

**The Romanesque Disgorging Green Man
and His Companions:
a heretic, some good guys, some bad guys, no pagans**

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Introduction

The original intentions of this paper were to dispel the wrong-minded view that the Romanesque Green Man is a pagan (or 'pre-Christian') image, and to introduce the proposition that this image and its companion images are in fact the campaign of the late-11th and 12th century Western Church against the rampant new heresy of the time, Catharism. As work progressed, it became obvious that it is appropriate also to distinguish the radical difference between the Romanesque Green Man group of images and the foliate-head Green Man image. The foliate-head image remains unresolved, leaving us in a position where all we really know about it is that it is indeed a pagan image that has a long progeny, its earliest known home being Roman temples. The dissociation of this image from concepts like Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood, Sir Gawain and the Green had also to be carried out, if only briefly.

The more important distinction (one I encountered only recently, in correspondence with Mr Mark Phythian-Adams, Warden at St Mary's Church, Iffley) is that between the Romanesque Green Man images and a group of living-creature images, the purpose of which is representation of the tenets of the Salvation Plan, an important medieval theology. Very important though those theological images are in the Romanesque church, I can do no more than point them out. That much has to be done, for the theological images are commonly, but quite wrongly, assumed to be either in the same group of images as the Romanesque Green Man, or eccentric 'unknowns'.

The practical outcome of this multi-focusing was a very crowded paper. To give that crowding some order, this paper proceeds in five parts: Part 1 makes the point that the Romanesque Green Man images are not 'pagan' or 'pre-Christian'; Part 2 conducts a (light-weight) distinguishing of the imagery, themes and symbols of medieval theology; Part 3 discusses the origins and functions of the Romanesque Green Man group of images; Part 4 proposes that the Romanesque Green Man image represents the heretic; Part 5 picks up the 'pagan' fallacy once more, points out the error of associating the foliate-head Green Man with folkloric images, and comments briefly on the scholarship on the Romanesque Green Man theme.

PART 1: NO PAGAN IMAGERY IN THE ROMANESQUE GREEN MAN CONTEXT

The ‘ridiculous monstrosities’ of St Bernard of Clairvaux

The *Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem* (1124-1125) of St Bernard of Clairvaux contains this enlightening passage (translated by Conrad Rudolph):

... in the cloisters, before the eyes of brothers while they read — what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity ...? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? ... Everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in books ... If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one not at least troubled by the expense?¹

Here, St Bernard names ‘monstrosities’, a concept familiar at least since Virgil’s *Aeneid* (29-19 BC) and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (c.8 AD). (Dunstan Lowe conducts an engaging discussion of those monstrosities.)² The ‘monstrosities’ St Bernard sees must have been images of the Romanesque disgorging Green Man and his companions: he would not have called the theological images ‘ridiculous monstrosities’. Notably, he does not see among those images the gods of Olympus or Walhalla, nor the Celtic or Norse gods, nor any rituals that associate with them. So ‘pagan heresy’ does not even occur to him. Yet he was never slow at spotting the threat of heresy. He was the foremost actor in the combatting of the deleterious effects of prominent heretics on sections of the laity, and even on members of the clergy.³ A stickler for orthodoxy, he censured heresy even in Peter Abelard’s novel philosophical approach to theology, and drove him into retirement and obscurity.⁴ Certainly, St Bernard saw a certain frivolity in the images he describes, but nothing at all that might suggest the pagan revanchist

¹ Conrad Rudolph, 1990, ‘The Things of Greater Importance’: Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Apologia* and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art, University of Pennsylvania Press, 282.

² Dunstan Lowe, 2015, *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry*, University of Michigan Press.

³ Stephen O’Shea, 2000, *The Perfect Heresy*, Profile Books, 29-30; Michael Frassetto, 2007, *Heretic Lives: Medieval Heresy from Bogomil and the Cathars to Wyclif and Hus*, Profile Books, p.42.

⁴ Karyn Louise Jolly, 1997, *Tradition & Diversity: Christianity in a World Context to 1500*, ME Sharp, 369-370.

sneaking images of pagan deities and rituals into the churches of Western Europe.

It is inconceivable that neither St Bernard nor anyone else noticed that, from the late-11th century and throughout the 12th century, the churches of Western Europe were displaying pagan images. We must therefore conclude that at the time no-one mistook the images of the Romanesque Green Man and his companions for pagans. Indeed, their being mistaken for pagans is nothing other than a contemporary grabbing of the wrong end of the stick.

A pagans-tolerant Church?

I have heard it argued, even by people whose opinions I normally value, that it was Church policy to refrain from suppressing pagan images while a society is in the process of adopting Christianity. This was not so, as the letter from Pope Gregory I (590-604) to Abbot Mellitus confirms:

Tell Augustine that he should by no means destroy the temples of the gods but rather the idols within those temples. Let him, after he has purified them with holy water, place altars and relics of the saints in them. For, if those temples are well built, they should be converted from the worship of demons to the service of the true God. Thus, seeing that their places of worship are not destroyed, the people will banish error from their hearts and come to places familiar and dear to them in acknowledgement and worship of the true God.⁵

But the ‘pagans’ argument would run clean off the rails even without this revealing letter, for that argument is fatally flawed unless at least one of the putative unsuppressed pagan images it proposes is pointed out, and its pagan legacy is identified. None has ever been pointed out, for the simple reason that none can be, because there is none. And therein lies the fatal fallacy. (Also, it is as well to remember that the Church that introduced the Romanesque Green Man images was a good half-millennium beyond Britain’s Christianising period, and that the Christianising of Western Europe occurred several centuries earlier.)

