The Green Man in Medieval England

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Christian Shoots from Pagan Roots

By
Stephen Miller

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For my daughter Lucy Alexandra Miller, whose images grace this study.

For the Angel of Mercy, who enabled the seed of our redemption to be placed beneath the tongue of Adam.

And for the greater glory of the Lord God who makes all of these things possible.

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

~ 1 Corinthians 15: 22, *KJV*

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This book follows the publication, in 2019, of my monograph *The Book of Angels: Seen and Unseen*, an exploration of the various traditions and associated lore and legend surrounding the celestial orders. This study looks at the phenomenon of the foliate head, perhaps better known as the 'Green Man motif', in the cathedrals and churches of England, in the period since the 11th century Norman Conquest, through the Romanesque and Gothic phases of English architectural history, up to the English Reformation.

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Stephen Miller London, Lady Day, 25th March 2022

INTRODUCTION

This monograph will show that the profusion of occurrences of the 'Green Man' motif, in its various particular forms in the medieval cathedrals and churches of England, prevalent in the centuries following the Norman Conquest of 1066 and before the English Reformation of the 1530s, typically have associations of a specific Christian context and tradition rather than an unspecific archetypal pagan one. The meaning and significance attached to such motifs would have been apparent to medieval churchgoing folk of all walks of life, from the patrons who commissioned them and the stonemasons and woodcarvers who created them, to the monks, clergy and worshipping community, well-versed not only in biblical narrative but also with associated Christian apocrypha, lore and legend that helped to flesh out and illuminate Scripture—stories and legends long-since forgotten by the majority of folk today. The visual narrative of medieval churches brought such stories to life in a meaningful way for all, the literate and illiterate alike (a contention we will take up at the end of *Chapter Five*).

If, as many assert, the design elements of Green Man iconography have been borrowed from an archetypal connection to, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Celtic, and what-have-you, mythologies, folklore and symbolism, it is no less true that there is typically a precise Christian basis and significance for the use of the motif in medieval churches, deriving from medieval (and earlier) Christian (and Jewish) hagiographies concerning Adam, the Quest of Seth, and the various legends concerning the origins of the Wood of the Holy Cross, which themselves point back to even older mysteries and legends on which *The Book of Genesis* draws. The reason for the frequency with which such motifs occur on the tombs of bishops and archbishops becomes apparent in such a context.

While there is a weight of evidence to suggest that particular mythologies and certain resonances of analogous Green Man-related lore developed in the traditions of separate ancient cultures independently, at various stages throughout history, our particular focus for what we refer to as the foliate head or 'Green Man motif' (for the want of a better term), will primarily be in medieval England in the centuries following the Norman Conquest of the 11th century. Its true heart and home are found in the architecture, furnishings and decoration in the church buildings of the Romanesque and Gothic periods prior to the English Reformation of the 1530s. Here it is that we are the most likely to get a handle on what this traditionally enigmatic and elusive character most universally represents and just why stonemasons and woodcarvers were so occupied with the motif, at the behest of those patrons who commissioned and instructed them.

In 1931 Captain Charles John Philip Cave had written an article for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society on the roof bosses at Ely Cathedral, which examines the foliate heads there and in which he ponders, 'I cannot help thinking that these foliate heads must have had some meaning behind them'.[1] It was some eight years later that Lady Raglan (Julia Somerset, née Hamilton, the wife of the independent scholar Major FitzRoy Richard Somerset, the fourth Baron Raglan) first came up with a term for this genre in her 1939 article 'The "Green Man" in Church Architecture', for the journal *Folklore*,[2] and the term gained currency, with Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, among others, proving decisive

in establishing the term when adopting it, for descriptive purposes, in his great architectural series *The Buildings of England*, begun in the 1940s and published between 1951 and 1974, in some 46 volumes. While Lady Raglan might have conflated several quite unrelated, albeit superficially similar, notions about such motifs, she was successful in giving a name (albeit, as we shall see, something of a misnomer) to a largely disregarded and consequently forgotten and anonymous, and yet ubiquitous, emblematic figure. She wrote:[3]

> This figure I am convinced, is neither a figment of the imagination nor a symbol, but is taken from real life, and the question is whether there was any figure in real life from which it could have been taken. The answer, I think, is that there is but one of sufficient importance, the figure variously known as the Green Man, Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood, the King of May and the Garland King, who is the central figure in the May Day celebrations throughout Northern and Central Europe.

In an article for *The New Yorker*, setting the scene for a review of new writings on the subject, Jo Livingstone concluded, 'Lady Raglan's theory is bunk, but it became extremely popular bunk'.[4] It is no doubt true that Lady Raglan's article was published at a time when, as Livingstone puts it, enthusiasm for folklore in Britain was 'at a great pitch',[5]

> … still under the long-reaching influence of James Frazer's compendium of comparativism, 'The Golden Bough' (1890). Frazer emphasized continuity with and preservation of a native tradition, and Raglan, thinking very much in those terms, posited that the Green Man was an ancient pagan icon of fertility.

Lady Raglan had written, 'The fact is that unofficial paganism subsisted side by side with the official religion and this explains the presence of our Green Man in a church window with the Virgin beside him', referring to a window at the Church of St. Mary Redcliffe in Bristol (see Plates 63 and 64).[6] Livingstone comments,[7]

> Unlike the folklorists of the *völkisch* movement in Germany, neither Raglan nor Frazer had any explicit interest in building a nationalist project through romantic visions of European myth. But Raglan's desire to connect with an authentic, deep-time form of British culture—to reach beyond the church's stronghold, beyond industrialization, to touch an ancient and therefore true tradition—was political, and nationalistic, anyway: it sought out pure origins where really there were none.

