Anyone addicted to detective stories should enjoy the history of art, which offers very close parallels. Unlike detective fiction, however, there is not always a solution at the end of the investigation, since some of the essential clues may be missing. On the other hand, there is one extraordinary advantage for art historians, in that clues may always turn up at a later date, through someone else’s research or the discovery of a new artifact or document, and a stymied investigation may be started afresh, sometimes after a lapse of decades.

One of the most famous cases of the missing central clue is that of the carved medieval alabaster plaques. These small reliefs, measuring about a foot by two feet and depicting the events

1. Calcite font, Mosan, about 1200. Diameter 51 3/4 inches

Purchase, The Cloisters Collection, 47.101.21
of the Passion and the lives of saints, were found all over the continent of Europe in the nineteenth century. As the majority of them seemed to come from France, they were often called French. There was little conviction behind the attribution, however, because the alabaster carvings were in a rather mannered style, with elongated and angular figures that did not fit the stylistic concept of French Gothic sculpture. The alabasters were, as a result, always looked at as a manifestation of low or popular art.

As similar alabasters turned up in Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Italy—even Iceland—each country in turn was vainly considered as a possible source of these peculiar carvings. Almost none of the panels were found in England. In that country, however, were innumerable tombs of alabaster still in situ in churches and connected by documents with quarries and workshops near Nottingham. After many years, it was noticed that some of the English tombs had side panels related in subject and style to the separate plaques found all over Europe, and it suddenly became apparent how well these Continental panels would fit into the history of English medieval art. The missing clue, of course, was the fact that the panels were almost never found in England. This is perhaps a tribute to the thoroughness of Oliver Cromwell and the Protestant wars in that country, which destroyed so many English altarpieces, leaving only exported remnants for the art historian to puzzle over.

The export of works of art from productive centers often tends to confuse the art historian, and where records of workshop activity have been destroyed, the essential clue to identifying the exported material properly is lost. To return to England for a moment, one finds a huge number of medieval baptismal fonts spread far and wide about the country. Many years ago, it was recognized that seven of these fonts, made of very hard blackish limestone, were related to one another. The problem was that they were dispersed along various waterways in regions as far apart as Winchester in the south and Ipswich
and Lincoln in the north. In 1893 Dean Kitchin read a paper on these fonts before the British Archaeological Association, showing them to be un-English when compared to the many others in the country, and suggesting that they had been imported from the Continent. He could not attribute them to any European area on the basis of style, but the stone was so distinctive that he suggested the region of Tournai, where the bluish-black stone is quarried, both to the north and south, along the river Scheldt.

By 1909 this thesis had been generally accepted, and Cecil Eden wrote a book, *Black Tournai Fonts in England*, in which he related the seven English examples to more than forty fonts on the Continent. Some nineteen of these were in the north of France, eleven were in Belgium, and other examples were found in Scandinavia, Holland, and Germany. Nearly all the fonts were located in churches near water routes, which was both logical, as the objects were extremely heavy (and therefore difficult to move except by water) and important as a clue to their source. Along these same waterways, one could show that other products made of the same stone had also traveled. For instance, a tomb of the blackish stone at Mons is signed by a Tournai artist, and the architectural stonework of the churches of Oudenberg, near Bruges, and Nesle, near Amiens, is carved in Tournai stone. The export business in stonework in general, and of fonts in particular, from Tournai in the twelfth century seemed to be established. All the clues had been found.

A dozen writers published further examples and reinforced the theory of a vast industry in Tournai in the twelfth century. Meanwhile, some other writers, notably Dr. Raphael Ligtenberg, had quietly suggested other schools might be involved, and had collected examples of fonts in Holland and Schleswig-Holstein that were generally related to the “Tournai” works. In 1932 Georg Pudelko re-examined the by now huge group of fonts that were widely accepted as coming from Tournai. He felt that both stylistically and structurally the group was not homogeneous. He found many fonts of a stone that was grayer and not quite as dense. He noticed that instead of square bowls supported by a drum and four heavy columns in a thoroughly structural way, some of the fonts were round, and their columns were thin and merely decorative rather than structural. What is more, he discovered that the blacker and sturdier fonts were largely located on tributaries of the Scheldt River, while the grayer ones with less architectural feeling were along water routes issuing from the valley of the Meuse, on the other side of Belgium. Pudelko then wrote a book suggesting that many of the fonts were not Tournai work at all but that they came from the Meuse Valley, probably near Namur, where the largest quarries of gray stone were located. He also discovered, reinforcing this thesis, that fragments of fonts had been excavated in the region of Namur.