Besides, we cannot say sensibly that the monstrosities that are the Romanesque Green Man and his companions are pagan images. Our saying that would entail that the gods of Olympus and Walhalla and of the Celts were monstrosities. But we have exactly no rational grounds for positing that, since the pantheons of the pre-Christian deities are rather well known, and none of them was ever portrayed

⁵ Pope Gregory I, ‘Letter to Abbot Mellitus’, *Epsitola* 76, *PL* 77: 1215-1216, <https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/greg1-mellitus.txt>

as a monstrosity. This fact makes it all the more surprising that so many people have for so long supposed that they are looking at pagan images when they survey the Romanesque Green Man and his companions (and other medieval symbols). This supposition is a radical misunderstanding in church studies that has to be corrected.

Unfortunately, not many contemporary medievalists are working to effect that correction. That makes Ronald Hutton's work all the more valuable: He describes the Romano-Celtic deities of Britain's Roman Empire period (43-410 AD), of which images abound on coins and shrines.⁶ He notes also that no images are known for certain⁷ to be the deities of the pagan period of the Anglo-Saxons (early 5th century, thereafter rapidly giving way to Christianity). So the position is this: No sentimental reversion to any of the many known Celtic images is discernible among the Romanesque Green Man and his companions; and no Anglo-Saxon images have been identified, despite the strenuous efforts that Hutton describes to find one, so there cannot have been any sneaky reversion to them in the medieval churches of Britain. In any case, those images are not unique to Britain; they are everywhere in the churches of 12th century Western Europe. And surely no-one is suggesting that there was a collective Western European front of sentimental revanchist sculptors/patrons who got together to fill Romanesque churches with Roman-Anglo-Norman-Celtic-Saxon images. So much for the 'pagan images' and 'pre-Christian images' twaddle!

The political climate: very unhealthy for heretics

Even a cursory glance at the late-11th and 12th century *zeitgeist* cannot but confirm that the Church would not have been tolerant of the brazen heretic who suddenly takes to filling Western European churches with pagan images. The times were much too tense for tolerance of anything short of the orthodox Church position. The Great Schism, the split of the Greek-speaking Eastern Christian Church and the Latin-speaking Western Christian Church, had already happened in 1054. But the Church had detected heretical thinking well before then, and had dealt with it very harshly: in Ravenna in 970; in France in 1000, 1022, 1025; in Italy in 1028, and in Germany in 1048. (See Frassetto⁸ and Wakefield & Evans.⁹)

In short, the supremacy of the Roman Church had been challenged in various ways since the turn of the 10th century, and by the rapid

⁶ Ronald Hutton, 1991, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*, Blackwell, 201- 257.

⁷ *Ibid.* 265-274.

⁸ Michael Frassetto, 2007, *Heretic Lives: Medieval Heresy from Bogomil and the Cathars to Wycliffe and Hus*, Profile Books, 7-55.

⁹ Walter L Wakefield and Austin P Evans, 1991. *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, Columbia University Press 129-131, 244.

rise of the Bogomil-inspired Cathars from the mid-11th century. (Jonathan Sumption's brilliant work offers an account of the theological and ethical bases of Catharism, and of Cathar activity. So does Andrew Phillip Smith's work.)¹⁰ The aggressive heretical activity of those years accelerated throughout the 12th century, threatening another schism (this time in the heart of Western Europe), and was made very dangerous by the reacting Church authorities and the overwhelming majority of the secular nobility loyal to them:

In parts of France, immoral or married clergymen were threatened by mobs...the growing ... wealth of the church provoked bitter protest and...armed rebellion. Tanchhelm raised a fanatical following in Antwerp by preaching against the lax morals of the local clergy...he was murdered by a priest.¹¹...violent outbursts of anti-clericalism in Italy...in 1143 the pope's temporal dominion was seized. (That pope was Nicholas Breakspear. 'It would be eight years before he returned to the Lateran Palace.')12 The leader, Arnold of Brescia, was captured in 1152 and executed by the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa...In the mid-1160s the Cathars of the northern towns...were unwise enough to flee to Cologne, where they were promptly detected and burned. Another group of Flemish exiles turned up in the west of England, only to be branded on the forehead and driven naked into the winter snow. But the greater majority of the fugitives...fled to Lombardy and Languedoc [*where*] the nobility had little reason to cooperate with the church...by the end of the 12th century an entrenched heretical church faced the orthodox hierarchy...on equal terms. The Albigensian crusade [*1209-1229*] was the outcome.¹³

I propose that it is nothing short of reasonable to assume that the Church had its propaganda works in motion well ahead of this

¹⁰ Jonathan Sumption, 1979, *The Albigensian Crusade*, Faber & Faber, 32-36; Andrew Phillip Smith, 2015, *The Lost Teachings of the Cathars: Their Beliefs & Practices*, Watkins Media Ltd.

¹¹ Sumption, note 10, 37.

¹² O'Shea, note 3, 28.

¹³ Sumption, note 10, 37-42.

outcome. After all, the 11th century had given it plenty of experience of the heretical threat.

The newcomer is not a familiar monstrosity

Interestingly, in his comment quoted above, St Bernard does not point out the cat-faced disgorging. Did he simply not notice it, or was cat-face too new a 'monstrosity' in 1125 for easy reference? Indeed, he sees 'filthy apes' and 'fierce lions', that is, the familiar monstrosities. But there are neither apes nor lions among the Romanesque Green Man's companions! Is St Bernard playing naive here?