Despite also being wrong about there being an absence of pure origins for the motif Livingstone's perspective is useful at the outset as it cuts though much of the woolly (and time-wasting) thinking that has beset the subject. In this study we will attempt to arrive at a better and more precise idea of what the motif we have come to know as the 'Green Man' actually represents and, on that journey, we must also take the opportunity to flag-up what he is not. At the outset, the first thing to nip in the bud is that he is any sort of conflation or derivative of Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood, Father Christmas and/or the King of May. The Green Man is very much his own man with a precise meaning and origin (indeed as we shall see he is not just any man, but commonly a representation of First Man and in that sense Everyman, of humanity itself), one whom over the centuries has displayed a remarkably durable persistence, notwithstanding our neglect of his sources and origins. We will look at just why this should be in these pages.

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Notes

1) Cave, C. J. P., 'The Roof Bosses in Ely Cathedral', in the Cambridge Antiquarian Society's *Proceedings and Communications*, E. A. B. Barnard (Ed.), vol. XXXII, 1930-31, p. 36

2) Lady Raglan, 'The "Green Man" in Church Architecture', in *Folklore* 50: 1, 1939, pp. 45-57

3) Ibid., p. 50

4) Livingstone, J., 'The Remarkable Persistence of the Green Man', in an article for *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2016

5) Ibid., *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2016

6) Lady Raglan 1939, op.cit., p. 56

7) Livingstone 2016, op.cit., *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2016

CHAPTER ONE

PAGAN ROOTS – SOME PROPOSED GREEN MAN ARCHETYPES

While it will be asserted here that the Green Man motif typically contained a specific Christian message and meaning for the worshipping community of medieval England (i.e. pretty much everyone) and came about spontaneously, bursting into life to serve the proliferation of church building independently of other sources, it would also have been natural for the stonemasons, woodcarvers and illustrators responsible for bringing this genre to life to have originally sought inspiration for what they wanted to represent from particular classical and ancient prototypes, as anyone preparing to create a depiction of an angel, for example, for the very first time might have looked for a visual precedent to the forerunners of angels (such as Mesopotamian *genii*, or Assyrian four winged protective spirits) for ideas.[1] This seems to have led to the erroneous belief that the Green Man is actually derived from an array of pagan archetypes. If the nourishment for its roots were in that soil, its shoots spoke of something quite different, dedicated to a bespoke end.

Roman architecture, for example, had drawn from classical sources. It featured ornate leaf masks, describing Greco-Roman deities such as the Greek god Pan (or his Roman counterpart Faunus), the god of the wild, or Dionysus (Bacchus) a god of nature, fruitfulness and vegetation. It is not known where the cult of Dionysus originated but he was already worshipped in the Mycenaean period (the last phase of the Bronze Age in ancient Greece, ca. 1,600-1,100 BC). His name appears on a Linear B (the name for late-Minoan script) tablet dating to the 13th century BC and in all legends of his cult he is depicted as having foreign origins.[2] Dionysus's personal attributes were an ivy wreath, the thyrsus (staff) and the kantharos (a large two-handed cup). In early Greek art he was represented as a bearded man, but later portrayed as youthful and more effeminate.[3] Bacchic revels were a favourite subject of vase painters and much later, particularly in the Italian Renaissance, of classically inspired frescoes and oil paintings, such as Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* in London's National Gallery. Dionysus has been associated with the Green Man of the medieval era and the leaf-clad reliefs, heads, vases and statues, some dating as far back as late-sixth century BC, are considered by some commentators to be precursors of medieval foliate head/Green Man depictions. Gargoyle style heads of Oceanus/Okeanos, one of the original Titans of Greek mythology, found in Greece and Turkey, are likewise assumed to have served as a model for the later Green Man carvings in Europe. In addition to such deities and demi-gods, parallels have been drawn between the Green Man and the likes of Osiris, Odin and Lud. Rightly or wrongly these and other archetypes have been associated with Green Man iconography.

Commentators, such as Kathleen Basford point to a Mesopotamian mid-second century 'Green Man' carving on the façade of a temple at Hatra (Al Hadr), an ancient city of Upper Mesopotamia in modern-day Iraq, and to a temple dedicated to Bacchus at Baalbek in the Lebanon, dating from a similar period, which show leaf-mask types, and also to sixth century examples of leaf masks from Constantinople, such as those kept in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul.[4] Mercia MacDermott likewise points to a number of pagan sources in her book *Explore Green Men* (see especially her chapter 'Pre-Romanesque discoveries and dead ends').[5] In his *A Little Book of The Green Man*,

Mike Harding reaches as far afield as Borneo, Nepal and India, in search of Green Man types, and to an example (fourth to fifth century) of a Green Man disgorging vegetation from his mouth in St. Abre, in St. Hilaire-le-Grand, France, as well as to an eighth century Jain temple example in Rajasthan. Trier (the oldest city in Germany) also has leaf masks dating back to the second or third centuries of the common era. Such examples, it is claimed, were gathered in and appropriated by Christian iconography.[6]

While a good selection of these said Green Man archetypes pre-date the Christian era, it should also be noted that the first comprehensive draft of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, beginning with *Genesis* and ending with *Deuteronomy*) and the story of Creation, featuring Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, was composed around the late-seventh or early-sixth century BC (the 'Jahwist/Yahwist' source) and later expanded by the authors of the 'Priestly' source into a version of *The Book of Genesis* very like the one we know today. The combined narrative of Yahwistic and Priestly affirms monotheism, thus challenging the polytheism of Mesopotamian, Greek, Egyptian and Roman theology. The Christian hagiographies, so popular in medieval times, naturally point back to earlier biblically-inspired apocrypha, legend and hagiography (this is taken up in some detail in *Chapter Five*).

