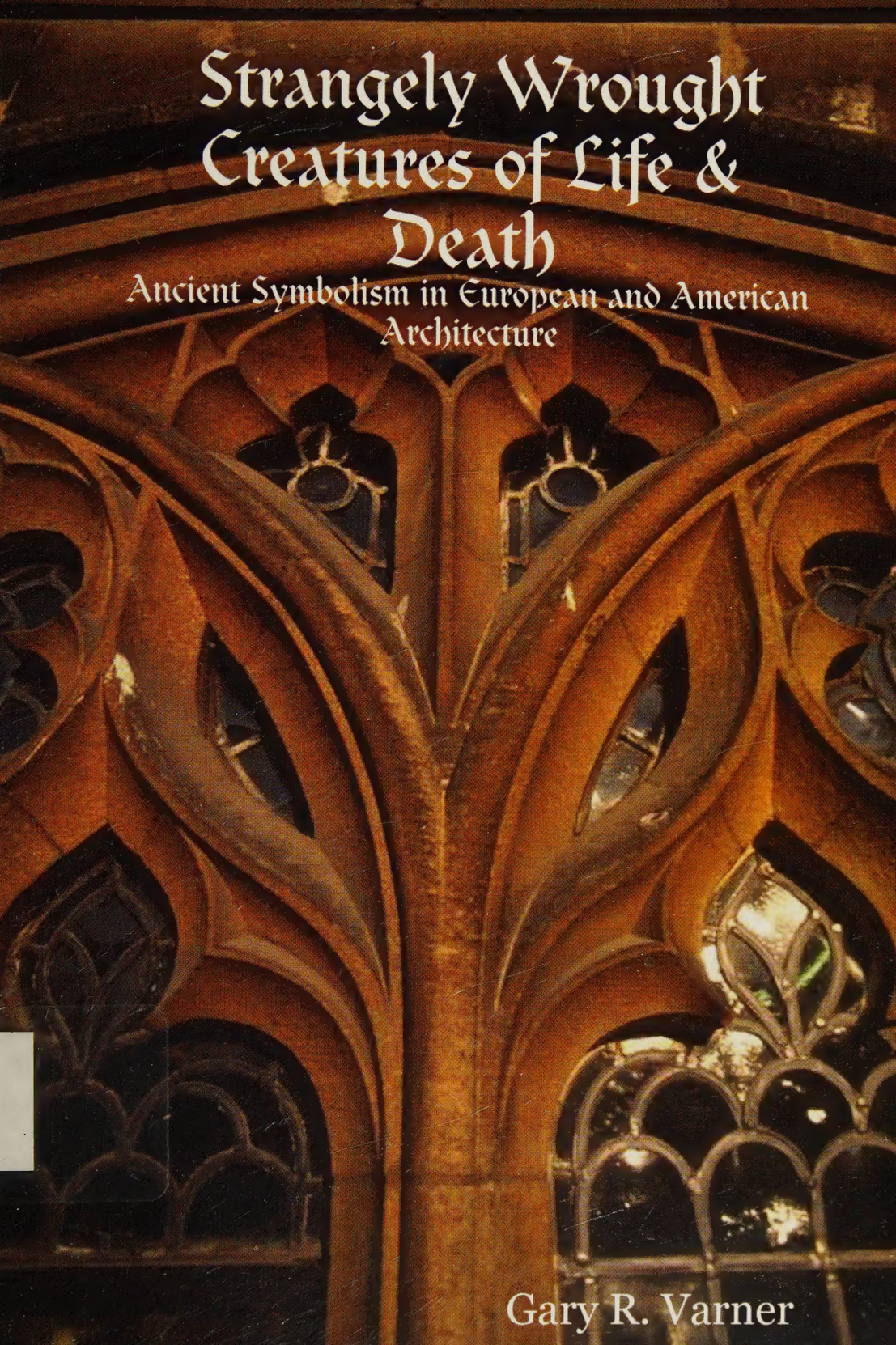

Strangely Wrought Creatures of Life & Death

Ancient Symbolism in European and American Architecture

Gary R. Varner

STRANGELY WROUGHT CREATURES OF LIFE & DEATH

ANCIENT SYMBOLS IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF EUROPE AND AMERICA

GARY R. VARNER

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Menhirs, Dolmen and Circles of Stone: The Folklore and Magic of Sacred Stone (2004)

The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature (2006)

Creatures in the Mist: Little People, Wild Men and Spirit Beings Around the World (forthcoming 2007)

"Gargoyles — Being strangely wrought creatures of life and death."
--Aleister Crowley, 1930

"These gargoyles and grotesques show very plainly the complete freedom under which the old craftsmen worked and the immense originality and variety that were the result. ...Craftsmen these, but also creative artists."
--Ralph Adams Cram
Gargoyles, Chimeres, and The Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture, 1930

"Early Christians in search of converts placed gargoyles on churches to entice pagans—their much-needed parishioners—inside. It was thought that by replicating the pagan use of fearsome carvings without officially condoning it, churches would seem more inviting."
--Darlene Trew Crist
American Gargoyles: Spirits in Stone, 2001

"Even though the functional role of a waterspout would have been served quite as well by a simple half-cylinder, gargoyles became an art form."
--Janetta Rebold Benton
Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings, 1997

"Many of these grotesque creatures display features—such as horns, pointed ears, and fangs—belonging to the iconography of the devil..."
--Chiara Piccinini
Medieval Folklore, 2000

"While gargoyles may have been written off as evil in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because paganism was considered 'bad,' during the Middle Ages, paganism was not bad, it was just part of the roots and traditions of everyday life...missionaries...consciously grafted Christian symbolism onto pre-existing pagan beliefs."
--Bill Yenne *Gothic Gargoyles, 2000*

"We are all apt to look on these grotesques as profane and indecent: but may not that arise from ignorance of their true meaning?"
--H.T. Ellacombe *Notes & Queries, Oct 1, 1859*

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Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), the English occultist, is responsible for part of the title to this book. In 1930, he wrote a collection of poems titled *Gargoyles: Being Strangely Wrought Creatures of Life and Death.* He certainly described these creatures accurately. For they are symbolic of the dual nature of our world, showing both humor and horror, beauty and deformity—much as Crowley's own life and character.

I would like to thank those scholars who have researched gargoyles and grotesques previously and who have left invaluable materials for others, like me, to study and to be inspired by. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Darlene Crist, John Blackwood, Janetta Rebold Benton, Bill Yenne, C.J.P. Cave and Lester Bridaham.

The photographs of the gargoyle excavated at Mt. Auxois and the mermaid figures photographed at St. Die Cathedral and Reims Cathedral are from Bridaham's book, *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture* published by Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc., New York. This work was published in 1930 and, because the author is dead and the publisher evidently no longer in existence, I would like to thank them here for documenting these images for future generations to enjoy and to study.

Unless otherwise noted all photographs were taken by the author. The photographs in the chapter titled Artistry for the Dead: Symbolism in Graveyards were taken in the Old City Cemetery, Sacramento, California.

The chapters on the Green Man originally appeared in my book *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature*, published by Algora Publishing, New York in 2006. They have been revised and updated here.

A NOTE ON THE CONTINUATION OF PAGAN SYMBOLISM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

Ancient symbolism continuously influences the lives of everyone, in every society, throughout time. This is because symbols are important to each generation and seem to be imbedded in the psyche. Symbols satisfy a need to be linked to an ancient tradition and the physical remains of that tradition. Overtime these symbols, and the various things they represent, become absorbed into the dominating culture and religion and come to represent the core values of those cultures and religions. This is especially obvious in the development of Christianity.

"Classical mythology," wrote E.P. Evans "was another source from which Christian symbolism derived many conceptions and forms subsequently embodied in ecclesiastical architecture. [Gentile converts] ...were also told that the pagan religions were not merely old wives' fables, but had a certain heavenly origin and historical justification as preparatory to Christianity, which they foreshadowed." [1]

Symbologist J.C. Cooper noted that "Symbolism is not only international, it also stretches over the ages; it has 'the virtue of containing within a few conventional lines the thought of the ages and the dreams of

[1] Evans, E.P. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture.* London: W. Heinemann 1896, 18.

the race. It kindles our imagination and leads us to realms of wordless thought.' (Lin Yu-tang)." [2]

The symbols and strange images we have today that are found in our cemeteries, on our religious structures, our banks and in our parks are the same symbols that have been part of the framework of the human psyche for thousands of years. While contemporary man of the 21st century may think that they are simply decorative manifestations of a by-gone era, they represent so much more. They represent the fears, dreams, ideas, beliefs and struggles that humankind has endured since we began to walk upright. This book will survey many of the icons that still reside alongside modern man and will give a meaning for them both in the context of ancient history and folklore as well as a meaning that is suitable for our contemporary times.