A new clue has recently appeared that may help to throw some light on the entire situation. In 1947 the Museum acquired from the Joseph Brummer Collection a font (Figure 1) attributed to Tournai. It is circular and is carved with four stylized heads that project from the sides. Between the heads runs a continuous blind arcade, in which many of the columns rest on bases in the form of animals. The font is carved of a dark gray and very hard limestone called calcite, of a type quarried in the twelfth century between Dinant and Huy.

In building a base for the installation of the
font in the twelfth century apse from Fuentidueña at The Cloisters, it was discovered that
the font was closely related to others, like that at Goesnes in the Meuse Valley, in which the
four columns provided little or no support. Among the fonts with these thinner decorative
columns is one at St. Séverin-en-Condroz, also near the Meuse, in which the number of columns
has been playfully increased to ten. There is a marked distinction between these works and
those more structural examples, as at Zedelghem in western Belgium, or the seven in England,
which are attributed to Tournai. The fonts of Goesnes and St. Séverin are among those that
Pudelko said came from Namur. The bowls of
several of the so-called Namur group—those of
Lesquielles St.-Germain, Chereng, and Archennes—have many features in common with
that of the Cloisters font.

In one detail, however, the Cloisters font dif-
fers from all the others, and this is the clue that
may shed new light on several issues. The arcade (see Figure 2) around the sides is constructed in
a very unusual manner. Above the main arches
of the arcade is a second, superimposed set, sup-
ported on corbels directly above the capitals.

At first glance this looks like an architectural
confusion on the part of the sculptor, as it is a
feature generally unfamiliar in northern Roman-
esque architecture. In Italy, however, this type
of superimposed arch, a kind of restatement or
eyebrow above an arcade, is found in innume-
rible examples. It can be seen in works as early
as the tenth century, such as the apse of Sant’
Eustorgio in Milan; on the façade of San Michele
in Lucca, finished in 1143; and in the gallery by
the architect Giudetto at the Duomo San Mar-
tino (1196-1204). The detail seems to have
grown logically out of the early Christian habit
of outlining arches in an arcade with colored
stone. The later structural system of recessing
the arcade created a more dynamic quality, using
shadow instead of color for the effect.

The detail is seldom seen in the north, and
only then in areas that had considerable artistic
interchange with Italy. There is a long history
of interrelations between the valley of the Rhine
and northern Italy, through trade, politics, and
the mutual large-scale production and exchange
of art objects. One is therefore not surprised to

4 (opposite), 5, 6. Heads from the Cloisters font
find an example of such a recessed arcade on the exterior ambulatory of the apse of St. Gereon in Cologne. In Belgium and Holland, where there is little early medieval architecture still in existence, there are also two examples of this detail. One is in the exterior ambulatory of St. Servatius in Maastricht, dating from the late twelfth century, and the second is the west side of the early thirteenth century cloister at Tongres (Figure 3). The stonework at Tongres shows great similarity to the arcade of the Cloisters font. Not only is the upper arcade placed in the same manner, with the corbels directly above the capitals, but the alternation of plain and animal-headed corbels is nearly identical. In both works, the capitals are uniformly simple.

Both Maastricht, as its name implies, and Tongres lie in the valley of the Meuse, at the opposite end from Namur. The Meuse was famous for enamels and goldsmiths’ work, and in these objects there is certain evidence of influence from the north of Italy. While there is good reason to find the recessed arcade in this area, it does not seem to occur around Tournai in the valley of the Scheldt.

There is another feature also that bears out the relation between northern Italy, parts of the Rhine Valley, the Meuse Valley, and the Cloisters font. This is the love of animal decoration in architecture. Throughout northern Italy, columns, fonts, and arcades are supported on lions, half lions, bears, elephants, and a vast variety of other creatures. This is a tradition rather distinct from that of Spanish and French Romanesque architecture, in which animal decoration was largely restricted to use on capitals. One sees the influence of this northern Italian taste from the cathedral of Basel all the way down the Rhine. The cathedral of Worms is particularly notable for its elephants, lions, and bears on the sills of the apse windows and for the wonderful animal corbels of its arcades. The same feature appears, as noted, in the Tongres cloister and in the lion column supports just below the recessed arcade on the apse of St. Servatius at Maastricht. While the latter monuments illustrate the tendency in the Meuse Valley, it seems quite uncharacteristic of architecture along the Scheldt. Tournai Cathedral, which is the greatest surviving monument of the Scheldt school, is virtually animal-less, and the fonts attributed to Tournai, such as those of East Meon and St. Mary in Bourne, are carved with arcades having simple bases and capitals.