There are Romanesque foliate heads in 11th century Templar churches in Jerusalem and Harding suggests that the Green Man motif may have originated in Asia Minor and been brought to Europe (and via France to England) by travelling stone carvers.[7] While this is indeed plausible, it does not undermine the medieval, specifically Christian, understanding ascribed to the motif (originally derived from ancient sources of Adam stories and the Quest of Seth, fused with Christian Wood-of-the-Cross and Holy Rood tales, see *Chapter Five*), or diminish the significance of the shared legends and hagiographies based on the opening books of the Bible.

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Notes

1) Miller, S., *The Book of Angels: Seen and Unseen*, 2019. For a discussion of archetypal forerunners of angels see pp. 76-87

2) Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Dionysus', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 26 May 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dionysus Accessed 15 June 2021

3) Ibid.

4) Documented in the Plates section of Kathleen Basford's book, *The Green Man*, 1998, see especially pp. 26-35

5) Mercia MacDermott's *Explore Green Men*, 2006, 2nd revised edition. See especially ch. 7 in this regard, 'Pre-Romanesque discoveries and dead ends', pp. 155-168

6) See Mike Harding's handy pocket book, *A Little Book of the Green Man*, 1999.

7) Ibid., p. 58

CHAPTER TWO

ROMANESQUE STYLE IN ENGLAND – A NEW EXPRESSION

While proposals for the beginning of the period of the Romanesque style can range anywhere between the sixth and the 11th centuries, for our purposes, with our focus on England, we will concentrate on the 11th century and the Anglo-Norman churches that sprung up here at that time. The Romanesque period in England was later to develop into the beginning of English Gothic style in the 12th century. Examples of Romanesque architecture are to found across the European continent, making it the first truly pan-European style since the architecture of Imperial Rome. The overthrow of Anglo-Saxon England in 1066, by the Duke of Normandy (later styled William the Conqueror) and his Norman, Breton and Flemish army, was to transform England, from how the country was organised and governed to its language, customs and expression—the visible remains of which are seen today in England's cathedrals, churches and castles of the period. With these then new and richly decorated buildings came 'a new language of ornament'[1] and it is at this time, in the period following the Norman Conquest and leading into the 12th century, that the first wave of what we refer to as foliate head/Green Man depictions burst onto the scene in England. As Richard Hayman comments, in his beautifully illustrated short survey on the Green Man (*The Green Man*, 2010), 'Their emergence was not an isolated event but part of a new vocabulary of art and architecture that came with a surge of church buildings'.[2] These English Romanesque churches belong to the period immediately following the Norman Conquest. Hayman writes:[3]

> It was a great period of Christian enthusiasm, when cathedrals were rebuilt and new monasteries were founded. At a local level it was the final stage in the evolution of the parish system and a period when many parish churches were rebuilt in stone.

Churches in the 11th and 12th centuries were built by wealthy patrons rather than parish communities and these patrons were responsible for prescribing decorative schemes in explicit detail, rather than it being left to the stonemasons and woodcarvers, who executed such schemes, to invent them. Hayman rightly states that the artisan would have been instructed 'by patrons and clergymen who suggested either a model from which they could copy or introduced ideas from illuminated manuscripts'.[4] The Green Man motif indeed appeared in churches because they were part of the developing Continental tastes of those who made it possible for the churches to be built. The example of designs on the capitals of columns at Northampton St. Peter, show masks emitting foliage that are derived from manuscript illuminations, 'in particular English Psalters of the mid-twelfth century and a copy of [Pope] Gregory's *Moralia*'.[5] The richly decorated and exquisite St. Albans Psalter (ca. 1120-40, produced by at least six scribes and four artists), for example, includes many illustrations of disgorging heads. It is the best known of a number of Romanesque illuminated manuscripts produced in the Abbey scriptorium at St. Albans (now stored at the Cathedral Library, Dombibliothek, of Hildesheim Cathedral, Germany). English Benedictine monks settled in the Lamspringe monastery in Lower Saxony, Germany, in the 17th century, bringing the St. Albans Psalter manuscript with them. From there it passed to the Hildesheim Benedictines near St. Godehard, who gifted the psalter to the community of St. Godehard in the 19th century. Hayman is

right to make this connection as the Green Man motif, as defined here, certainly first appeared in book illustrations, especially in France, from the 10th century onwards and grew in popularity in the 11th and 12th centuries during a period of significant growth in the number of monasteries—described by Mercia MacDermott as 'the Golden Age of monasticism'[6]—and the attendant demand for books at those monasteries, as well as the training of scribes capable of producing them. The stonemasons and woodcarvers, under the direction of clergy and commissioning patrons would have referred to their own store of decorative designs gleaned from such manuscript illustrations, as well as to the previously carved precedents of such designs in wood and stone *in situ* at other church buildings. The theological inspiration for these designs and illustrations will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on medieval hagiographies (see *Chapter Five*).