Dragons, gargoyles, mythical beasts and strange carvings of foliate faces are all around us. Ancient symbolism is as much a part of our lives as the newest Chryslers, Fords and Jaguars. Symbolic images of ancient design and meaning can be found not only on ecclesiastical buildings of the Old World, but also on Victorian and contemporary buildings in the New World. While in America many of these motifs are seen in historic structures dating from the mid 1800's to the early 1900's, the periodic revival of "pagan" feelings in the last few years, as they did during the Gothic Revival in Victorian England, has created a newfound awareness of these archetypes. Gargoyles, "Green Men," and other representations of ancient elemental spirits and ancient symbols can be found in most of the older American cities. They can also be found in newer

[2] Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.* New York: Thames and Hudson 1978, 7.

neighborhoods, if they are not part of the architecture their likenesses can be purchased in garden shops, craft stores and museum shops.

The recent resurgence of these images appears to reflect the fluid nature of the human psyche that occurs in society. The sacredness of the earth, the universal attachment to ancient myth, the knowledge that "something" is missing in our lives, and that so much of our natural world is in danger of extinction has re-established an attachment to our past. A past that is re-surfacing through an awareness of our linkage to religions and traditions that once dominated the world and greatly influenced who we are.

We have a "oneness" with these representatives of the ancient archetypes, even though so many of them may also, to some, represent our darkest nightmares. The primitive visages that we see looking down upon us from an old building somehow bring a certain level of comfort as well as awe to us. That is unless one has been programmed to see evil in anything unusual or otherworldly. Many people will be surprised that so many examples of these ancient symbols can be found near where they tread. However, if one were to look up more often, he or she may be amazed at the wondrous sights that have been patiently awaiting them.

Why or how these images came to be part of our architecture is subject to discussion. Perhaps they were a decorative fad at one time or functioned as metaphors for a troubled time. Regardless of their origins, they existed in the dawn of time and remain in man's universal unconsciousness. This book will provide pictorial examples of the images as well as any available historical information. In addition, we will attempt to provide the reader with the original meaning of the images as found in folklore, presented in a historical and religious perspective.

Our overall focus is to provide a record of these images before they are destroyed in "redevelopment" efforts, or simply crumble into dust. It is hoped that gargoyle and grotesque aficionados will find the photos and information contained in this volume of interest and of use in their own studies.

Gargoyle, Chester, England

GARGOYLES & GROTESQUES

Introduction

Gargoyles, those strange, monstrous beasts which reside in and on some of Europe's most famous churches and cathedrals also seem to have taken up residence not only on our own American continent, but in our imaginations and hearts. Over the years they have appeared in movies (*Gargoyles,* the 1972 production starring Cornel Wilde as an anthropologist investigating tales of winged demons in Arizona) and cartoon series as a half-human, ancient race of pseudo-super heroes. Green Men are commonly believed to be gargoyles but, while they share many of the physical locations, they are an entirely distinct species of art and can be regarded as *grotesques* rather than gargoyle. The Green Man's origins, meanings, and even some of his physical qualities have merged with the gargoyles although their paths have long been separate.

Gargoyles and grotesques can take a variety of forms. Dragons, devils, demons, half-human and half-animal are the most common but there are a large number as well that are caricatures of real people or classes of people. The styles and possible meaning and functions will be discussed here. While there is growing interest in these carvings, which originated during the time of ancient Egypt, there is not a large amount of meaningful written material concerning them. In fact, even though the Victorian age was responsible for a huge number of gargoyles during the

Gothic Revival period the architects and scholars who were responsible for the revival did not seem to care about the gargoyle's interpretation. There has not been much of an improvement in the 20th and 21st centuries either. Very little has been produced on the history or symbolism of these works of art. Books about Gothic and Romanesque church architecture especially that of France's Notre-Dame Cathedral, have the greatest amount of detail concerning gargoyle and grotesque carvings but as historic accounts they are superficial at best. As Bill Yenne wrote, "there is no accepted explanation of why they exist as they do." [3] The Gothic Revival period produced the largest and most varied number of gargoyles and grotesques—as well as the most beautifully carved—however, the origin of the gargoyle dates much earlier. According to Bridaham, "A gargoyle dug up at Alesia dating from 160 AD, shows a plain channel with a human head as spout." [4]

No two gargoyles are identical even though there were thousands at one time peering down from their lofty heights across Old Europe and Britain and many still exist today, although many of these are reconstructions.

It is unfortunate today that the art of stone carvings has almost died out in the Western World. There is hope however. One school of stone carving still operates in the United States and the master carvers which graduate from there are restoring and creating these magnificent works once again. The modern world would not be the same without these

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[3] Yenne, Bill. *Gothic Gargoyles.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books 2000, 18.
[4] Bridaham, Lester Burbank. *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and The Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc. 1930, xiv.

weird, humorous and monstrous objects, which reflect the hidden fears of our soul as well as our ancient past.

A 'rookery" of Gargoyles on the US Post Office, Corvallis, Oregon.

Boar-head gargoyle, Adair, Ireland

THE ORIGIN OF THE GARGOYLE

The word "*gargoyle*" comes from the Old French "*gargouille*" which is derived from the Late Latin "*gurgula*" meaning "throat" or "gullet." The connection is obvious when one considers that most gargoyles in the strict sense were intended to be gutter spouts to direct rainwater from the roofs of buildings. Over the years however, as is the case with language in general and certain words specifically, the word has changed and "gargoyles"[5] have come to symbolize any carving of a grotesque nature—regardless if the carving has a functional or purely decorative purpose.

Medieval folklore records the name "gargoyle" as originating in a dangerous dragon, called *La Gargouille* that lived in a cave near the Seine River in France. This dragon was described as having a long, serpent-like neck, heavy browns, slender jaws and snout, with membranous wings. The French people in that area came to fear the dragon due to the flooding caused by its ability to spout water, its destruction of ships and the damage caused by its fiery breath. The citizenry attempted to reduce its destructive acts by annually providing it with a human sacrifice—normally criminals although it apparently preferred maidens.

A Christian priest, of course, saved the day. Sometime during the 6th or 7th century Fr. Romanus rode into Rouen and told the people there

[5] One of the many theories concerning the English word gargoyle" is that it is derived from the French "gargariser" which means, "to gargle."

that he would take care of the dragon if they built a new church and agreed to be baptized. They, of course, agreed. Romanus, prepared with the tools needed for an exorcism, tamed the dragon by making the sign of the cross. He led the beast back to the village on a leash made from priestly garments where he promptly burned the dragon at the stake. The head and neck were severed and mounted on the town wall—becoming the inspiration for gargoyle making around France and Britain. [6] *La Gargouille* was carved in stone to commemorate the event on the exterior of the Rouen cathedral where it may still be seen today. An annual festival was held in Rouen to celebrate this victory of Christianity vs. dragon until the French Revolution brought it to an end. Bridaham noted that along with a procession and festival, "a criminal condemned to death was set free each year and given high honors." [7]

While the most distinctive gargoyles we are familiar with today originated in the early 12th century, the use of decorative water spouts was known to the ancient Egyptians, Etruscans, Greeks and Romans. Gargoyles of the ancient Greeks were acknowledged as far back as 1862. An article in *The Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal* of that year stated "We know how commonly the rainwater which fell on the roofs of Greek temples was made to issue from the mouths of lions carved on the cyms of the cornice: they were, in fact, the true gargoyles of the Greeks."[8]

Gargoyles may, in fact, have a much older past. A recent archeological find in southeastern Turkey, near the city of Şanlrurfa, disclosed a number

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[6] Benton, Janetta Rebold. *Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings.* New York: Abbeville Press 1997, 11-12.

[7] Bridaham, Lester Burbank. *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc. 1930, x.

[8] Smirke, Sydney. "Lectures on Architecture at the Royal Academy", in *The Civil Engineer and Architects Journal,* Vol. 25. London: W. Kent & Company 1862, 112.

of ancient sculptures dating some 11,000 years BCE. One of these is a creature decidedly similar to many of the gargoyles crafted on Christian cathedrals. Their purpose, according to Klaus Schmidt of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin, were to act as "'watchmen' of the period"—guardians of the ancient religious sanctuary that existed at this location during the Neolithic. [9] Gargoyles made during the Middle Ages may have had the same purpose.

The gargoyles rise to prominence during the Middle Ages was due to their use on cathedrals and other church structures. Depending on who you chose to believe, the church either viewed the demonic images carved in stone as a metaphor for Christianity's washing away the sins of the world and to frighten Satan, or, according to researcher Darlene Crist, they were "placed...on churches to entice pagans—their much needed future parishioners—inside."[10] Others say that the dragon and demon images were placed on religious buildings in order to subdue them, to hold them bound to the superior force of Christianity. "True gargoyles", wrote art historian Janetta Benton, "are thought to date from the beginning of the twelfth century. In the Gothic era, especially during the thirteenth century and thereafter, gargoyles became the preferred method of drainage." [11] In fact, the "true" gargoyle originated near what is today Paris, France around 1150 CE. Within one hundreds years, with the spread of Gothic architecture, gargoyles were appearing all over Europe.

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[9] "Human figures, wild animal reliefs unearthed in 11,000-year-old Göbeklitepe tumulus" in *Turkish Daily News*, Wednesday, October 11, 2006. www.turkishdailynews.com.tr

[10] Crist, Darlene Trew. *American Gargoyles: Spirits in Stone.* New York: Clarkson Potter 2001, 16

[11] Benton, op cit.

The classic gargoyle that we recognize today is no longer constrained by geography or time. It appears in the New World as it does in the Old. Gargoyles identical to those on Nortre-Dame Cathedral in Paris can also be found in Spain, the Netherlands, New York City and Corvallis, Oregon.