St Bernard could well have been acting out a mock condemnation of these images: No genuine, fulsome intention to condemn is likely to make its subject alluring, as St Bernard does with 'Everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in books'. To my mind, his condemnation reads very much like covert recommendation. And this amounts to at least an indication that St Bernard's 'monstrosities' had his imprimatur, and therefore the imprimatur of the Church authorities. Short of such an imprimatur, these images would have disappeared rapidly from Romanesque churches, just as the Roman foliate-head had disappeared from Trier Cathedral. (More on this below.) But, instead of making them disappear, every Romanesque church in Western Christendom carried them as prominent friezes. Certainly, the Church authorities could not have failed to see them. Just as certainly, therefore, they did not take them to be heretical pagan images; they knew what these images were up to!

PART 2: THE SYMBOLS OF MEDIAEVAL CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY ARE NOT 'ROMANESQUE GREEN MAN' IMAGES

The symbols of mediaeval Christian theology

The Romanesque Green Man and his companions are far from alone in the menagerie of the Romanesque church. And, unlike another group of images in that menagerie (the symbols of a mediaeval theology), the Romanesque Green Man appeared only at the turn of the 11th century, and was gone after the 12th century. That is, it did not make it into the Gothic church. Also unlike the theological images, the Romanesque Green Man and his companions have very little function as theological illuminators. These two groups are unlike also in that the theological symbols are living creatures, not composite beasts like the cat-faced Romanesque Green Man and his companions.

Correspondence (late September 2016) with Mark Phythian-Adams alerted me to the existence of a wealth of Romanesque images that are in fact illuminations of concepts of the medieval theology known collectively as the Salvation Plan. The symbols of those illuminations include:

bird-and-snake, where Christ is the bird and the devil the snake, representing the triumph of good over evil;

horse-and-rider, where the rider is the soul and the horse the human body, carries moral edicts about keeping the body mindful of the good of the soul;

centaur-family, depicting sexual licentiousness and gluttony, is a reminder to mankind to temper the physical appetites. This mythical figure, rather than human figures, was the tactfully preferred symbol here, given the salacious subject-matter.

symbols of the Evangelists, such as the Man of St Matthew (and sometimes Angel or Lion) and the Eagle of St John (and sometimes Lion), speak of the stages and facets of the Salvation Plan.

We have one bird-and-snake image at Canterbury Cathedral, two horse-and-rider images, and one Evangelist image. The bird in the bird-and-snake image below is definitely an eagle. And an eagle is a 'living-creature', not a monstrosity. As such, it is not one of the Romanesque Green Man's companions. Yet here, the snake-killing eagle on the West face is sharing a capital with two manticores (one on the South face and the other on the North face) and a snake-killing griffin on the East face. (This point will be taken up again, below):



Fig. 1: Eagle killing a snake, West face of capital, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

The one Evangelist image at Canterbury, a concerned-looking man with a handsome beard, appears on all four faces of the capital on

the column exactly where the glass wall of the Treasury dissects the Crypt, on the northern side of the centre isle:



Fig. 2: An Evangelist, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

Which Evangelist he is depends on which Church Father's taxonomy we follow. The odds are that he is St Matthew. Dr Felix Just SJ makes an interesting study of this taxonomy:

http://catholic-resources.org/Art/Evangelists_Symbols.htm#Irenaeus.

The horse-and-rider symbol is on the capital of the column immediately opposite the Evangelist, on the south side of the isle:



Fig. 3: Horse-and-rider, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral

This symbol, on the West face of the capital, is very like the one on its East face. That suggests that the two images are of the same horse-and-rider pair. The plot thickens, though, for on the North face, we have this image:



Fig 4: Satan attacked by a creature, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

Satan is instantly recognisable, the creature biting him less so. On the South face of this capital, that same creature is trying to gain control of the rope that, presumably, had once tethered the horse of the rider on the West face: It seems that this horse/body needs tethering again:



Fig. 5: Creature securing a horse's tethering rope, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

This is the same creature that, on the North face, is biting Satan. But what is it? A dog, a powerful one – a hound? In the light of the connotations of the horse-and-rider symbol, it is protecting the soul and body from Satan, and therefore seeking to take control of the horse (body) by means of the tethering rope. Is this hound, as is the dog in the context of the Romanesque Green Man, the good pastor? Indeed, if we recall the eagle killing a snake and its theological symbolism: Christ defeating Satan/good conquering bad, and if we note that the East face of the capital that carries this eagle is showing the Romanesque Green Man image of the griffin killing a reptile:



Fig. 6: Griffin killing a reptile, East face of capital, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

are we feeling that we are being invited to let the symbolism of the two groups (of the Romanesque Green Man group and the mediaeval theology group) conflate somewhat, at least for this one instructive purpose? Supporting this possibility is the presence of the eagle in the Romanesque Green Man group: it is sharing a capital with that group. Yet the eagle, a living creature, is not part of the latter group's menagerie. Did the sculptor/patron intentionally associate the two groups here, and on the horse-and-rider capital? We *are* on complicated terrain!

It was very instructive to learn from Mr Phythian-Adams that the symbols of medieval theological thinking are just one group in the images that adorn the doorways of St Mary's Church, Iffley. Despite his many years of passionate engagement in the study of these doorways' images, he still thinks it beyond him to understand the connotations of all of them. I am very grateful to him for this insight into the complexity of the imagery in Romanesque churches.

PART 3: WHO AND WHAT IS THE ROMANESQUE GREEN MAN, AND WHO ARE HIS COMPANIONS?