Clive Hicks has attempted the task of putting together a 'gazetteer' of Green Man sites in Britain and abroad in his book *The Green Man: A Field Guide* (2000), in which he acknowledges the input of Green Man enthusiasts Ruth Wylie, Peter Hill and Mike Harding. Imogen Corrigan is another who has made a systematic study and detailed cataloguing of the various different types of foliate heads, their location, and the type of foliage used in depicting the motif, in an attempt to resolve their function, in her unpublished thesis *The Function and Development of the Foliate Head in English Medieval Churches* (see Bibliography). Of a sample of 798 churches visited (founded in England prior to the Reformation) Corrigan's survey notes that some 400 'had one or more examples of the foliate-head motif'[7] (the complete data sample are included in her Appendices). Some of the best locations for finding the foliate heads of 'Green Men' that I have personally visited, with my own photographer (Lucy Miller), are written up in the 'Selected Green Man Locations in England' section at the end of this book and supported in a colour Plates section of some 69 images from many of these locations, following my concluding chapter.

Corrigan concludes chapter two of her thesis with the statement that 'an interpretation connected to resurrection and eternal life is likely to be correct'. My contention here is to show that not only are such foliate heads (particularly those of the disgorging variety) typically connected with resurrection and eternal life, but that certain examples implicitly (if not explicitly) represent the specific Christian message of the rebirth of mankind to new life (represented by the first man, Adam). Not all foliate heads, lumped under the designation of 'Green Man' (as we have noted, a somewhat spurious and inaccurate appellation, originally made out of misconception for the significance of the motif), necessarily share such a reading however. While not every Green Man, or Beast, or other type of foliate head, will necessarily be imbued with such precise intention or elicit such reception, something in common connected to resurgent life from death is typically the general point. It is nonetheless the intention of this study to assert that certain 'Green Man' examples (especially of the disgorging variety) do indeed signify Adam (as first man) and further that Christ (as a second, or new, Adam) is intimately connected to this chain, symbolising mankind's redemption.

While disgorging animals also say something in a general sense about the regenerative force of nature, we know from the bestiaries that certain animals also have particular associations and significance when depicted in a particular context. Lions and Panthers are often used to represent aspects of the nature of Christ, or to recount a moral lesson and other animals are used to represent the strengths and weaknesses of humans. Christ is often equated with the spiritual lion of the tribe of Judah and with the 'true Panther' (whose only enemy is the dragon), who rouses and rallies the other animals, who 'gather from far and near, and follow him wherever he goes'.[8] The lion is also

equated with God the Father breathing life into Christ (following the Crucifixion), just as the male lion was believed to breathe life into its cubs after being born dead. The lion (or rather certain aspects of the lion's behaviour) can also represent the devil on occasion, as the 'roaring lion' from the *First Epistle of Peter*, who 'walketh about, seeking whom he may devour',[9] especially when, according to the bestiaries, a 'Pard… a mottled beast and very swift [and] thirsty for blood' is 'adulterously' matched with a lioness, from which 'a third kind of beast [the Leopard] is born'.[10] The bestiaries agree that the leopard has a mystical significance as either the devil, 'full of a diversity of vices', or the sinner, 'spotted with crimes and a variety of wrongdoings'.[11]

The *Textus Roffensis* (Book of Rochester), on display in an airtight cabinet in the crypt at Rochester Cathedral,[12] was written between 1122 and 1124 by an unknown monk/scribe (it is thought to have been written by a single scribe, with others making later additions) working in the cathedral scriptorium and is the only copy of earlier Kent laws transcribed from a range of original manuscripts written in various Anglo-Saxon dialects. It is in two parts, folios 1-118 are a collection of Anglo-Saxon laws from Æthelberht to Henry I; and folios 119-235 contain charters of Rochester Cathedral priory. Although not richly decorated throughout the text it does contain an elaborate acanthus-leaf disgorging dragon, which together with an attendant saint forms the initial letter 'R' at the beginning of the cartulary.

Several disgorging head motifs are to be found in the Cathedral itself (including Plate 59, to be found on the pulpit), and one Green Man head sprouting acanthus leaves from the nostrils and mouth features over the tomb of Bishop Hamo de Hythe, Prior of Rochester, 1314-19, and Bishop of Rochester, 1319-52 (see Plate 11). Such heads so placed on tombs are specific symbols of the hope and belief of overcoming death to resurrection and the life eternal. Such imagery would have been charged with profound theological significance for these bishops in the same way that a Medici cardinal or pope in the Italian Renaissance instructed even the very great practitioners, such as Michelangelo, to perform specific illustrative tasks, as a means of soliciting atonement for sins in this life and restoration in the life to come. Unlike Britain and France there is relatively little actual Green Man imagery in the Medieval and Gothic architecture of Italy, but with the Renaissance such imagery (or a derived form of it) makes an appearance. Mantegna, Donatello and Michelangelo all used analogous motifs, including examples in Michelangelo's decoration of the Medici chapels in Florence, where the deliberate placing of the motif in the context of a tomb appears to be of particular significance. The Medici's *Sagrestia Nuova*,[13] located within the Basilica di San Lorenzo, was intended as a mausoleum or mortuary chapel by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, the future Pope Clement VII, and his cousin Pope Leo X, for four members of the Medici family. The tombs were decorated by Michelangelo with sculptural figures, which he referred to as 'allegories', of the four times of day—pairing *Day* with *Night* and *Dawn* with *Dusk*.[14] These were intended to symbolise human life, where 'active life' and 'contemplative life' interact to free the soul after death. Two of the four intended tombs were never started, with the result that the two existing tombs are those of comparatively insignificant Medici dukes, Lorenzo di Piero and Giuliano di Lorenzo.

Several other later examples of Green Men seen in such a context, in Spain, England and Scotland, are noted in a section 'Green Men on tombs and memorials' of MacDermott's book.[15] Such examples serve to show the particular significance, outlined above, attached to this motif in such a context.