A classic gargoyle gracing an English cathedral.

While the early Gothic period gargoyles were stubby and crudely done, they quickly evolved and the images became more refined, realistically and artistically executed. How and why these images originated is lost to our contemporary age but we are able to safely conjecture that they represent a mixture of ancient Greco-Roman art and Celtic mythological creatures. Their re-emergence as fixtures on the grand

Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals of Europe in the 12th century is not doubted, but why they did emerge at that time is perplexing. Prior to the 12th century water spouts in the form of fantastic creatures appeared singularly, not in the rows or "rookeries of fantastic hybrid monsters"[12], as Bill Yenne calls them, that characterizes their appearance during the Gothic period.

Historian C.J.S. Thompson noted "In early Christian art, the use of monstrous forms was chiefly symbolic...Animals with human heads were introduced into stone reliefs...In one example of the tenth century, St. John is depicted with the head of a tortoise, St. Luke is depicted with the head of a fox and St. Mark as a lion.

"Fantastic and curious creatures," he continued "are often to be seen sculptured in stone about the cathedrals, abbeys and churches of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, where the monastic sculptures and carvers gave free play to their imagination. The most grotesque and fabulous monsters are sometimes represented as gargoyles...Among them are to be found human and animal faces contorted with pain or obviously suffering from certain diseases; others take the form of devils and demons, people with deformities, dwarfs performing acrobatic feats, diabolical heads and hideous masks."[13]

The use of gargoyles as decorative and functional architectural motifs continued into the 16th century and appeared not only on ecclesiastical buildings but also on homes and secular buildings throughout Europe.

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[12] Yenne, op cit., 14.

[13] Thompson, C.J.S. *Mystery and Lore of Monsters.* New York: Barnes & Noble Publishing 1994, 120.

GARGOYLES AND THE CHURCH

Gargoyles and grotesques are found around the world. In many of California's missions the friars created *lavanderias*, or open air laundry areas that were used not only for washing clothes but for bathing. At California's largest and richest mission, Mission San Luis Rey located today in northern San Diego County; water from the San Luis Rey River was diverted into channels and poured out of the mouths of "gargoyles" carved into walls. It is unknown if these grotesque images added to or minimized the Indian's ritual use of water. Constructed in 1798 with the use of forced Indian labor, we are uncertain if the Franciscan friars or the Indians carved these gargoyles, but undoubtedly, the concept was one brought to Old California from the Old World. It is interesting to note that the San Luis Rey gargoyles are very similar to one excavated at Mount Auxois, France that dates to 160 AD. Another water feature very similar to the Mission San Luis Rey and Mount Auxois gargoyles is that of an ancient Celtic carved head at a natural spring in Clwyd, Wales. The carving serves the same purpose—water from the spring pours from its mouth into a pool below it. It undoubtedly was symbolic of a water spirit or god.

Mount Auxois Gargoyle, France 160 CE

Mission San Luis Rey Gargoyle, California 1798 CE

Some have theorized that these images were placed on ecclesiastical structures to protect them, to act as magical "stop" signs to repel Satan and his minions, or as "spiritual scarecrows." Others take the opposite view, stating that gargoyles were made as ugly as possible to actually represent evil. In this way, parishioners were made to feel safer once they entered the church—knowing that evil and danger lurked outside the sanctified walls of the church.

The stonemasons had not used the image of the devil in religious sculpture until the middle of the tenth century. As the year 1000 approached, however, it suddenly became a worry of everyone that the world may come to an end with Christ's return as foretold in the Bible. "In consequence of this state of fearful anticipation," wrote Evans, "we find the devil and his acolytes making their appearance in the latter half of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century on the capitals and friezes, the doorways and pediments of churches, frequently as human monsters with jagged wings and forked tails, or that hideous abortion of an affrighted imagination, the dragon. The object of such creations was to exert a religious influence by inspiring terror." [14]

Evans remarks may very well give us a good foundation as to *why* and *how* the gargoyles and grotesques were created—they were part of the churches campaign to ensure that the parishioners lived in utter terror of the End of Days. How better to enforce church attendance and docility than by providing a daily reminder of the horrors to come.

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[14] Evans, E.P. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture.* London: W. Heinemann 1896, 333-334.

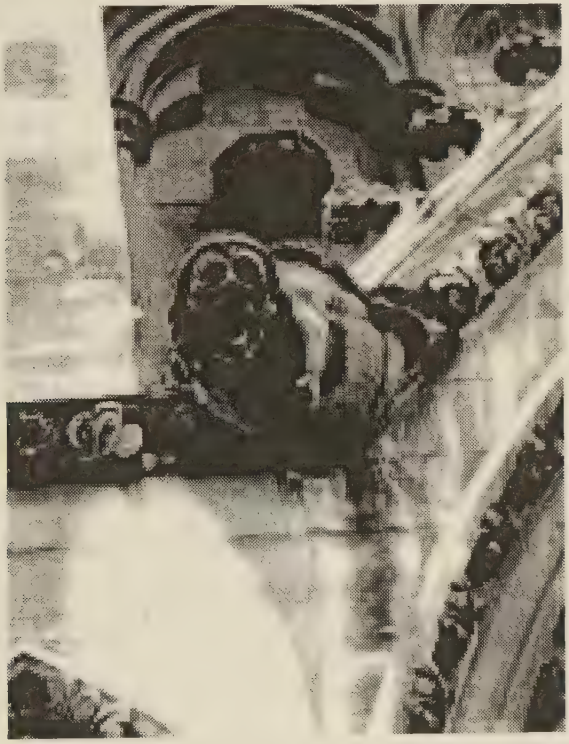
A pair of hybrid gargoyles, Westminster Abbey, London.

However, Evans goes on, as the millennium came and went without the end of the world the gargoyles and grotesques took on a different form. By the 15th century they became, as Evans says, "far more comical than terrible…They are devils who are fallen into dotage and visible decay, and with whom the artist can take all sorts of liberties, turning them into clowns and buffoons for the amusement of the populace." [15]

Some of the most common attributes of both gargoyle and grotesque are horns and cloven hoofs. Many Green Man images in North America contain either the curved horns of the ram or the straight horns so often associated with Satan. These characteristics are part of a far older religious tradition, pre-dating Christianity by thousands of years. These horned gods were worshipped to ensure prosperity and fertility. Fertile fields and herds, as well as human fertility were fragile things that must continue to

[15] Ibid., 334.

ensure the survival of the human species. Pan, Faunus, Cernunnos and other gods of fertility are perhaps the oldest of humankind's deities. The Christian church did all that it could do to either destroy the time honored traditions and rituals that focused on these gods or to assimilate them into the Christian iconography. Pan, Faunus and Cernunnos became images of the Devil and their forms were taken from pagan temples to decorate early Christian structures. Over time, their images became part of Christian symbolism but they retained their dual natures, representing the pagan way of life and belief as well as the Christian warning for demons and the consequences of sin.



The Church embraced these pagan images but only as a way to instruct the commoners that the old ways were evil and must be thrown off if salvation was to be obtained. In so doing, the Church ensured that the gargoyle and grotesque would survive and continue to exist in their dual nature .

The photo above shows a "composite" gargoyle. In this instance, the figure has a human face and arms but a reptilian body. These fantastic forms were the carvers delight. Benton wrote that these "fantastic creatures [do] not necessarily mean that their existence was believed in literally....emphasis was, above all, on the moral edification a creature provided...Medieval artist seem to have preferred the fantastic, or at least the real animal distorted, over the accurately recorded real animal." [16]

[16] Benton, op cit, 124-125.

GROTESQUES & GREEN MEN

Grotesques are a close, almost identical, cousin of the gargoyle. The main difference is that the grotesques do not act as water spouts—they simply *are*—residing as peculiar and imaginative objects of art upon some of our most interesting architecture.

The origin and purpose of grotesques has piqued the interests of people ever since they began to appear as architectural motifs. "Where may one find an explanation," asked a nineteenth century reader of the British journal, *Notes and Queries*, "of grotesque figures often seen in old churches, both in *carved* stone and painted glass…And why represented in a sacred edifice?"[17]

St. Bernard of Clairvaux asked the same question in the year 1125:

"Of what use to the brothers reading piously in the cloisters are these ridiculous monstrosities, these prodigies of deformed beauty, these beautiful deformities?... Almighty God! If we are not ashamed of these unclean things, we should at least regret what we have spent on them." [18]

Who Carved These Creatures and Why?

There are a variety of opinions and theories as to how gargoyles and grotesques wound up on ecclesiastical structures such as the magnificent Nortre-Dame Cathedral. Many researchers have concluded that the church had them carved to either attract pagans into the fold or, as Evans

[17] *Notes and Queries*, Vol. 8, 2nd Series, August 13, 1859, pg. 130.

[18] As quoted in *Oxford's Gargoyles and Grotesques* by John Blackwood. Oxford: Charon Press 1986, 2.

told us earlier, to warn those heathens what awaited them after death. Others have theorized that the carvers themselves, predominately pagan in their traditions and beliefs, freely designed and carved them to make fun of their Christian employers or to endow these Christian buildings with an older, pagan symbolism.