Where did cat-face and his companions spring from?

Mercia MacDermott explores the European pre-Christian images that are commonly proposed as the cat-faced disgorgers' (the Romanesque Green Man's) possible ancestors: the Titan Okeanus, the Medusa (Gorgon), the Roman god Silvanus, Dionysus/Bacchus, the Roman-times images of the Celtic god Cernunnus, the Gaulish hammer-god Sucellus, and 'the much older Celtic stone heads found

in southern Germany and uninfluenced by Roman art'.¹⁴ But she dismisses them all:

Have you ever seen a Green Man with antlers? Or a Roman, Greek, Celtic, or even Egyptian deity who disgorges foliage? No? In that case, we need to do some serious re-thinking ... In order to get back onto the right track, we have to reject the popular but anachronistic idea that the Green Man was smuggled into churches by recalcitrant, underground pagans. There is no evidence of any appreciable survival of paganism in Western Europe at the time when the first known Green Men were created, let alone of the presence of active, militant pagans in a position to influence patrons, architects and masons in the numerous dioceses where Green Men appear in monasteries and cathedrals.¹⁵

MacDermott's is indeed a very pleasing dissing of the historically untenable tenet that the Romanesque disgorging Green Man and his companions are pagan (sometimes prettied up as 'pre-Christian'!) images. It is high time to abandon it, as much in the interest of good sense as in favour of an informed investigation of the place of these images in Church history. Clearly, it is nonsense to speak of these images, their having appeared in Western European churches only in the late-11th century and never seen in any prior time or context, as 'pre-Christian' or 'pagan'.

Origin of the Romanesque disgorging Green Man image

Mercia MacDermott shows us a promising route to identifying the Romanesque disgorging Green Man: In search of the likely progenitor of this 12th century European disgorging head, one that has 'a feline or monstrous full-face ... disgorging long "beaded" stems, and often flowers and "fir cones" as well',¹⁶ MacDermott turns to India, and spots the *kirtimukha* and the *makara*, monstrosities of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, and recognises in them the pictorial ancestors of the disgorging Romanesque Green Man.

The ***kirtimukha*** is a face, fierce and suggestive of a lion or some kind of monster, with large bulging eyes and a wide mouth, often lacking a lower jaw, from which emerges what appears sometimes

¹⁴ Mercia MacDermott, 2003, *Explore Green Men*, Heart of Albion Press, 158-162.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 163.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 168.

to be foliage, sometimes flowers, sometimes ribbons strung with beads, and sometimes curling foam or smoke.¹⁷



Fig. 7: Kirtimukha

Kirtimukha ... has a lion's snarling face with fearsome bulging eyes, tongue hanging out, bared teeth, and occasionally a pair of horns ... In the legend, when a vainglorious king had the temerity to lay claim on Siva's beautiful wife, a terrible demon issued fully-formed from the wrathful god's third eye ... On the god's orders, it ate its own body until only the head remained ...

The Hindu, 22 January 2011

The **makara** combines the features of several creatures, including the crocodile, elephant, and fish or dolphin' ... the makara was believed to disgorge wonderful things, among them the Cosmic Tree or Wish-fulfilling Tree, usually depicted as a kind of vine or tendril derived from the sacred lotus plant, combined with strings of pearls.¹⁸



Fig.8: Makara

Master sculptor Ganapati Sthapati describes makara as a mythical animal with the body of a fish, trunk of an elephant, feet of a lion, eyes of a monkey, ears of a pig, and the tail of a peacock.

The Hindu, 22 January 2011

Of course, we cannot associate the Romanesque disgorging Green Man with a revanchist or newly risen Hindu/Buddhist paganism: That makes no sense in a medieval European context, where there

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 171-172.

was no Hindu/Buddhist past or present. The image of the Romanesque disgorging Green Man was custom-made in late-11th century Western Europe for the job it had to do there. The kirtimukha and makara were just the design models that influenced his unique appearance. (Curiously though, MacDermott notes that Millard B Rogers¹⁹ makes the point that the makara and kirtimukha actually do ‘appear on the majority of the French and Spanish churches built during the 12th century, but not on earlier Romanesque churches’.)²⁰

The Romanesque disgorging Green Man’s companions

On an aphoristic logic, the company you keep, and the role you play in that company, reveals who you are. So a necessary line of investigation is clearly the one that identifies the Romanesque disgorging Green Man’s companions. The following are the typical ones, on Mercia MacDermott’s descriptions. Of course, their illustrations have many styles. The examples that follow attempt to represent their essential features, and the statements they aim to make:

acrobats are socially dubious, subversive people in improbably ridiculous poses:



Fig. 9: An acrobat, Church of St Peter in Aulnay de Saintonge, Poitou, France.

(Canterbury Cathedral’s acrobats are shown in Fig. 29.)

amphisbaena, a reptile with a head at each end; suggests perversion, the unsavoury, wickedness, the devil:

¹⁹ Millard B Rogers, ‘An Archaeological Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: Romanesque ornamentation of the 12th century suggests the probability of Indian influence’, *Science*, No. 131, 1176-1182.

²⁰ MacDermott, note 14, 178.