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Norman governance of England

The Domesday Book—a manuscript record of the 'Great Survey' of much of England and parts of Wales—had been completed by 1086, with the new Norman administrators taking over almost all of the positions of government of the former Anglo-Saxon set up. In order to find the lands to compensate his Norman followers, William initially confiscated the estates of the English lords who had fought and died with Harold and redistributed their lands. This led to a series of revolts, which in turn resulted in a cycle of further confiscations. To stifle further rebellions, fortifications and castles were constructed by the Normans in unprecedented numbers. The historian Robert Liddiard states that 'to glance at the urban landscape of Norwich, Durham or Lincoln is to be forcibly reminded of the impact of the Norman invasion'.[16] William also exercised tighter control over the inheritance of property by widows and daughters, often forcing marriages to Normans.[17] The administrative structures put in place by William proved particularly successful and enduring, so much so that between 1072 and the Capetian Conquest of Normandy in 1204 it was possible to return to France and to rule England from a distance. Native Englishmen were thus effectively removed from high office. After 1075 all Earldoms were held by Normans, and Englishmen were only occasionally appointed as Sheriffs. Likewise in the Church, senior English officeholders were either expelled from their positions or kept in place for their lifetimes and replaced when they died. By the end of the 11th century no bishopric was held by any Englishman, and English abbots became uncommon, especially in the larger monasteries.[18]

The Norman style of Romanesque architecture that developed in Normandy and England happened almost simultaneously during the general adoption of the architectural style in both countries. Eventually the style diverged in England and France with the architecture of Normandy drawing closer to typical French Romanesque and that of England becoming a distinctive Anglo-Norman Gothic style, thereafter known as English Gothic. In ecclesiastical architecture the common Early Norman style was a Romanesque elaboration of the early Christian basilica plan—longitudinal with side aisles and an apse with a projection of the eastern (sanctuary) end of the centre aisle, a raised nave with windows piercing the upper walls (clerestory), a tripartite interior articulation of the nave into a lower arcade (separating the nave from side aisles), a triforium arcade (separating the upper nave from galleries above the side aisles and the clerestory), the transepts (forming a transverse aisle crossing the nave in front of the sanctuary), and a western façade, completed by two towers. A definitive example of the Early Norman style is the Church of Saint-Etienne, at Caen (begun in 1067), which provided a close model for the later English cathedrals of Ely (ca. 1090), Norwich (ca. 1096), and Peterborough (ca. 1118), all of which display the English characteristic of increased scale.[19]

Most Anglo-Norman churches of this period typically had timber roofs instead of the usual Romanesque rounded stone vaults. The notable exception to this is Durham Cathedral, the nave and quire (ca. 1104) of which are supported by the first known examples of pointed ribbed vaults (which cross at the top and carry the weight of the building through to a skeletal structure of vertical shafts). In addition to the cathedrals of Ely, Norwich, Peterborough, and Durham, other cathedrals begun in the Anglo-Norman style were Canterbury (ca. 1070), Lincoln (ca. 1072), Rochester (ca. 1077/1083), St. Albans (ca. 1077), Winchester (ca. 1079), Gloucester (ca. 1089), and Hereford (ca. 1107). Other major churches begun in this style include Southwell Minster (ca. 1108) and the abbey church at Tewkesbury (ca. 1088). Less closely related to the main Anglo-Norman tradition but important in their own right are the many Cistercian abbeys built during the Romanesque period in England—

among them, Rievaulx (ca. 1132), Fountains Abbey (ca. 1135), Kirkstall (ca. 1152), Buildwas (ca. 1155), Byland Abbey (ca. 1175), and Furness (ca. 1175).[20] Military and domestic applications were also common and they exhibited the same massive dignity as the ecclesiastical structures. The familiar imposing rectangular keep was characteristic, examples of which are the 11th century keep and chapel of the Tower of London and the 12th century keep of Rochester Castle and Hedingham Castle.

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The Age of Faith

The medieval era, as defined in this study, is also often referred to as the Age of Faith, due to the rise of Christianity and Islam. The commonly defined period stretches from the end of the Western Roman Empire, at the end of the fifth century, through to the end of the 15th century, a period, give or take, of a thousand years. It is the second half of that period (from the Norman Conquest on) that we focus on here (up to the English Reformation of the 1530s). As discussed in *Chapter One*, the characteristics of the foliate head/Green Man motif are particular to the Christian medieval period in Europe, and are only very loosely, and often quite erroneously, related to older superficially similar pagan archetypes.

The Green Man motif is often seen incorporated as a carved decorative ornament on English, French, German and other European buildings, primarily churches. The intricacies of Romanesque and Gothic architecture provided ideal locations for the inclusion of all manner of idiosyncratic ornamentation in church buildings. Grotesques, gargoyles and gremlins of many kinds were introduced, to warn of the snares and traps that mortal man might fall into. Sirens, Mermaids and Sheela-na-gigs (figurative carvings of naked, sexually explicit women) were among other recurring motifs to be found. Note for example the medieval misericord of a mermaid suckling a lion, at St. Mary the Virgin in Edlesborough (see Plate 49), intended as a stern warning of the traps that man is ever in mortal danger of falling into, through the seductive charms of sensual temptation and the sins of the flesh. MacDermott refers to a couple of doubled-tailed mermaid examples in Italy and France (at San Sigismondo and La Cour d'Or) as an 'anti-sex symbol' that in Romanesque church sculpture were 'another warning against debauchery'.[21] Several similar examples appear in England also. Apart from the example at Edlesborough, misericords of mermaids suckling lions also exist at both Wells and Norwich cathedrals. A two-tail mermaid holding up a mirror and comb (an indication of vanity) can be seen at Cartmel Priory, with others in similar pose at Carlisle Cathedral, Chichester Cathedral and St. Laurence Church in Ludlow, while a bare-breasted mermaid flanked by a manticore (a legendary creature with the head of a man, the body of a lion, and a tail of venomous spines) and a dragon, appears on a misericord at Bristol Cathedral.