Unfortunately, we may never get a clear and concise history of the carvers, their art or their subject matter. As Piccinini noted, gargoyles have "generally been overlooked in art history studies" and only "occasionally cited in research on single folkloric themes." [19]

Because the gargoyle has been in a continuous state of restoration, (the original gargoyles on Nortre-Dame reportedly were destroyed during the French Revolution and completely restored later, beginning in 1830) it is impossible in many instances to determine the original images from the newer ones, much less date them. This also causes some major difficulties for folklorists in attempting to study any thematic connection between gargoyles as well as gargoyles and the structures they inhabit. Although gargoyles most certainly are based on ancient traditions and folklore any attempt to classify themes "and their significance and origins," writes Piccinini, "seems a particularly difficult undertaking, at least for the moment." [20]

Most gargoyles made during the Middle Ages were constructed of limestone, Brabantine sandstone or marble although gargoyles made entirely of lead were common from the 16th century and the Chrysler Building in New York City sports a rookery of art deco stainless steel

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[19] Piccinini, Chiara. "Gargoyles" in *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 169
[20] Ibid., 170

gargoyles. An example of an early lead gargoyle were those made for the Reims Cathedral in France which were installed after a fire in 1481.

Gargoyles appear to have an evolution all of their own. At first crudely done during the early 12th century, they eventually became more complex with human figures replacing the usual animal fare.

Early writers, as well as many contemporary researchers, believed that gargoyles were a cultural icon left from the ancient pagan past. In an article appearing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1889 the author wrote "I fancy that many of these old carvings on gargoyles and fonts are merely traces of a heathenism which lasted on into Christian days—a heathenism which Christianity overlapped and absorbed." [21]

Even Theodore Roosevelt had an opinion about why gargoyles were created. He wrote in 1913, "The makers of the gargoyles knew very well that the gargoyles did not represent what was most important in the Gothic cathedrals. They stood for just a little point of grotesque reaction against, and relief from, the tremendous elemental vastness and grandeur of the Houses of God. They were imps, sinister and comic, grim and yet futile, and they fitted admirably into the framework of the theology that found its expression in the towering and wonderful piles which they ornamented." [22]

Benton agrees with Roosevelt in his assessment. Gargoyles were created, she says, as "yet another form of visual pleasure in medieval life—that of amusement..." She goes on to equate the gargoyle as 'examples of what may appropriately be termed 'medieval mischief,' and

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[21] Addy, S.O. "A Yorkshire Village", in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. CCLXVII, July to December. London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly 1889, 34.

[22] Roosevelt, Theodore. *History as Literature and Other Essays.* New York; Charles Scribner's Sons 1913, 308.

go some way to showing us how the inhabitants of the Middle Ages came to terms with and enjoyed their world." [23] As one scholar noted, "Grotesque art, then, expresses the repressed."[24]

Grotesque of a dragon, Hampton Court, Surrey, England (1515-1530)

However, Benton notes as well that "only occasionally do they represent obvious religious subjects" although they may have been created to act as protectors of the church structure from outside evil or to enforce the belief that hell is not a nice place and certain punishment existed for all sinners. [25]

We are yet again faced with the uncertainty of the very reason *why* the gargoyle was created and the true purpose it served, the debate over the

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[23] Benton, Janetta Rebold. *Art of the Middle Ages.* London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002, 19.
[24] Bienville, Michael de. *Gargoyles.* Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel 1996, 20.
[25] Ibid., 198.

origin and purpose, if there was one, of gargoyles is likely to be a prolonged one.

How and why many of the gargoyles and grotesques were created at approximately the same time in so similar a fashion, even though hundreds of miles separated the buildings upon which they resided, is one of cultural context. The gargoyles originally appeared in an area approximating the original Celtic world. It may be safe to assume that where the pagan traditions of the Celts existed, so did the gargoyles. It was an unforeseen boon for the stone carvers that the Church was willing to employ them on an extended basis for the construction of the great Gothic cathedrals. What better canvas for the carvers to work with but huge unadorned buildings? Most of the gargoyles and grotesques were fashioned on the ground and hauled into place with the use of a windlass and pulley. While some were carved *in situ,* they usually were the results of planning and careful artistry—models in clay being crafted to ensure that the proper effect was obtained.

To assume that these carvings were created, and then installed, on ecclesiastical buildings without the knowledge and consent of Church leaders would be incorrect. As noted previously, St. Bernard was well aware of them and was highly critical, if not shocked. While this view was common among Orthodox Christians, who declared that such creativity and supporters of the arts were "heathens and pagans",[26] his attitude could not have been universal among the Catholic clergy because, if it were, more than likely the gargoyle makers would have been stopped before their sculptures began to appear in thousands of locations around

[26] Ellerbe, Helen. *The Dark Side of Christian History.* Orlando: Morningstar and Lark 1995, 56. This belief may very well have been true.

Europe. As Benton theorized, "Like medieval grotesque art in general, gargoyles may be survivals of pagan beliefs the Church permitted to persist besides Christian subjects, incorporated into church decoration for superstitious reasons." [27]

Hundreds of years earlier, however, Pope Gregory instructed his clergy to utilize pagan temples and buildings as Christian places of worship, to replace the pagan idols with Christian relics, to continue animal sacrifice but to use the meat for Christian feasts, and to keep some festivals and icons that had been popular with the peasants as aids to conversion and to increase church attendance. Reasons for the appearance of gargoyles and grotesques are many and they all may have some basis in fact.

The fact that gargoyles and grotesques continued in their popularity long after Christianity had pushed the pagan traditions aside attests to the images becoming cultural and architectural icons—decorative motifs in the best sense of the word—on secular as well as ecclesiastical structures.

While there is some debate as to the geographic origin of the grotesque, Good year wrote "The introduction of grotesque forms of animals or men in these ornaments is peculiar to [the Romanesque] period…These grotesques represent the fantastic and original spirit of the Germanic North as contrasted with the more sedate Byzantine dependence on earlier classic designs." [28]

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[27] Benton, 1997, op cit., 23.

[28] Goodyear, W.H. *Roman and Medieval Art.* Meadville: The Chautaugua-Century Press 1893, 155.

A working gargoyle, Adair, Ireland.

Grundy discounts the assumption that the carvings were Christian symbols of evil and sin, writing, "taking into account St. Bernard's unfamiliarity with the carved imagery, it can...be anticipated that the subject-matter had little to do with Christian doctrine but much to do with the carvers themselves." [29] Anthony Weir and James Jerman provide us with another view though, "sculptures then, as workers now, did not carve what they were not commissioned to do, nor what they were not paid for." [30] In fact, according to these two researchers, "no mason would have been allowed to perpetrate, or been paid for, work of this kind in so

[29] Grundy, Thirlic. *Going in Search of the Green Man in Cumbria.* Cumbria: Thumbprint 2000, 6.

[30] Weir, Anthony and James Jerman. *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches.* London: Routledge 1999, 8.

exposed a position at the entrance to a Christian edifice, unless his work had been done with the connivance or direction of his patrons."[31]

The carvings produced by these craftsmen undoubtedly reflect their own experiences, values, traditions and beliefs even though they were paid to carve them by an institution which must have viewed their work as reflective of Hell rather than heaven.

Master masons in the Middle Ages were not chosen at random. Rather, as Benton noted, they were required to undergo years of study in a church or monastery school, serve as an apprentice for another five to seven years, and then to create a "master work" which permitted them to become an "architect" of that period in time. [32] Each of the gargoyle and grotesque carvers worked closely with the master mason, who was responsible for the entire construction of the church or cathedral. The twentieth century stonemasons responsible for the gargoyles and grotesques present on the Washington National Cathedral are not so different as their 12th century brothers. "Wrought from personal experience and handcrafted with the tools and skills of their trade," notes folklorist Marjorie Hunt, "the stone carvers' freehand carvings are quintessential expressions of the spirit of freedom and responsibility that pervades their work—poignant, powerful statements of individual creativity and shared cultural values." [33] Stone carvers today, as they did in the past, share "esoteric" knowledge among themselves, knowledge which surfaces in their carvings.

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[31] Ibid., 20.
[32] Benton 2002, 198
[33] Hunt, Marjorie. *The Stone Carvers: Master Craftsmen of Washington National Cathedral.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1999, 136.

"What they [the carvers] themselves thought of what they were doing, they did not tell us; they worked with stone, not words", wrote John Blackwood. "Perhaps they were just enjoying themselves." [34]

A horned and fanged grotesque, Sacramento, California.

C.J.P. Cave believed that the many carvings appearing on churches during the Middle Ages were a mixture of Church direction and artisan choice. "The master builder," he wrote "may have been responsible for them, or the individual craftsmen may have made their own choice. ...there is no question that a programme fixed by church authorities would not have allowed the indecent little scenes found in some church

[34] Blackwood, John. *Oxford's Gargoyles and Grotesques.* Oxford: Charon Press 1986, 2.

bosses…." [35] However, he also noted that "in certain churches the subjects…were obviously chosen by the authorities, and the carvers had to follow their instructions…." [36] The give and take relationship of the cravers and their religious employers must have been agreeable to both, since the beautiful churches and cathedrals, adorned with gargoyles and grotesques, multiplied throughout Britain and Europe over the next few hundred years.