Fig 10: Amphisbaena, Church of St Mary of el Puerto, Santona, Cantabria, Spain.

griffin (Scythian): a winged creature with an eagle's head and an animal's body, sometimes that of a horse:



Fig. 11: Griffin, Cathedral of Bitonto, Apulia, Italy.

and sometimes that of a lion:

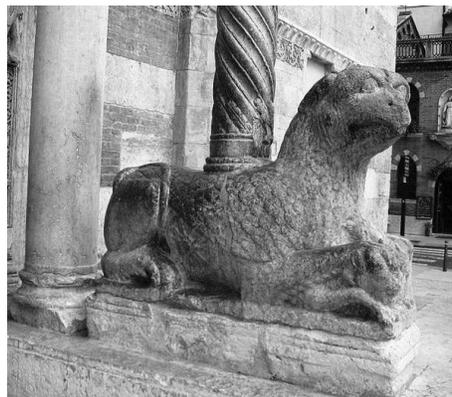


Fig. 12: Griffin seated in the Porch of the Duomo, Verona, Italy.

(Canterbury Cathedral's besieged griffin is shown in Fig. 31. The reptile-killing one is shown in Fig. 6.)

manticore (Persian): head of a man, body of a lion, three rows of teeth on each jaw, poisoned spines on tails, fleet-footed; the Persian word means ‘man eater’; in mediaeval times, it was associated with Satan:



Fig. 13: Manticore, Church of St-Pierre de Chauvigny, Poitou-Charentes, France.



Fig. 14: Manticore, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral
(Another Canterbury Cathedral manticore is shown in Fig. 31.)

sheela-na-gig (reputedly, a corruption of the Irish term for ‘loose woman’): this image is a repulsive female representation that came to England from Spain, on pilgrim routes. The generic term is ‘exhibitionist’, or ‘siren’, and includes the male version. In the 12th century, this figure is never a fertility symbol. Without doubt, the best known sheela-na-gig is the Kilpeck one:



Fig. 15: Sheela-na-gig, Church of Sts Mary and David, Kilpeck, Hertfordshire.

But there are much less bawdy ones:



Fig. 16: Sheela-na-gig, or siren, Monastery of St Mary of Tirgo, Salvador, Spain.

wolf woman/she-devil is fearsome: bringer of war, mayhem; destroyer of the social order:



Fig. 17: Wolf Woman, Abbey of Maria Laach, near Andernach, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany.
(Canterbury Cathedral's wolf-woman is shown in Fig. 31.)

wyvern: two-legged winged dragon, apparently the good pastor of the medieval Church.



Fig. 18: Wyverns on a tombstone, Church of St Mary, Bridlington, Yorkshire, East Riding.



Fig. 19: Wyvern relaxing, Holy Innocents' Chapel, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

(Canterbury Cathedral's other wyverns appear in the Crypt, St Gabriel's Chapel, and in St Anselm's Chapel in the Chancel.

See Figs 21, 24, 25 and 26.)

The answer to 'what is he?' about the Romanesque Green Man is simple: He is a cat face (sometimes very humanoid) with bulging cheeks and protruding eyes, disgorging vine stems (mostly bare of leaves) and/or beaded strands of ribbon:



Fig. 20: Romanesque Green Man, Holy Innocents' Chapel, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

(See the other Canterbury Cathedral cat-faced Romanesque Green Man images in Figs 26, 27, 29.)

But 'who is he?' takes a little more telling, for he is the image that very probably represents the heretic.

PART 4: THE POINT AND PURPOSE OF THE ROMANESQUE DISGORGING GREEN MAN IMAGERY IS THE COMBATING OF HERESY

The cat and the disgorging Romanesque Green Man as heretics

Why would a cat be thought to represent the heretic? A most useful suggestion comes from Stephen O'Shea:

Their [*the Cathars*] name, once thought to mean 'the pure', is not their own invention. Cathar is now taken as a twelfth-century German play on words implying a cat worshipper. It was long bruited about that Cathars performed the so-called obscene kiss on the rear end of a cat.²¹

Irina Metzler's scintillating article attributes (citing Beryl Roland)²² the 'rear end kissing'²³ accusation to Pope Gregory IX. This is part of Metzler's ingenious tracing of 'the origins of using cat symbolism in the denouncement of heretics'.²⁴ From her claim that 'Alan of Lille (c.1182-1202) was the medieval author who first linked cats

²¹ O'Shea, note 3, 13.

²² Beryl Rowland, 1974, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*, George Allen & Unwin, 51. ²³ Irina Metzler, 'Heretical Cats: Animal Symbolism in Religious Discourse', Vol. 59, *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, 2009, 23.

²³ Irina Metzler, 'Heretical Cats: Animal Symbolism in Religious Discourse', Vol. 59, *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, 2009, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 16.

with one group of heretics in particular, the Cathars...’,²⁵ she proceeds to offer a fascinating body of etymological evidence²⁶ that fully vindicates O’Shea’s claim that an associative German play on words is chiefly responsible for the term ‘Cathar’: ‘the lexical link between cat (*Katze*) and heretic (*Ketzer*)’.²⁷ So ‘Cathar’ is a pejorative term, not the self-naming of the so called. Clearly enough, given the politics of the times, a major job of the Romanesque disgorging Green Man was to conflate ‘Cathar’ and ‘heretic’ by playing the heretic role in the narratives carved on prominent surfaces in late-11th to 12th century churches. Incidentally, Kathleen Basford had in fact distinguished the Romanesque disgorging Green Man from the foliate-head one:

... they must be recognised as distinct types ... and can be interpreted in accordance with the text: *See, how they hold the branch to the nose*, Ezekiel 8.17, and allude to the idolaters to whom God should show no mercy ... The most common variant of the human mask is the cat mask.²⁸

And Basford’s 1978 position came very close to seeing the heretic in the Romanesque disgorging Green Man.