It is perhaps easy to see how the Green Man motif might be lumped in with the fashion for such grotesques and pagan caricatures. In writing about the image of the grotesque and the occurrence of the type in church art and architecture Katherine Marsengill writes:[22]

> One manifestation in popular belief, which also preserves the image of the grotesque, is Britain's Green Man. His representations, so clearly related to classical images, consistently show a man's face merging with and emerging from acanthus or other leaves, sometimes with garlands strung from his mouth. He is not merely a pagan remnant, as the Green Man is found in many examples of Christian art and ecclesiastical architecture.

We will examine more precisely here exactly why it should be that the Green Man motif is found in such frequency and abundance within Christian churches.

The French style of foliate mask gradually began to prevail in France and Europe, although the disgorging style of Green Man was more predominant in England, especially throughout the Romanesque period (note Plate 1, for example). Both main types flourished throughout France, England and Germany. Chartres Cathedral features dozens of Green Man motifs in a variety of different forms, including leaf mask types and those disgorging vegetation. A particular focus for such depictions throughout the late-medieval period are the cathedrals, abbeys, minsters and parish churches throughout England and continental Europe. The Green Man continued to appear in English architecture after the end of the Romanesque period and into the Gothic and late-Gothic periods, such as at King's College Chapel in Cambridge and St. Paul's Cathedral in London, as well as in country churches, both as newly created and as restored versions of the motif.

The Green Man thus featured prominently, in stone and wood, in English cathedrals, monasteries and churches from the late-11th and 12th centuries through to the 16th century. The authors of *The Green Man in Britain* (Fran and Geoff Doel, see Bibliography) tell us that while some 'rudely carved non-naturalistic heads', together with 'highly stylised vegetation', which might well be identified as Green Man types, do make, 'rare appearance as a decorative feature in a few great churches, parish churches and cathedrals', that there is no evidence of such carvings 'of the Green Man in Britain before the late-Norman period'.[23] It was, as we have noted, with the rise of Gothic architecture in the 12th and 13th centuries that these types of decorative heads became more numerous in England continuing into the 14th and 15th centuries when they reached a height of popularity, with hundreds of surviving stone and wood roof bosses in widespread locations. Thereafter, a rapid decline is evident, in church buildings (despite the motif continuing to appear in the secular world), coinciding with the rise of Protestantism. A revival in the Church has only been seen again in more recent times through the efforts of Victorian carvers and restorers (see Plates 37, 38 and 58 for such examples, in both secular and church context).

Romanesque examples

The west front façade at Rochester Cathedral dates from ca. 1150 (albeit sympathetically restored in the late-19th century) and ranks as a place of special significance in the understanding of the theological, cultural and iconographical elements of the English Romanesque period. Bliss states:[24]

> Its importance as an almost complete late Romanesque composition is […] beyond question. This is not just due to the extent of its completeness or its remarkable preservation. Rochester is unusual in that it seems to have been peculiarly susceptible to a wider range of influences from the Continent and one may go as far as to suggest that the whole of Rochester's Romanesque west front […] is primarily eclectic and even cosmopolitan in character placing the work in a unique position within the development of the Romanesque style in England.

Both the patrons and sculptors of the façade were critically aware of contemporary Continental precedents. The column figures incorporated into the jambs are evidence of this. The heavily eroded column figures, either side of the doorway have now been identified as King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (it had for many years been assumed that the figures depicted Henry I and Queen Matilda who had both been present at the consecration of Rochester Cathedral in 1130.)[25] In 1899 William Henry St. John Hope had written:[26]

> The great west doorway is a very rich work […] wrought with leaf-work and monsters. The jamb shafts have sculpted capitals and medial bands, and out of two of them, one on each side, are carved figures of a king and queen, probably Henry I and his consort Matilda. These are among the most ancient statues now remaining in this country.

The tympanum (above the doorway) of the façade contains a composition based on elements of apocalyptic text described in both the Old and New Testaments in passages from *Ezekiel* and *The Book of Revelation*. Christ sits enthroned within a mandola surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists and two attendant flanking angels. The subject is typical of 12th century monumental art derived both formally and iconographically from, 'late Romanesque and early Gothic tympana of Burgundy and the Ile-de-France'.[27] Indeed, the tympanum of Rochester appears to be directly modelled on the likes of the Royal Portal at Chartres Cathedral (ca. 1140-50). The Rochester tympanum is often cited as evidence that the ecclesiastical patrons and artisans were aware of the latest developments on the Continent, particularly from Normandy, Poitou, and the Ile-de-France. There are strong stylistic and iconographical similarities with the tympanum over the Prior's door at Ely Cathedral, believed to date even earlier, from ca. 1120-40, which also shows Christ enthroned in majesty, within an almond-shaped mandorla, flanked by angels. Christ's right hand is raised in blessing and his left hand holds the *Book of the Seven Seals*, while the signs of the zodiac and the labours of the months and seasons are carved into the doorway's surround. New life is the hope held out to all who pass through such doorways.