Nineteenth century historian W. H. Goodyear agreed, writing "The stonecutter of the Middle Ages was given a capital to decorate and was himself the artist who conceived and did the whole thing. This means that the execution was vital and vigorous, that the pattern itself was an inventive and creative effort, not a mechanical copy…"[37] Goodyear also notes that each gargoyle was its own distinctive design—no two ever alike.

It is probable that many of the gargoyles found in churches were, in fact, intended as religious symbols—symbols of warning to a sinful population. Bridaham agreed, writing, "the clergy regarded every stone in the fabric of the cathedral as a religious symbol…" [38] Bridaham believed that the true meaning behind these sculptures is obscure today simply "because we have lost the unrecorded local tradition."[39]

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[35] Cave, C.J.P. *Medieval Carvings in Exeter Cathedral.* London: Penguin Books 1953, 18.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Goodyear, op cit., 193.
[38] Bridaham, Lester Burbank. *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and The Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc. 1930, xii.
[39] Ibid.

Gargoyles on a Chester steeple, England.

"A gargoyle said to depict the devil devouring an unbaptized child on the south transept on the Church of Saint Aldhelm, in Doulton, England, supports this interpretation", [40] wrote Benton. A series of carvings at the Cathedral of Saint John in Den Bosch, the Netherlands graphically depicts people cringing in terror as gargoyles leap out from buttresses. This image, however, is unique to this 16th century cathedral.

[40] Benton, 1997, op cit., 24.

Many grotesques craved after the Middle Ages were undoubtedly created as decorative or for some other reason. The satyr sculptures appearing on the Wall Pavilion at The Zwinger in Dresden, crafted in the 1730's, were designed to offer some esoteric protection of the exotic plants there during the winter.

The Dragon as Grotesque

Dragons seem to fill everyone's dreams of fantasy. Children and adults both love them and they are important cultural icons in both the East and the West. They are also among the most common of those carvings known as "grotesques" and gargoyles. "Fantastic animals such as dragons," writes Rosa Giorgi, "became major figures in the history of art thanks to their being mentioned in canonical sources and legends…" [41]

The dragon was often used to represent the Devil and evil. In legend, once the dragon (Devil) was defeated the entire population of pagans would convert to Christianity. Many early saints and martyrs are remembered for their heroic battles against terrible dragons in battles of good against evil. [42] And, of course, the saints won out in the end.

However, the dragon is also the national symbol of Wales, appearing as the primary image on the Welsh flag. The Welsh Celts adopted the image, according to Alexander, "after Merlin found two dragons fighting each other in a cavern beneath Vortigern's fortress." [43] We must remember too that King Arthur's father was Uther Pendragon, whose

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[41] Giorgi, Rosa. *Angels and Demons in Art.* Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum 2005, 99.

[42] Some of these are, of course, St. George, the Archangel Michael, Saint Martha and Mary Magdalene who was said to have defeated a dragon with a blessing and a sprinkling of holy water.

[43] Alexander, Marc. *A Companion to the Folklore, Myths & Customs of Britain.* Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited 2002, 73.

name meant "Great Dragon." In China, the dragon represents the highest spiritual power as well as strength and supernatural wisdom. Again, as with most cultural symbols, its meaning is dual—representing both good and evil.

Because the dragon symbolizes ferocity in battle, it often was adopted in heraldic crests throughout Europe—an obvious diversion from Church symbolism.

The Green Man

Kathleen Basford believed that the Green Man image found on so many cathedrals and other ecclesiastical structures represented punishment rather than life. Writing in her book *The Green Man*, she noted, "although the Green Man was a much loved motif I think it is very unlikely that he was revered as a symbol of the renewal of life in springtime." [44]

The Green Man, according to Basford, "represents the darkness of unredeemed nature" and "the root of all evil." [45] While the Green Man does have a dual nature, it is certainly not evil but illustrates the very characteristics of nature—both of death and life and mankind's fate if it chooses to abuse nature rather than live within the bounds of nature's rules. It appears more likely that those with strict Christian upbringing may see the "darkness and unredeemed nature" of the Green Man as perceived by Basford rather than as a representation of Nature and the spirit of the forests. It is perhaps our concept of "God" and "good and evil" which dictates for each of us what the Green Man is.

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[44] Basford, Kathleen. *The Green Man.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 1978, 20.
[45] Ibid., 21.

Wooden carved Green Man, ca. 1850 California.

Marc Alexander wrote "The most puzzling aspect of the woodland entity known as the Green Man is that while he is obviously pagan, carvings of his face with foliage sprouting from his mouth are to be found in over a hundred cathedrals and churches in Britain…there is no explanation as to why representations of the Green Man were so universal." [46] Rosslyn Chapel, in Scotland, alone has over 100 Green Man images carved in stone.

In North America, the carvings of Green Men are not part of religious architectural motifs, but rather incorporated into old public buildings such as post offices, banks and apartment buildings. This is contrary to those carvings in Britain where a majority, but not all, are found on, and in, church buildings. During the Middle Ages, as well as before this time, the buildings that were designed and built to last were places of power—those being castles and fortresses of the government and churches. We are familiar with many of the grotesque figures of gargoyles found on many of the cathedrals. So too do carvings of Green

[46] Alexander, op cit. 114.

Men appear on and in these magnificent structures. The reasons for their appearance on these Christian shrines have been debated for years. They are considered by many to be pagan survivals, which were either incorporated by the early church architects to show dominance over pagan beliefs or intentionally carved by pagan stonemasons as an intended statement of "we are not vanquished." Some have suggested that the numerous carved foliate heads found in churches represent the continuation of the ancient Celtic head cult into the Christian era. At the same time, other researchers suggest that the Green Man motif was popular simply as a survival of classical art and constitute a fondness of *style* rather than *substance of meaning.*[47]

The origin for the Green Man is surely ancient although its meaning may have changed and evolved over time. Malcolm Jones notes that "heads emerging from or above stylized acanthus leaves can be found in Roman sculpture (an on the third-century BCE so-called Jupiter columns at Cirencester and elsewhere.)" [48] Jones, however, believes that the foliate head was simply a "decorative commonplace" by the eighth century. [49]

Researcher Clive Hicks wrote, "Commentators have found no mention of the Green Man in Medieval texts, [50] and the image seems to have been used in a wholly intuitive way, accepted but not explained." [51]

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[47] MacDermott, Mercia. *Explore Green Men.* Loughborough: Explore Books/Heart of Albion Press 2003.

[48] Jones, Malcolm. "Green Man" in *Medieval Folklore.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 186.

[49] Ibid.

[50] While the Green Men may not have been written about specifically in early texts, their images were used in illuminated manuscripts in the 10th century.

[51] Hicks, Clive. *The Green Man: A Field Guide.* Helhoughton: COMPASSbooks 2000, 8-9. Hicks' statement is true as far as specific commentaries written during that time, however, there are some manuscripts from this time that included the motif in the illustrations and the 13th century sketchbook of Villard de Honnecourt included several such depictions.

While many of the carvings, according to Hicks, were intended to be purely decorative, he also believes that a great many were the result "of a deep, but probably intuitive, sense of symbolism." [52] Researcher Carol Ballard has a similar view, writing in her booklet *The Green Man: The Shakespeare Connection:*

"...rarely, if ever, can the Green Man be said to be a purely decorative ornament devoid of meaning." [53]

Basford agreed, proclaiming, "Rarely if ever can the Green Man be considered a 'meaningless' ornament or an empty echo."[54]

There is also some indication that in the Christian church the Green Man is directly related to the Madonna and Child and to Jesus in particular. Hicks noted in his book, *The Green Man: A Field Guide*, that "one boss in the vault of the Lady Chapel in Ely might be seen as a green Virgin and Child, and another, at Lincoln, as a green Christ. Two of the most important we discovered were from Exeter Cathedral, where a choir corbel shows the Madonna and Child surrounded by the foliage pouring from the mouth of a Green Man, and from Frieburg im Breisgau, where the Easter Sepulcher, containing a carved figure of Christ in the tomb, is framed by weeping green men." According to Hicks, "these were clearly intentional iconography, not customary decoration, not pagan survivals, not warnings against sin."