The similarity of architectural detail on the Cloisters font with that on buildings in the lower Meuse Valley, where the river crosses the border between Belgium and Holland, leads one to a consideration of the late twelfth century style of depicting figures in the same area. In more monumental works such as the Majestas Domini tympanum of St. Servatius in Maastricht or the apostle figures from St. Odilienberg now in the Rijksmuseum, one can see only a family resemblance. The heads on the font (Figures 4, 5, 6) are treated in a powerful but rather summary fashion. The lightly incised hair fits over each one in a sort of tight cap, but is then swept back in a mass projecting beyond the skull. The beard
is strongly stylized into a frame for the face and sweeps down from the ears to the line of the mouth. Drooping mustaches cut through this framing line. The nearly round eyes are large, pupil-less, and ringed with stylized eye sockets. The ears are perhaps the most peculiar features of all, being attached sideways at the top of the beard.

There is one work in Maastricht itself that is very closely related to these heads. It is a relief in the façade of the Liebfrauenkirche (Figure 8). The miter-shaped plaque contains four figures and depicts the taking of an oath, interpreted as an oath of allegiance to Frederick II. It is dated in the decade prior to Frederick’s coronation as German king in 1215. In the right background, the head of the witness with his hand on his beard is treated in much the same manner as those on the font. The head shape is similar, the hair cap fits in the same way, and the hair is lightly incised. The eyes, though oval and drilled to indicate the pupil, are surrounded by a similar stylized socket. While the ears are placed correctly on the head, the beard makes the same sharp frame for the face as do those on the font, and the drooping mustaches are similar.

Ligtenberg has pointed out that while this oath relief is in a boldly stylized technique departing somewhat from the more monumental work on the Liebfrauenkirche or on St. Servatius, the sculptor was somewhat of an innovator, working on a secular subject without a tradition to fall back upon. While his work seems less impressive than some of the more conventional sculpture in Maastricht, it helps to show a continued originality in the sculpture of the Meuse Valley until at least the first quarter of the thirteenth century. The Cloisters font reinforces this idea, for there is a considerable freedom and inventiveness in its design.

The adaptation of contemporary architectural modes, both in the use of the recessed double arcade and the animal bases and corbels, is the most striking feature of this inventiveness. The animals themselves are imaginatively handled. One bearish animal (Figure 7) that serves as the base of a column, for instance, has been carved with his paw stretched out to rest on the projecting column next to him. This freedom of interpretation is seen also in the leaning columns and fudged arches beneath the projecting heads, as well as in the strange placing of the ears to fit in with the flying mop of hair and the stylized lines of the beard. The sculptor obviously had a thorough knowledge of local conventions, yet worked with a great deal of spontaneity. One would suspect that he worked outside a large workshop where conventions would have been more likely adhered to. Wherever this was, it was surely not far from Maastricht and in the valley of the Meuse.

The fonts of the late Romanesque period are all more or less of a size. They average about three and a half feet in height and are about a yard wide, the bowl being usually a foot or so deep. The baptismal service of the period called for immersion, a rite ordinarily performed in early infancy. Although illuminated manuscripts of the period sometimes show adults being immersed, such illustrations (see Figure 9) usually depict the conversion of heathens, and except for such conversions, adult baptism is rare. The more common scene is that shown in the Museum’s Sacraments tapestries, dating from the mid-fifteenth century, in which a child is shown being immersed in a typical font.

8. Oath of allegiance to Frederick II, relief from the Liebfrauenkirche, Maastricht, Holland, 1205-1215.
However, as churches were unheated, and baptism was recommended soon after birth, immersion was obviously a dangerous process, especially in winter. In the mid-thirteenth century, therefore, the procedure was changed to infusion, or touching of the forehead with water. This in turn affected font design, and Gothic fonts tend to be considerably smaller in dimensions and at the same time taller, as infants no longer had to be lifted into them. The Cloisters font shows a step in the change from the massive immersion fonts of Tournai to those with shallower bowls and decorative columns more usual in the Meuse Valley. The latest examples of this group omit the columns altogether and the four heads project unsupported into the air, a convention carried on into Gothic work.

The transitional stage in the design of fonts comes roughly at the end of the twelfth century, and this, considered with the dates of the cloister at Tongres, the apse of St. Servatius, and the oath relief from the Liebfrauenkirche, indicates a date about the year 1200 for the font.

As a new clue in a long investigation, the font helps to invigorate the thesis put forward by Pudelko and Ligtenberg that a distinct sculptural school existed in the Meuse Valley. At the same time it suggests that Namur may not have been the only other center besides Tournai producing fonts, and will allow in the future a wider re-evaluation of the fonts and other works attributed to Tournai shops. It may also in a minor way help with the architectural history of the Meuse area and add to our knowledge of sculpture on the Dutch border at the turn of the thirteenth century.

REFERENCES
Georg Pudelko Romanische Taufsteine (Berlin, 1932).

9. St. Denis Baptizing (left), illumination from the Life of St. Denis showing immersion in a Romanesque font, about 1250
Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 1098, fol. 37v