Professor George Zarnecki and Dr. Deborah Khan have both independently contributed to a significant understanding of the stylistic origins of Rochester's sculptural work.[28] The figures were probably inserted into the façade in ca. 1160-70. Together with the sculpture of the tympanum, the figures of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba point to a quite rapid spread of artistic ideas during the 12th century. The Rochester figures are evidence that English patrons and stonemasons were alive to both the artistic and theological ambitions of Continental work as well as precedents here in Norman England. The assimilation of French stylistic and iconographical motifs at Rochester was recognised as early as 1859 by James Fergusson: [29]

> [Rochester's] western doorway, which remains intact […] is a fair specimen of the rich mode of decoration so prevalent in that age. It must be considered rather as a Continental than as an English design.

Fergusson was perhaps the first popular commentator to make the connection between the voussoirs at Rochester and the Poitevin Romanesque. Thus, works such as the south portal of St. Pierre, Aulnay-de-Saintonge, of ca. 1130 became important precedents for later historians to examine.

Both of the now heavily eroded figures are dressed in long robes. Solomon holds a sceptre in his right hand which is, 'the mark of royal power, termed the sceptre of rectitude, and the rule of virtue, for the proper guidance of the king himself, the Holy Church, and the Christian people'.[30] Solomon is thus presented in a place of great significance in relation to Christ (the supreme judge and redeemer), as he is shown here as an administrator of temporal power and standard of royal virtue. The front of the Queen of Sheba's crowned head is missing (see Plate 4), but the long plaited braids of hair survive. The treatment of the Rochester figures has been directly related to examples from the Ile-de-France, which first appeared on the West portal of Saint-Denis, in Paris, ca. 1130-40 (now destroyed). Abbot Suger at Saint-Denis was almost certainly one of the first medieval ecclesiastics to instruct his masons to produce such figures. The resulting aesthetic contribution of these figures to the design of portals forms the beginning of an artistic development which was to culminate in

the later tendency for free-standing sculpture in façade niches, reaching their fullest expression at Rheims in ca. 1240. The rarity of the use of column figures before their incorporation in the Rochester portal is a testament their originality.

The biblical allegory associated with the story of Solomon and Sheba can be found in the Gospels of both Matthew (12: 42) and Luke (11: 31).[31]

> The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.
>
> The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation, and condemn them: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.

The central position of Christ within the composition of the façade points to the theological significance of the connection between the column figures and the remaining iconography. Biblically, the figure of Solomon is an ambivalent one. He is presented at the height of his powers as a wise ruler, supreme judge and builder of the Temple at Jerusalem. However, his imperfections were to eventually lead him into idolatrous forms of worship and, ultimately, brought about the decline and division of the kingdom of Israel. To the medieval theologian, on the other hand, Solomon's achievements within the context of the Old Testament rested almost exclusively on the fact that he prefigured aspects of the nature of Christ—the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon foreshadows the Adoration of Christ; Solomon's Judgement is related to the Last Judgement; the foundation of the Temple prefigures the later growth of church construction in the Christian period; and his wisdom is analogous to that of Christ.[32] Similarly, the Queen of Sheba's role within the later development of Christian thought was profound. As we will see in *Chapter Five* on the medieval legends and hagiographies associated with the Green Man motif, during the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon, she was foretold in a vision of the significance of the wood that was to be used for the Holy Cross of Jesus's execution.

The Church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck in Herefordshire is a prime example of 12th century Romanesque expression in England, referred to by Nikolaus Pevsner as 'one of the most perfect Norman village churches in England'.[33] It was built in ca. 1140 and certainly before 1143, when it was given to the Abbey of Gloucester, and may have replaced an earlier Saxon church at the same site. The Church is a classic example of a Romanesque three-cell plan with a stilted apsidal sanctuary, square chancel and rectangular nave.[34] It was originally dedicated to St. David and later acquired the additional dedication to St. Mary. The carvings in local red sandstone—all original and in their original positions—are remarkable for their variety and condition of preservation, particularly so around the South door, the West window, and along a row of corbels which run around the exterior of the church under the eaves. They have been attributed to a Herefordshire school of stonemasons, who were probably local but may have been instructed by master masons recruited from France. Kilpeck had used the same builders as a church with similar Romanesque carvings (now largely lost), to the north of Kilpeck at Shobdon, on which work began at some point after 1135. The South door at Kilpeck has double columns, the outer displaying carvings of serpent heads swallowing their tails. The inner right column features birds in foliage with a Romanesque-style Green Man on the capital at the head of the double column on the east side of the South door (see Plate 1 and the back cover illustration). The Green Man is disgorging stylised foliage and fruit of the same type as shown in the tree motif on the doorway's tympanum, which corresponds with the thesis put forward here that the seeds of the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (afterwards

known as the *Tree of Mercy*) placed under the tongue of Adam (by either Adam's son Seth, or the Angel of Mercy himself) are sprouting from his mouth, providing the wood for the Holy Cross and for mankind's redemption (see *Chapter Five* on Christian hagiography). Green Man motifs also appear as capitals on the decorated columns of the West window and large protruding dragon heads with coiled tongues appear at each corner of the nave's west wall. The meanings of such iconography and symbolism may be obscure to a modern eye, but would have been copied, or adapted, from a bestiary (or compendium of beasts, real and mythical, each representing a moral lesson, see *Glossary*), which were popular in medieval times (the earliest extant *Bestiary* manuscript dates from ca. 1120). While not all of the Kilpeck animals and mythical beasts appear in the extant manuscripts of such bestiaries it seems likely that a more complete set of references would have been in circulation and available to the stonemasons. The inclusion of an upside-down ibex (mistakenly identified by Simon Jenkins as a pig[35]) on one of the corbels, for example, offers conclusive proof that such bestiaries were consulted, in particular detail, as the inspiration and source for the sculptor's work. Of the ibex it states:[36]

> This creature has two horns, which are so strong that if it falls from a high mountain down a precipice, its horns bear the weight of its whole body and it escapes unhurt. The beast represents those learned men who understand the harmony of the Old and New Testaments, and if anything untoward happens to them, they are supported as if on two horns by all the good they have derived from reading the witness of the Old Testament and the Gospels.