However, C.J.P. Cave, a celebrated architectural photographer of British cathedrals, wrote "In various parts of the cathedral [of Exeter] we find heads with stems of plants coming out of their mouths. This motif is

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[52] Ibid. 9

[53] Ballard, Carol. *The Geen Man: The Shakespeare Connection.* Warwickshire: Self published 1999, 6

[54] Basford, Kathleen. *The Green Man.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 1978, 21

very common from Norman times to the end of the Gothic period, and I suppose that it may be a survival from tree worship which had come down through the Middle Ages, just as Jack-in-the-Green has come down almost to our own days." [55]

Nicholas Mann, writing in *His Story: Masculinity in the Post-Patriarchal World,* notes that it may seem ironic that the Green Man, a very pagan symbol, "makes his most frequent appearances in ecclesiastical architecture." However, Mann believes that "in this case, the denial of a chthonic and daemonic immanent power by the Church...has led to its most vital expression in the elements of wood and stone which form the places of worship of the Church. There is irony in this, a quality much loved by the Green Man." [56]

When did the carvings of the Green Men first appear in British ecclesiastical architecture? The evidence is that they first appeared in large numbers in the late Norman period, from the late 12th to the early 16th centuries.[57] This is the same period of time that gargoyles became prolifically crafted upon Europe's cathedrals. The Doel's note that the popularity of foliate head carvings was most evident in the 14th and 15th centuries following the Black Death. This would certainly make sense with the symbolism of life and fertility being associated with the Green Man—an intuitive response to the grotesque death that killed over a third of the population in Europe. Basford writes that the "history and development of the Green Man in the Church can...be followed continuously from the

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[55] Cave, C.J.P. *Medieval Carvings in Exeter Cathedral.* London: Penguin Books 1953, 12

[56] Mann, Nicholas R. *His Story: Masculinity in the Post-Patriarchal World.* St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications 1995, 143

[57] Doel, Fran & Geoff. *The Green Man in Britain.* Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Ltd. 2001, 37

fourth or fifth century. Though pagan in origin, the motif evolved within the Church and, during the Middle Ages, became part of its symbolic language."[58]

The Green Man image was brought to Irish churches somewhere between 1128 and 1150 CE. Champneys wrote that the distinction between Norman influences on church architectural motifs and influences from other sources are difficult to determine, however "the human heads, sometimes of a grotesque kind, seem to...be of very early date...of unmistakably Norman character..."[59]

The Green Man may be identified more directly with Sylvanus, the Roman "country god', the god of the oak. Thirlie Grundy, writing in her little book *The Green Man in Northumberland and County Durham*, notes that during the Middle Ages when the large stone churches began to replace the small wooden ones, stonemasons did not exist. It was the wood carvers who were called upon to fashion the extensive and ornate stonework. "On finding themselves in charge of stone-building projects", asserts Grundy, the woodcarvers "had summoned the aid of their most trustworthy ally—the powerful, spiritual god of the oak, or today's enigmatic Green Man." [60] Sylvanus, also known as the "woodland god", was a Roman-Celtic tree deity of ancient Britain. Basford wrote of a leaf mask carving on a fountain at the French Abbey of Saint-Denis. Dating back to 1200 CE the fountain has a series of heads carved on the basin, each head with the name of a particular deity engraved over it. The one

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[58] Basford 1978, op cit., 19

[59] Champneys, Arthur C. *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture*. New York: Hacker Art Books/Irish University Press 1970, 114-115

[60] Grundy, Thirlie. *The Green Man in Northumberland and County Durham*. Carlisle Cumbria: Thumbprint 2001, 3

Green Man face represented is named "Silvan."[61] An altar dedicated to him was set up in Yorkshire, on Scargill Moor, by the occupying Roman army. [62]

The concept of the woodland god, the foliate head or Green Man, appears to have followed the Roman armies as they trekked through conquered lands, eventually adopted by the early Christians who aided in the Green Man's spread along trade and pilgrim routes. While early Christian authorities may have used the Green Man image to induce the pagan community to go to church, it is also possible that the early Christian faith did not have a clear definition between the ancient Pagan traditions and the new Christian faith, which so heavily borrowed from the past. Because of this lack of definition, the two traditions became fused together—pagan and Christian—co-existing in the same religious structures for hundreds of years. As researcher John Timpson wrote, "maybe in those days no one was quite sure they [the pagan gods] wouldn't make a comeback—so these medieval craftsmen were just hedging their bets." [63]

William Anderson, however, believed that the incorporation of the Green Man motif into church architecture and art was perhaps unconsciously intentional:

"...the missionary saints needed to bring the greatest source of living power on earth under the guidance of Christ: the power that is in grass and leaf and sap on which all living things depend. Though they knew that

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[61] Basford 1978, op.cit. 15

[62] Hutton, Ronald. *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1991, 208

[63] Timpson, John. *Timpson's Leylines: A Layman Tracking the Ley's.* London: Cassell & Co. 2000, 29

demonic forces dwelt among the works of Nature, they had at the same time to assert the goodness of creation, and there arose a dualism between their fear of the demonic and the beauty and usefulness of God's work." [64] Green Man researcher Mike Harding has estimated that there are five times the numbers of Green Man figures in Exeter Cathedral as there are of Jesus. This would certainly imply that they have held an important function and spiritual place in the Christian church for a significant period of time prior to the Reformation.

Green Man, Kensington district, London

One notable boss at Exeter is that of a woman within a mass of vines, holding the stems in her hands. Cave believes that many of these carvings

[64] Anderson, William. *Green Man: The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth.* London: Harper Collins 1990, 54.

were not completed under Church authority, but rather by craftsmen that "may in such bosses easily have given rein to their humour, knowing that as soon as the work was done it would pass unnoticed from the floor of the church...." [65] Other images that may be thought strange in Christian churches, unless one takes into account the then contemporary mixture of folk-religion, paganism and Christianity, include wild men and centaurs. Cave notes that early legend "explains the human part of the centaur as a type of Christ." [66]

The early Churches' obvious comfort with pagan imagery is most noticeable on the tomb of Saint Abre in the Church of Saint-Hilaire-le-Grand in Poitiers. The tomb, dating from the 4th or 5 century C.E., is decorated with a variety of Pagan themes, including dolphins, and a foliate head. Basford notes, "it is a curious carving, quite unlike the Hellenistic leaf masks. The head is surrounded by contiguous and overlapping leaves which may represent the hair and beard, while large sprays of stylized foliage and flowers spring from the nostrils and extend on either side of the head, like fantastic moustaches." [67] It is this carving, according to Basford, which may be the prototype of the Green Man images of the medieval period. The foliate head at Saint Abre is the first example of the "disgorger of vegetation" in Europe. [68] It was from this same area in France that the Gothic style of Green Man developed. [69]

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[65] Cave, op cit., 18

[66] Ibid, 22

[67] Basford, K. H. "Quest for the Green Man", in *Symbols of Power.* Edited by H.R. Ellis Davidson. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Ltd. 1977, 107

[68] Anderson, William. op cit. 46

[69] Harte, Jeremy. *The Green Man.* Andover: Pitkin Unichrome Ltd 2001, 2

For approximately three hundred years, between the 10th and 12th centuries, the foliate mask began to change, to represent evil and sin—in fact; the foliate head became part of the exclusive realm of demonology. To this day, many examples of these demon masks exist—including some in the United States. The 13th century reversed this trend with a delightful focus on the lifelike and natural quality of the carved leaves. The obvious struggle between nature and man is shown in many of the Green Man images during the 13th to 15th centuries.

Sexuality and fertility may be associated with the Green Man image in some areas. Weir and Jerman believe that some Green Men were carved by craftsmen that had the May Day festivals in mind rather than anything else. "At Linley in Shropshire," they write, "a twelfth-century weather-worn tympanum depicts a figure, arms akimbo, legs widely-splayed, surrounded by greenery, some of which sprouts from him." [70]

Myth and images of the Green Man certainly influenced the art of the Florentine Renaissance.[71] Fifteenth century artist Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510), who painted for the Medici family for half of his life, was given artistic freedom by Lorenzo Medici who was himself influenced by Christian Neo-Platonism, which tried to reconcile classical (pagan) and Christian views. Botticelli's *La Primavera*, painted around 1478, is perhaps his most famous painting incorporating Pagan themes in the Christian Neo-platonism philosophy. However, *La Primavera*, like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, has remained somewhat a mystery. According to Jean Seznec,

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[70] Weir, Anthony and James Jerman. *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches.* London: Routledge 1999, 148.

[71] Likewise, "Christian literature in…learned language was permeated by the allusions, thought, symbolism, mythology, and esthetic of the pagan past, inevitably" notes Ramsay MacMullen in his book *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, pg. 147. It is not difficult to see how easily art was also influenced by these "pagan" qualities.

"their ultimate secret has not yet been penetrated—or rather, their secrets, for it is our belief that they hide several layers of allegorical meaning." [72]

The most striking aspect of *La Primavera,* a painting depicting Venus attended by Mercury, the Three Graces, Flora, Cupid and others, is the appearance of a flowering vine flowing from the mouth of a wood nymph. According to Robert Coughlan, this painting is an allegory of spring that "takes place on a flowered plain, backed by a forest where trees bloom and bear fruit at the same time." [73] Even though the painting, while appearing pagan in theme, "is a Christian painting"[74] reflecting the Neo-Platonist philosophy of the time, this would be one of the last paintings to incorporate the symbiotic themes of Nature and humans being linked physically together. The vine, gushing from the Nymphs mouth surely was inspired by the foliate masks found around Botticelli's environment. These foliate masks struck a cord with him. Nowhere could a finer example of the meaning of rebirth and regeneration be found than in such a depiction.

With the overthrow of the Medici court by French armies things changed. The arrival of the Dominican monk Savonarola sealed the fate of Botticelli's artistic freedom. It was "the reforming priest-dictator", according to Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages,* "who denounced the paganism of the Medici and their artists, philosophers, and poets"[75] and

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[72] Seznec, Jean. *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art.* New York: Harper Torchbooks/The Bollingen Library 1961,112.

