in their centres," i.e., it is the same as two right angle triangles, which I have endeavoured to show on Plate XVIII, fig. 7. The half of the figure is, of course, the equilateral pointed arch (fig. 8), which is considered to be the best proportioned of any pointed arch, and is commonly found in the Early English and Decorated styles. It is a "common form given to the Aureole, or Glory, or Nimbus," by which the representation of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, and of our Blessed Lady, are surrounded in the paintings, sculptures, and carvings of the Middle Ages; this will be best understood by referring to fig. 9. The *Vesica* form took the place of the representation of the fish itself (fig. 10), and was used in sculpture, in stained glass, in tile pavements, in illuminated MS., in seals, on wood carvings, and, indeed, in all imaginable ways in Ecclesiastical decoration. It may even, as I have already hinted, have been the origin of the pointed arch itself. Thus to the fish, as a symbol, and the various ramifications of thought to which it has given rise, we owe many of the most interesting features connected with Ecclesiastical architecture, decoration, and history; while to the other fish story, the Mermaid, and its allegories, we are indebted for much curious matter of a far different kind.

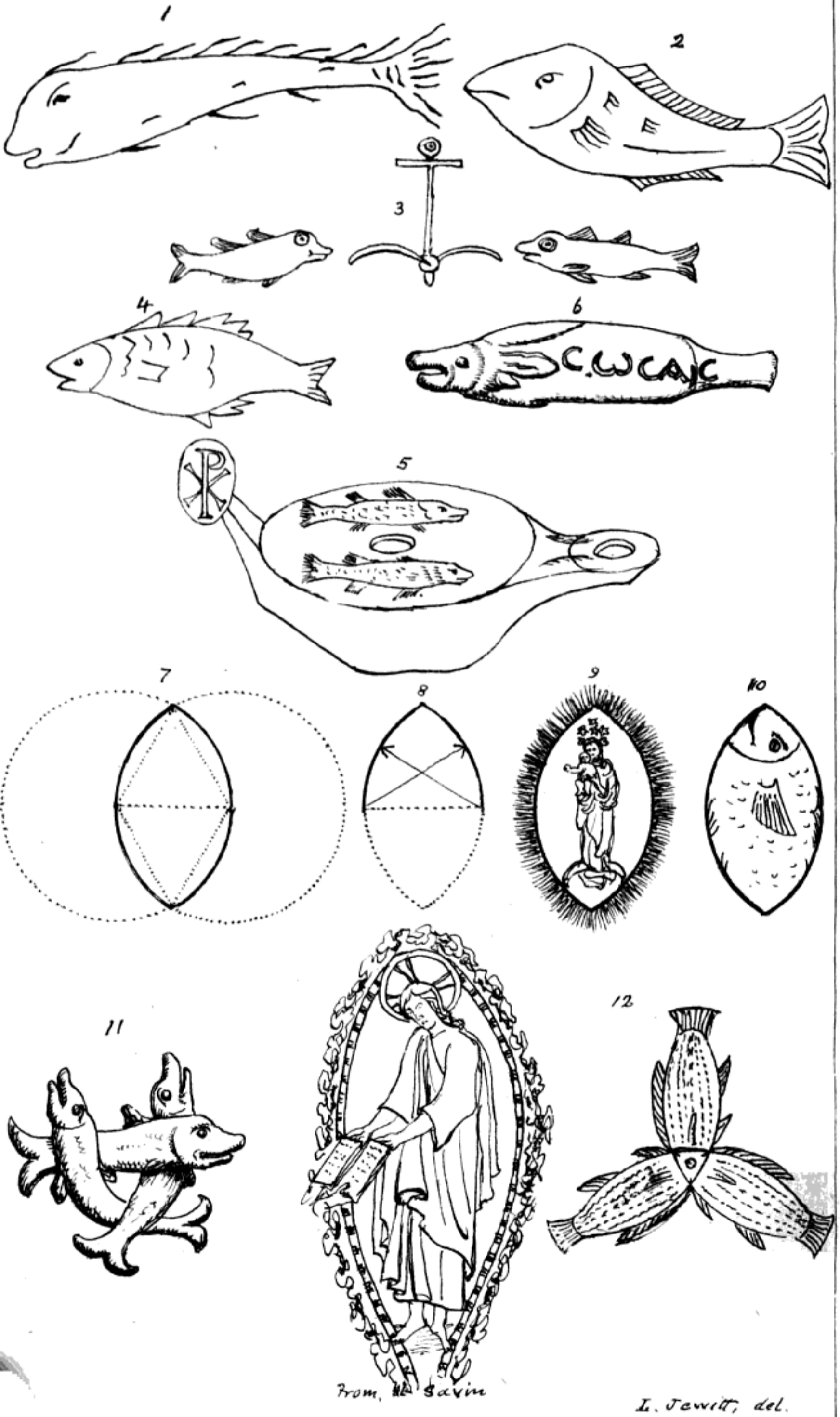
Of the occurrence of the Mermaid in Ecclesiastical decoration, a few words will suffice. It is one of the most common of subjects on the carved misereres of our cathedrals and churches, and is also found sculptured on brackets, bosses, doorways, and capitals of pillars. Of

Mermaids, and their male companions—the Mermen—examples occur on the misereres at Winchester Cathedral, where the male figure grasps a fish in his left hand, while his spouse holds a comb in her left, the right hand of each being elevated; and in one place, at least—Lyons Cathedral—the family ties are completed by the addition of a mer-baby. In this the bearded merman is playing on the fiddle for the amusement of his scaly-tailed wife, who is crowned and very lovingly holds, in true maternal fashion, her child in her arms. At Chichester is a somewhat sad-looking attenuated mermaid, holding a circular mirror in her right hand; and at Exeter is an elegant figure enclosed in a bower of foliage—fig-leaves evidently, as a sly hint of the mediæval artist that they were needful to the nude fish-maiden—in which the lady is gracefully represented as grasping her own tail; another bears a mermaid grasping a fish; and another has a merman and mermaid holding a mirror between them. At Bristol Cathedral, one of the cleverest in drawing and conception of the whole series of misereres, represents a mermaid in an attitude of fear and surprise, both her arms upraised, and hands expanded, while a winged human-headed monster on one side, and a dragon or griffin on the other, are attempting to seize her. At St. Albans is a mermaid with comb and mirror. At Bakewell are a mermaid and merman, the former with mirror and comb, and a foliated tail; and at Boston is a



very peculiar design, representing two men with hoods on their heads, in a boat, who are evidently overcome by the sweet Syren-sounds of the mermaid who, pipe in hand, is seen risen from the sea, and playing close to the stern of the vessel. At Beverley, is a mermaid with a fish; and the side carvings are the "Trinity of fish" (fig. 11), and another design of one fish swallowing another. Another form of "Trinity of fish," formed by intersecting segments of circles, the one central head serving for the triune figure, is shown on fig. 12. To this part of my subject, the mermaid on misereres, I shall again have occasion to refer.

(To be continued).



From, M. Savin

L. Jewitt, del.

Mermaid, and Symbolism of the Fish.