Other every-day animals, as well as the fantastic creatures of legend and mythology, taken straight from the pages of the bestiaries, litter the decoration on the South doorway, including such beasts as the manticore (a human-headed lion with a 'pointed tail with a sting like that of a scorpion' who […] 'delights in eating human flesh'[37]) and a basilisk (a fabled reptile, or 'little/serpent king', mentioned in Pliny's *Naturalis historia* (*Natural History*), hatched by a cockerel from the egg of a serpent, who will 'kill a man simply by looking at him'[38]).

Inside the church the keystone of the apse depicts four lion heads. The lion is an ambiguous reference in church architecture, as touched upon at the beginning of this chapter. In the bestiaries it is said, 'the lion is proud by nature; he will not live with other kinds of beasts in the wild, but like a king disdains the company of the masses'.[39] The lioness is also shamed with pride, she 'stands for the human mind when Job says: "You have caught me because of my pride, like a lioness"'.[40] And:[41]

> […] the human mind, while seeking to feed carnal appetites, is caught in the trap which is concealed by freedom of choice, just as the lioness seeks food for her cubs and is killed in the pit intended to deceive her, because her enemies persuade her to reach out her paw for forbidden food.

The lion is also equated with Christ 'our Redeemer, the spiritual lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of Jesse, the son of David'.[42] While Christ is also equated with the 'true Panther', whose only enemy is the dragon, who rouses and rallies the other animals, who 'gather from far and near, and follow him wherever he goes',[43] and from whom the Dragon, 'hearing his voice, hides in terror in the bowels of the earth'.[44] The lion is also equated with God the Father, breathing life into Christ (following the Crucifixion),[45]

> […] when the lioness brings forth her cubs, they come into the world dead. She watches over them for three days, until on the third day the father comes, blows in their faces, and awakens them to life. In the same way the Almighty Father awoke our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day, as Jacob says: "He couched as a lion: who shall rouse him up?".

Finally, the lion is, confusingly, also equated with the devil, as the 'roaring lion' from the *First Epistle of Peter*, who 'walketh about, seeking whom he may devour'.[46] Especially so, according to the bestiaries, when a Pard, 'a mottled beast and very swift [and] thirsty for blood'[47] is 'adulterously' matched with a lioness, from which 'a third kind of beast [the Leopard] is born'. The bestiaries agree that the leopard has a mystical significance as either the devil, 'full of a diversity of vices',[48] or the sinner, 'spotted with crimes and a variety of wrongdoings'.[49]

The chancel arch at Kilpeck bears carvings said to have been inspired by those of the Puerta de las Platerias at Santiago de Compostela. Both Pevsner and Jenkins suggest the alternative influence of Ferrara Cathedral, 'the superimposing of sculpted figures on the shafts is found at Ferrara in Italy, but not in England'.[50] On the apex of the South doorway an angel (see Plate 2), a messenger of God, is carrying what appears to be a scroll and perhaps also a sword, in the manner of an angel from *The Book of Revelation*, bearing the gospel to those on earth:[51]

> And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,
>
> Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.

An alternative reading might be that the angel is the cherub barring the way to *The Tree of Life*, at the east gate of Eden. The tympanum presents a tree, in stylised form, that would represent either *The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (later becoming the *Tree of Mercy*) or *The Tree of Life*. Next to the angel is a phoenix, amid stylised flames and a 'nest' of interlaced design, commonly so described in medieval bestiaries:[52]

> The phoenix is known to live in certain places in Arabia and to live for five hundred years. When it knows that the end of its life is approaching, it builds a chrysalis of frankincense and myrrh and other spices, and when it is about to expire it goes into the chrysalis and dies. From its flesh a worm emerges, which gradually grows up: in due course it grows wings and appears in the form of the previous bird. The bird teaches us by its example to believe in the Resurrection […] The phoenix produces all the signs of the Resurrection […] O man, make your chrysalis, and putting off the old Adam, and all his deeds, clothe yourself in the new man. Your chrysalis and sheath is Christ, who will protect you and shelter you in the evil hour.

The angel and the phoenix are flanked by two, devouring or disgorging, masks, the one to the left with a pair of facing dragons, or serpents, issuing from the mouth, and the one to the right of a Green Man-type mask with two sprigs of foliage hanging from the mouth. If forces of mankind's salvation are apparent surrounding the doorway so too are those representing temptation and evil. A dragon appears in the apex medallion of the door arch. However, we note that the tip of the dragon's tail is limp, suggesting a loss of strength or impotence. As the *Bestiary* instructs us:[53]

> The dragon is larger than all the rest of the serpents and than all other animals in the world […] The dragon is like the devil, the fairest of all serpents, who often leaves his cave to rush into the air […] the devil rises from his abyss and transforms himself into an angel of light, deceiving fools with the hopes of vainglory and human pleasures. The dragon has a crest because the devil is the king of pride; its strength lies not in its teeth but in its tail, because having lost his power, the devil can only deceive with lies.

There seems to be much in the way of hidden riddles to decipher at Kilpeck, as elsewhere, and yet if the precise meaning of such images is a puzzle for us, the general themes of original sin and loss of grace, but also of the promise of salvation and the renewal of creation, in all of its brimming, ebullient and potential diversity, are also clearly apparent. It is important to keep these themes in mind when we turn to the true significance of the Green Man motif.