[73] Coughlan, Robert. *The World of Michelangelo 1475-1564.* New York: Time-Life Books 1966, 53.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Gardner, Helen. *Art Through the Ages, Fifth Edition.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1970, 443.

who caused the decline of Florentine culture. Botticelli turned his talents to painting safer Christian subjects.

Some foliate heads were the work of Michelangelo, appearing on the tombs of Pope Julius II in Rome and on the Medici Chapel in Florence. Many historical figures in Britain have Green Man images as part of their tombs dating back to the Renaissance and, in fact, it may be due to the influence of the Renaissance that finally got the Green Man out of the church and into secular architecture. Along with the forced insistence of Reformation leaders, that classic religious imagery no longer had a place in ecclesiastical buildings. An ivory helmet owned by George II (1722-60) is decorated with a foliate mask on each side, along with the Royal Coat of Arms and a winged dragon. It would seem that, to the King, the foliate mask was symbolic of power as well as of rebirth and renewal.

Green Man, Cardiff, Wales

It appears that this struggle, at least as shown in contemporary Green Man art, has changed to one of a symbiotic relationship between humankind and nature. The foliate head has given birth to such garden ornaments as leafy children, birdbaths and other items, which embrace life and the spirits of nature.

Green Man, California 1915

The artisans employed to construct and decorate the early churches were, says Grundy, "chosen for their skills rather than for their Christian beliefs." [76] "On finding themselves in charge of stone-building projects" Grundy writes, "...they had summoned the aid of their most trustworthy ally—the powerful, spiritual god of the oak, or today's enigmatic Green Man." [77] We must be thankful to the Church for the survival of the Green Man image into the 21st century.

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[76] Grundy, Thirlie. *Going in Search of the Green Man in Cumbria.* Cumbria: Thumbprint 2000, 5.

[77] Grundy, Thirlie. *The Green Man in Northumberland and County Durham.* Cumbria: Thumbprint 2001, 3.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ELEMENTS IN THE GREEN MAN MOTIF

The foliate head, the mask of the Green Man, is comprised of various symbolic motifs. Vines, leaves of various trees, certain expression types, the disgorging of leafy tendrils from the eyes, mouth and ears all make up the Green Man image. Moreover, all of these items are important symbolisms in religious thought in both the pagan and Christian traditions.

Vines

Vines are depicted on many religious statuary and reliefs throughout time—including the foliate head of the Green Man. Vines represent fertility, the Tree of Life and life itself. The vine is a symbol of spiritual life and regeneration in both pagan and Christian traditions. The vine is symbolic of certain deities as well. Jesus referred to himself as the "True Vine" in John 15: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman." In Egypt, the vine was sacred to Osiris, to the Greeks and Romans to Dionysus and Bacchus and to the Sumerians to Tammuz. The vine is intimately associated with these Dying Gods and the promise of life reborn.

The symbol of Dionysus is the ivy vine. A life-sized mask of Dionysus located at Icaria, states Otto, "is wreathed with ivy." [78] In Greek

[78] Otto, Walter F. *Dionysus: Myth and Cult.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1965, 153

mythology ivy "appeared simultaneously with the birth of Dionysus." [79] Ivy is symbolic of eternal life—growing green even during the winter season.

A vine spewing Green Dragon or lion in New York City. (Photo courtesy Ellen Lissard)

Leaves

Leaves denote fertility, growth and renewal. Green leaves are symbolic of life renewed. Cooper notes "Crowns of leaves symbolize divinity or triumph and victory. In Chinese symbolism the leaves of the Cosmic Tree represent all beings in the universe..." [80]

Leaves are also closely associated with prophecy and, according to Porteous, "ancient magicians used to encircle their heads with leaves so as to obtain wisdom." [81] Perhaps the foliate head is representative of the

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.* New York: Thames and Hudson 1978, 96

[81] Porteous, Alexander. *The Lore of the Forest: Myths and Legends.* London: Senate Publishers 1996, 252. A reprint of the 1928 publication *Forest Folklore* published by George Allen & Unwin, London.

wisdom that is obtainable by all of us if we would only surround ourselves with those things that stimulate fertile thoughts! Because the Green Man is sometimes equated with knowledge, the leafy appendages to the masks add to this symbolic characteristic.

Leaves were also believed to have souls or to be inhabited by intelligent beings, and like some trees, were believed to be responsible for the creation of life. Porteous noted, "Some of the ancient writers tell of wonderful trees whose leaves produced animals and even serpents, and in one case the leaves as they fell off became changed into butterflies." [82]

In many Green Man sculptures, the leaves are those of the acanthus, which is widely symbolic of life and rebirth in the Mediterranean world. It also represents immortality but, in the Christian tradition, the acanthus thorns represent sin and the pain associated with the punishment of sin. "The influential scholar Hrabanus Maurus (784-856)," wrote Anderson, "had identified the [acanthus] leaf with sin, especially with sexual sin, and this probably gave a further licence to the portrayal of vegetation." [83]

Acanthus certainly is not the "leaf of choice" however for the Green Man image. Hawthorn, oak, ranunculus, potentilla, hops, rose and ivy make up the majority of the plants present in the carvings. Not all leaves or flowers that are present on the foliate head have magical or even much of a folkloric meaning. This is certainly true of the maple leaf. The decorative beauty of the maple leaf obviously was the deciding factor in the stone carver's choice. Although the leaf had little folkloric value, the tree did. There is one bit of folklore that indicates that the maple was

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[82] Ibid., 253

[83] Anderson, William. *Green Man: The Archetype of our Oness with the Earth.* London: Harper Collins 1990, 64

viewed, at one time, as having some special powers. An old saying, "A child passed through a maple tree will live long." According to Edwin and Mona Radford, "As late as the nineteenth century, this belief held its ground in many rural areas of the country. The passing had to be through the branches of the maple. And passed through the branches all the babies of the village were." [84] The maple tree was believed to be an "old age giver." Perhaps the carving of the maple leaf as part of the foliate head was intentional after all as it represents time and longevity.

The use of acanthus leaves in Green Man carvings in Irish churches is not uncommon, according to Champneys. In one such church, "two of the capitals are adorned with heads, the hair being decoratively treated, which…is not uncommon in Irish Romanesque, but others are carved with leaves in low relief of a somewhat classical type (such as is supposed to be derived from the acanthus), which now comes in probably for the first time in Ireland; it is much like some of the carving which appears in Norman and (in better form) in some of the Transitional work in England…"[85]

Horns

While horns are common on many American Green Man images, they are relatively rare in Britain. One example that does exist is the 12th century carving on a pillar capital located at St. Michael's church in Hereforshire. This figure has the typical vegetable disgorgement but also two horns on its head that recall the classic image of Satan. Other British

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[84] Radford, Edwin and Mona A. *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions.* New York: The Philosophical Library 1949, 168

[85] Champneys, Arthur C. *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture.* New York: Hacker Art Books/Irish University Press 1970,150

Green Men sport outgrowths that are reminiscent of horns but are composed of vines or other vegetable matter.

A foliate head on the west font of the church of Notre-Dame-la-Grand in Poitiers, France does have classic horns that seem to grow from the middle of the forehead. This carving also dates from the 12th century.

Horned Green Man, California ca. 1899

Horns are commonly linked to gods of nature and vegetation, such as Pan, Cernunnos, Dionysus and Hathor. Horns represent supernatural power; divinity; virility and fertility, and abundance.

Face Types

As previously noted, there are three distinct Green Man types that have evolved over time. The first are those of the Roman type in which the foliage forms, or rather "generates" the face. This type is found in and around Dublin, Ireland, London, Istanbul and other old European cities. This style is not entirely ancient in that a very nice example of a Roman

style foliate head is found on a 19th century corbel at St. Peter's in Wiltshire.

Kathleen Basford believed that the Roman style "is a delightful 'now you see it, now you don't' fantasy. It is, however, pure ornament." [86]

"Now you see it, now you don't" Green Men-Dublin, Ireland

The second form, according to Hicks, is that of the face itself generating the foliage. This may be the most common style, being prevalent in England, France and North America. This style appears as the earliest in Christian architecture on a tomb in Poitiers, France that dates from 400 CE. According to Hicks the second form is the most common among architecture dating to the Middle Ages.

Lastly, the third form of Green Man image is that of a carved face set in among the leaves and foliage—these faces simply inhabit the area and are not part of the vegetation itself. According to Hicks, this last form does have a few variations, "such as the shape of a face pressed into a leaf." [87]

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[86] Basford, K.H. "Quest for the Green Man", in *Symbols of Power*. Edited by H.R. Ellis Davidson. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Ltd. 1977, 118

[87] Hicks, Clive. *The Green Man: A Field Guide*. Helhoughton: COMPASSbooks 2000, 8

A "modern day" re-creation of the Green Man in stained glass showing the classic face generating foliage, ca. 1896-97, Hanford, California.

Typical Green Man of the third form, ca. 1915 California. This form may also be referred to as a "breathing" Green Man according to Gundy.

There are many expressions carved into the Green Man face that are reflective of the religious attitudes and the particular time in history when the images were created. These are the images causing so much disagreement among researchers about the intent of the motif.