Playing monks

It is difficult to resist interpreting the carvings on the capitals in Canterbury Cathedral once one has to hand the *dramatis personae* that Mercia MacDermott provides. (*The Book of Beasts*²⁹ is also handy.) But then, resistance is unnecessary: As St Bernard of Clairvaux observes, those carvings are there to be read: ‘one would rather read in the marble than in books’. So bits of my own readings follow, only a little apologetically:

At Canterbury Cathedral we see the Romanesque disgorging Green Man with his companions in St Gabriel’s and St Anselm’s chapels. Among the beasts Mercia MacDermott names, the wyvern is explicitly a good guy. In St Anselm’s Chapel, a wyvern is supporting a monk’s chair and desk, and the monk himself, on its wings:

²⁵ *Ibid.* 25.

²⁶ Malcolm Jones, 2003, *The Secret Middle Ages*, Praeger Publishers, 39-40; Nicholas J. Saunders, 1991, *The Cult of the Cat*, Thames & Hudson, 69; and several German commentators.

²⁷ Metzler, note 23, 25.

²⁸ Kathleen Basford, 1978, *The Green Man*, DS Brewer, 13.

²⁹ TH White, 1984, *Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, Dover Publication Inc.



Fig. 21: Monk's desk supported by a wyvern, St Anselm's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.

Since this image is on the marble surround of Archbishop Meopham's tomb, and, of course, in Archbishop Anselm's own chapel, there is a strong suggestion that this supportive wyvern represents them, the good pastors who had looked after their flocks. There was an even more solicitous wyvern in mid-12th century Germany. This one makes a monk's chair of its back, a desk of its tail fins, and a back-rest of its neck and ears:



Fig. 22: Monk seated on a wyvern, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

But the wyvern (the good pastor) will mete out punishment too, when it is due: Two dogs halt the exhibitionist antics of the cat-eared person (male sheela-na-gig?) on the East face of the central capital in St Gabriel's Chapel:



Fig. 23: Male sheela-na-gig, Crypt,
St Gabriel's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.

The images on this capital were made in 1110, or, at the latest, in 1120: Uwe Geese, 'Romanesque sculpture', in *Romanesque Architecture, Sculpture and Painting*, Rolf Toman (ed.), HF Ullman 2014, p. 320.

The two dogs are there to help him, not to harm him. As Irina Metzler tells us, dogs are by nature good guys, inclined to look after everyone, even cats/heretics:

... the dog is on the side of orthodoxy and order in medieval minds. The well-known comparison of the Dominicans with *domini canes*, the watch dogs of the Lord, is a case in point. The notion of the dog guarding and even admonishing the sinner is sometimes presented graphically in counterpoint to the cat,³⁰ which was 'often used as a symbol of heresy'.³¹

David Taylor has another interpretation: On this capital, where the good dogs discipline the 'naked free spirit', the narrative warns against the Brethren of the Free Spirit (Adamites) heresy that resurfaced in Germany in the early 14th century:

Could it be that the Green Man carvings that we find on medieval churches were indeed commissioned by the church to show the tortured face of a heretical messiah as a warning to the masses about the sins of the flesh and the presumed sins of the Adamites in particular?³²

³⁰ Metzler, note 23, 28.

³¹ Janetta Rebold Benton, 1992, *The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages*, Abbeville Press, 93.

³² David Taylor, 'Medieval Heretics and the Green Man', published at Belthane, 2000, <<<http://www.whitedragon.org.uk/articles/greenman.htm>>>

On the South face, we see a wyvern with a harp and a good dog with a flute demonstrate the salubrious fun available in making sublime music. (Or is that not a 'good dog' at all, but cat-ears trying to look like one, just as the Cathars and the 11th-century heretics were accused of merely giving the semblance of being Christians?):



Fig. 24: Musical dog and wyvern, Crypt, St Gabriel's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.

But, as we are soon to see, cat-ears declines to become a maker of sublime music: So, on the West face of this capital, the time has come to separate the goats from the sheep: A vielle-holding ram is shocked by the obscene trumpet sound that cat-ears, now acting the goat, blows at him. The wyvern on whose back he is riding with disrespectful glee arrests his trumpet-holding arm:



Fig. 25: Wyvern arresting the obscene-instrument player, Crypt, St Gabriel's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.

(Emma Dillon makes a brave study of the medieval art of visually representing 'obscene' sound by conjoining instruments and the 'more familiar sites of the obscene', e.g., 'a man blows a trumpet while defecating'. So 'certain types of sound, particularly trumpets,

horns, bagpipes and drums ... amplify sites that were already understood to be obscene'.)³³

On the North face, cat-ears, now full-faced, pop-eyed and disgorging freely, is glaring out from underneath two wyverns' triumphant feet. They have squished him, having found out that he is an obdurate heretic who declines to respect the holy pastors of the Church:



Fig. 26: Wyverns punish the heretic, Crypt, St Gabriel's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.

Capitals where the Romanesque Green Man is not with his companions

Romanesque disgorging Green Man gets a prominent capital to himself at the first crossing in the Crypt, where he looks out in four directions under each corner of the abacus:



Fig. 27: Romanesque Green Man, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

³³ Emma Dillon, 'Representing Obscene Sound', in *Medieval Obscenities*, Nicola MacDonald (ed.), 2006, York Medieval Press, 55-84, 75.

and another in St Anselm's Chapel, where he looks west along the South Isle with one face, and into the Chapel with another:



Fig. 28: Romanesque Green Man, St Anselm's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.

On these capitals, the Romanesque disgorging Green Man seems to be the 'On Your Guard Against the Heretic!' poster.

There are columns in the Crypt of which the capitals do not feature the disgorging Green Man, only his companions. Their role is didactic: they re-affirm the Church's teachings on ethics and morality. On first sight, the 'acrobats', on the East face of the north-central capital at the first crossing, are puzzling. What are we supposed to find wrong in them, other than their dim-witted looks and antics? One acrobat sits on the other's head, arms stretched out, holding a fish by the tail in his right hand, and a bowl of something in the left:



Fig. 29: Acrobats, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

It is not obvious why this banal pose brings on the disturbing scene, on the South face, where a dog and a wyvern are attacking each other:



Fig. 30: Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

The dog bites the wyvern's tail, and the wyvern drives its lance into the dog's lower spine. These two good guys of the Romanesque church have turned on each other! That is the natural order gone awry. The West face tells just as grim a tale:



Fig. 31: Two-headed wolf-woman overcoming the griffin, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

The vicious two-headed wolf woman has overcome the powerful, clever griffin, and is keeping a disabling hold of it by its neck and tail. The griffin's tail has sprung another head, shamefully making an amphisbaena of it. A perky, well-pleased manticore/Satan struts on the North face:



Fig. 32: Manticore/Satan in possession of acrobat, Crypt, Canterbury Cathedral.

He has a second face protruding from his chest area, wrapped between his wings. That face is suspiciously like that of the dim-looking acrobat atop his companion's head on the East face. And not only that, closer observation reveals: Two arms stretch out improbably from the manticore's long neck, the right hand holding a fish by the tail, and the left a bowl of something ... just like the acrobat on the East face. My how grown-together Satan and the acrobats are! Or so we are meant to conclude.

Several commentators make helpful suggestions about what is happening in such disturbing narratives: The 12th century Church disapproved of itinerant entertainers: the troubadours and the jongleurs, and the acrobats and dancers who travelled alongside them. The Church aligned their status with that of prostitutes,³⁴ determined to present them as venal, taverns-frequenting types who undermine the proper social order of 'men of prayer, men of war, and men of work'. This was the distribution of social pursuits desired by King Alfred (871-899) of fond memory, and scripted by the prominent Benedictine, Aelfric of Eynsham (c.950-c.1010). It was still the ethical norm in Chaucer's time (1343-1400).³⁵ The tearaways from this norm, the freewheeling troubadours and their entourage, became objects of the no-holds-barred derision of the Church, derision being the ready means of providing against public approval of them. (Actually, the Canterbury acrobat pair gets off lightly. Weir and Jerman³⁶ show quite a few others, who, victims of

³⁴ Anthony Weir and James Jerman, 1986, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches*, Routledge, 45.

³⁵ Richard K Emmerson, 2013, *Key Figures in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopaedia*, Routledge, 113.

³⁶ Weir and Jerman, note 34, 42.

someone's unbridled anal sense of humour, are fully stripped of human dignity.)

The fateful offence of the troubadours and their attendants was that they took to writing and performing songs 'concerning the conflicting theologies of the Church of Rome and the Albigensians (Cathars). When Pope Innocent III authorised a crusade against the Albigensian heretics (1209-1229), numerous Provençal troubadours were massacred with them.'³⁷

So that's it then: Acrobats and their kind are the order-disruptors who let in the chaos that plays them and their surroundings into the hands of the manticore/Satan, and disables the good guys, like the greed-inhibiting griffin and the helpful, caring dog. Shun acrobats and their like! (If you can stand the semiotics approach to social analysis, then Andrew Cowell³⁸ is brilliant reading on the stand-off of churches and taverns in the growing urban centres of the new medieval economy, especially on pilgrim routes.)

PART 5: FINAL THOUGHTS

The real pagan is the foliate-head Green Man

The foliate-head Green Man motif is not related either symbolically or historically to the highly political late-11th-to-12th century image, the Romanesque disgorging Green Man.

Although the foliate-head Green Man is not a direct subject of this paper, a quick glance at it is appropriate: It was Lady Raglan whose enthusiastic research in 1939 first called attention to the Green Man. Indeed, it was she who coined the term 'Green Man'.³⁹ For this, Mercia MacDermott gives Raglan full credit.⁴⁰ However, MacDermott fulsomely rejects Raglan's analysis of this motif. For instance, she points out the anachronism in Raglan's associating of Jack-in-the-Green and May Day customs and the Gothic foliate heads: This Jack, as folklorist Roy Judge notes,⁴¹ dates from 1795. He was a leafy-frame-clad character at annual processions staged by chimney sweeps, and had everything to do with cadging summer-

³⁷ Paul Oliver and Bryan Gillingham, 'Troubadours', in *Continuum Encyclopaedia of Popular Music of the World, Vol. II, Performance and Production*, John Shepherd, David Horn, Dave Laing, Paul Oliver and Peter Wicke (eds), 2003, *Continuum*, 118.

³⁸ Andrew Cowell, 1999, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins and Bodies in the Middle Ages*, University of Michigan Press, 14-53.

³⁹ Julia Raglan, 'The "Green Man" in Church Architecture', *Folklore*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1939, 45-57.

⁴⁰ MacDermott, note 14, 1-2, 9, 15, 19, 192.

⁴¹ Roy Judge, 1975, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom*, DS Brewer.

survival money,⁴² and nothing to do with greenness, except perhaps the summer season.

MacDermott dismisses also the Green Man association with Robin Hood, and with the legend of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁴³ The latter was the creation of an un-named mid-to-late 14th century poet who dramatised the themes of chivalry and knightly honour: The Green Knight, a kind-of nemesis of the totally fictional Sir Gawain, appears out of the blue, green from top to toe, to set tests of honour for Sir Gawain. His head, albeit severed by Sir Gawain, speaks a detailed demand for honourable satisfaction.

The first appearance of the Robin Hood legend is dated to 1377 by the Sloane Manuscripts of the British Museum. Then and ever since, the theme of this legend is the valiant outlaw and master-archer who champions the cause of the peasantry against the cruel oppression of the corrupt lieutenants of essentially benevolent royals.

Neither the Green Knight nor Robin Hood, both English literary figures, carry any resemblance to the foliate-head Green Man, whose pedigree is many centuries older. In view of this, MacDermott offers wise caution against the temptation to associate too many images when in search of the meaning of one: ‘A net spread too widely may catch so many red herrings that the truth may slip through unnoticed!’⁴⁴

As Kathleen Basford has shown with her Plates 1-12,⁴⁵ the foliate head, unlike the Romanesque disgorging Green Man, has a very long history, its deepest point traceable to capitals salvaged by Bishop Nicetius of Trier in the first half of the 6th century from an early-2nd century Roman temple, and incorporated in Trier Cathedral (Germany). Very tellingly with regard to the claim that the images of the Romanesque Green Man and his companions are pagan images, Basford tells us also⁴⁶ that *the foliate heads in Trier Cathedral were walled up in the early 11th century!* (‘Ouch!’ the pagan-claimers should wince. ‘Is this how very sensitive the 11th century church was to pagan images?’) A window-gap now allows visitors a peep at this seriously aged but still intact carving:

⁴² MacDermott, note 14, 15-16.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 11-12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 23.

⁴⁵ Basford, note 28, 25 *et seq.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 10.



Fig. 33: Oldest known foliate-head Green Man, Trier Cathedral, Germany.

Contemporary scholarship

There is, unfortunately, very little scholarly discussion of the Romanesque Green Man image: none, one might even say, with the notable exception of Mercia MacDermott's work. Yet the Romanesque disgorging Green Man is an unparalleled motif in Church art, arriving there only in the late-11th century, many other new 'monstrosities' in tow, good guys and bad ones. Close attention to him rewards us with rich insight into the turbulent Church politics of the Romanesque era. The few serious writers who have published books or articles that address the Green Man theme directly⁴⁷ conduct their discourses in tacit agreement with the point Richard Hayman makes explicitly:

Throughout the 1950s and beyond, the idea of green man as a pagan survival was uncontroversial ... Knowledge of churches, of the rise of Christianity and of pre-Christian religions has grown enormously over the past half century, and the assumptions made about the green man in the 1950s are no longer convincing⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Mercia MacDermott, 2003, note 14; Kathleen Basford, 1978, note 28; Anthony Weir & James Jerman, 1986, note 34; David Taylor, 2000, note 32; Richard Hayman, 2011, note 47. Other Green Man-titled books, popular though some of them are, are valuable for their illustrations only.

⁴⁸ Richard Hayman, 2011, *The Green Man*, Shire Publication, 5-6.

Interestingly, Anthony Weir, co-author with James Jerman of the impressive work cited earlier,⁴⁶ has commended Mercia MacDermott as the authority on the Green Man, thereby modifying some views expressed in his and Jerman's 1986 work:

‘The Green Man’ is a misleading catch-all term for Foliate Masks, Foliage-swallowers, and vine-spewers: ... They have nothing to do with ‘folk memory’ (usually invented in the early 20th century) ... By far the best study of the Green Man is *Explore Green Men* by Mercia MacDermott.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Mercia MacDermott fully deserves all the high praise that comes her way. Perhaps her work will inspire young medievalists to carry it forward. Certainly, there is no shortage of scope for research here. One need look no further than at the quite amazing fact that the same Green-Man-and-companions images appear in Romanesque churches throughout Western Europe, and they all appear in the late-11th century, then throughout the 12th century. But they do not make it into the Gothic church: 13th century sculptors were not making them. And the 14th century ones returned to the foliate-head Green Man: At Canterbury Cathedral, we see some very fine ones in the Black Prince's Chantry, now (since its granting by Elizabeth I to the French Huguenot community in Canterbury) the French Protestant Church. Can we not but suspect organised Church activity when we contemplate this history?

We are regularly told that it was the medieval manuscripts, mostly the psalters, that made the Romanesque disgorging Green Man known. But then, it is just as likely that the monks who were decorating psalters with Romanesque Green Man images during the 12th century had in fact copied them from the capitals of columns in their churches. So: Were those capitals the medieval ‘mass media’ that broadcast the engaging propaganda-in-sculpture that kept the faithful on side with the Church and against the heretics? True, that would have taken some organising. But then, what, if not organisation, accounts for the ubiquity, in late-11th and 12th century Western Europe, of the disgorging Green Man images? Is it realistic to account for them in terms alone of ‘a fashion that caught on’? Yes, but ... does fashion just ‘catch on’, or is it promoted? Big discoveries about the political operations of the late-11th and 12th-

⁴⁹ Blog comment, website *Head Heritage, Julian Cope Presents*, ‘The modern antiquarian forum’, 6 August 2003

<<<https://www.headheritage.co.uk/headtohead/tma/topic/12405/flat/>>>

century Church, and about the meanings of its imagery, are surely in search of a discoverer. In the meantime, there is nothing abroad that might alter the views I make known in this paper.

RECOMMENDED READING ON THE GREEN MAN

Romanesque Disgorging Green Man (in my estimate of order of importance):

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