The earliest forms of Green Men show expressions of calmness and quiet dignity. As the Christian church became the dominant force in the Western World, the images began to change to reflect not dignity but suffering. Some of this can be explained by the simple fact that during part of this time the plague was ravaging the countryside and death became more "normal" than life. Some writers, such as Basford, note, "the Green Man can be at once both beautiful and sinister." [88] It would seem that our own beliefs color our perceptions of the images. Basford finds the Green Man to be representative of "demonic character" and the "uneasy or actually hostile relationship" between humans and nature. [89] The teachings of the Church during the 14th and 15th centuries did promote this idea and the intentional portrayal of nature as an enemy rather than as a friend of humankind resulted in many of the grotesque images of the Green Man that Basford refers to. It may be more a reflection of the researcher's religious beliefs rather than the Green Man himself as to how the images are regarded.

However, many of the Green Man faces show another intent altogether. These faces leave a message of life and humor, not suffering and evil. Thirlie Grundy effectively argues that many of the Green Man carvings depict the archetype as breathing both in and out—indicating that they are carvings of a "living, breathing tree-god…[a] smiling god…."

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[88] Basford, Kathleen. *The Green Man.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 1978, 19
[89] Ibid.

[90] It is the Green Man carved into the French tomb of St. Hilaire-le-Grand dating to 400 CE that is the earliest known example of the breathing Green Man.

[90] Grundy, Thirlie. *Going in Search of the Green Man in Cumbria.* Carlisle: Thumbprint 2000, 14

Mermaid at Reims (from ***Gargoyles, Chimeres, and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture*** by Lester Bridaham)

THE GROTESQUE AS SEXUAL IMAGERY: THE SHEELA-NA-GIG, THE PHALLUS AND THE MERMAID

Many of the grotesque carvings placed upon church structure are of a rather graphic, certainly non-Christian, nature. Bald, emaciated females are shown holding their vulvas open in a decidedly non-erotic display. But, why were they carved in such an unflattering manner and why do they appear on ecclesiastical structures? Some have called these images fertility figures or outright pornographic and others have suggested that they were created as protective sculptures—keeping evil away. Others yet believe that these figures were set in stone to act as warnings against sexual lust.

Called collectively *Sheela-na-gig*, a Gaelic term of indeterminate origin, the figures themselves were carved during the early Celtic era into the early Christian period. One example appears on the eighth century Adamnan Cross at Tara in Ireland. The Adamnan Cross was actually fashioned from an ancient megalithic standing stone. Victorian antiquarians have used the "sheela-na-gig" term since the middle of the 19th century, however Simpson and Roud express doubt that it was widely used in common speech. [91]

[91] Simpson, Jacqueline and Steve Roud. *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, 323.

According to historian Jean Markale, the *sheelas* known today appearing on Irish and English churches are "relatively recent representations" that are likely to be reproductions of a far earlier time, an age of "druidic antiquity." [92] It should be known, however, that not all sheelas are located on church property. I have seen one at Bunratty Castle in County Claire, Ireland and it is likely that others as well are located on similar non-ecclesiastical structures.

Like all other icons, the sheela's origins and meanings have long been debated. While Markale and others believe these grotesque images to originate in Celtic paganism, others state that they originated in medieval France and northern Spain. Evidently these carvings became commonplace on 12th century Romanesque churches along the pilgrimage routes to St. James of Compostella—a major pilgrimage center. [93] According to Simpson and Roud, the purpose of the sheela images "would be to warn pilgrims against sexual sins by rousing disgust, presenting the female body as both voracious and degraded." [94]

Weir and Jerman wrote that these figures, by the hundreds, formed "part of a huge campaign against sin, mounted in the first instance by the celibate monks and clergy who built the churches and manned the pilgrimage undertakings." [95]

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[92] Markale, Jean. *The Great Goddess.* Rochester: Inner Traditions 1999, 52.

[93] While there was little evidence that St. James, who reportedly led Spain's armies in their successful bid to drive the Moslems from the Spanish peninsula, was actually entombed at Compostela, it was said that anyone who denied that the saint rested in the tomb was immediately struck with madness. (see Richard Barber, *Pilgrimages* published by Boydell & Brewer Ltd. Suffolk 1991, 60).

[94] Simpson and Roud, op cit., 323.

[95] Weir, Anthony and James Jerman. *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches.* London: Routledge 1999, 150.

This explanation of the sheela's origin would seem unlikely in that similar images have been dated to the 8th century at Tara, Ireland. Peter Berresford Ellis, one of the world's foremost authorities on the Celts, remarks as well that the sheela-na-gig motif "is popular throughout the Celtic world, surviving mainly from the early Christian period." [96] While the popularity of these grotesque carvings was obvious in the Romanesque period, their origins have been determined by most scholars to be pre-Romanesque in time. However, the meaning may not be far off the mark. Obviously, the images are not flattering of the female form—showing the bald, emaciated body holding the vulva open in a grotesque manner. Some have suggested that the image reflects an ancient fertility goddess but fertility is the last thing one thinks of when viewing the carvings. Rather, death is the more appropriate conceptual image. The open vulva may, in fact, represent the underworld opening that the souls of the dead use to return to the spirit world. Markale offers this as a suggestion as well, stating that the sheela image "with her genitals wide open...invite the deceased to reenter the maternal womb in order to be able to be reborn." [97] Ellis agrees, stating that the sheela "seems to have connotations with the Kali devouring goddess image in other Indo-European societies." [98]

This comparison with the Indian goddess Kali is not so far fetched. Indeed, Walker notes, "the protruding ribcage on many examples of the Sheila-na-gig imitates the features of Kali as the death goddess, Kalika,

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[96] Ellis, Peter Berresford. *The Ancient World of the Celts.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books 1999, 186.
[97] Markale, op cit., 129.
[98] Ellis, op cit.

evidently remembered in Ireland as the Caillech or 'Old Woman,' who was also the Creatress and gave birth to all races of men." [99]

Another possibility is that the sheela was used as a powerful protective symbol to keep the Devil and associated evil away. Such symbols have been used since classical times as a tool to keep the Evil Eye and other evil forces at bay.

While the absolute certainty of the sheela-na-gig being of pagan origin cannot be proven, there are a number of anecdotal clues that indicate that, perhaps, the sheela has been an ongoing symbol that, like the Green Man, rises in popularity and importance throughout time. According to researcher Cheryl Straffon many sheelas are found in areas formerly sacred to the Earth Goddess. "At Killiniboy in Munster," she writes, "the sheela was known locally as Baoith, named after the cow-Goddess Boand. At Ballyvourney in County Cork, Munster, there is a shrine dedicated to St. Gobnat that incorporates a sheela. St. Gobnat is the patron saint of bees, and this may be a Christianized version of the old Earth Mother bee goddess. And at Rodel on South Harris in the Western Isles is a sheela depicted with an animal or child that may have been carved in the same tradition as the Nurturing Mother Goddess." [100]

Straffon concedes that the sheela may or may not have been conceived of as a goddess, "but they clearly share some of the same traditions, and they must have touched a deep chord in the people, as indeed they still do today." [101]

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[99] Walker, Barbara G. *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets.* Edison: Castle Books 1996, 931.
[100] Straffon, Cheryl. *The Earth Goddess: Celtic and Pagan Legacy of the Landscape.* London: Blandford 1997, 72-73.
[101] Ibid, 74.

Nineteenth century mythologist Thomas Inman wrote, "I have elsewhere called attention to the idea that a sight of the yoni is a source of health, and a charm against evil spirits; however grotesque the idea may be, it has existed in all ages, and in civilized and savage nations alike." [102] Inman continues to write that similar figures have been found in Peru, Mexico and North America however he does not provide any details that would allow for a comparison of the figures. There is anecdotal evidence that his statement may be correct, however. In some locations where the sheela is found folkloric traditions exist telling of women wishing for children visiting the sheelas to rub the carved vulva in the hopes of transferring powers of fertility. [103]

As a continuing charm against evil powers exposing the vulva, or penis, was recognized since classical times as a powerful apotropaic act. Simpson and Roud relate that Irish peasants claimed that "men afflicted by the evil eye used to ask prostitutes to perform such displays as a way of turning their luck." [104]

Inman wrote as well, "It is remarkable that some nations should use the female organ, or an effigy thereof, as a charm against ill luck, whilst others adopt the male symbol." [105]

In fact, the male symbol has long been thought of as a lucky, protective and fertile image with sculptures, paintings and jewelry used since ancient times to ward off evil and to ensure fertility. There are actually more carvings of the male sexual organ or couples actively

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[102] Inman, Thomas. *Ancient Pagan and Modern Christian Symbolism.* New York: Cosimo Classics 2005, 66.
[103] Straffon, op cit. 72.
[104] Simpson and Roud, opt cit. 323.
[105] Inman, op cit., 78.

engaged in sexual relations appearing on church buildings than there are of the sheela image. It is interesting to note that during a survey of damaged churches in England during World War II by Professor Geoffrey Webb, then Secretary of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, that carved phalloi were found in the altars of 90 percent of the churches built up to the Black Death period.[106]

The longevity of the carved phallus as a protective emblem is discussed by Ronald Hutton, a noted English historian, who wrote "...the Roman custom of carving phalluses upon buildings in order to give them strength and protection persisted long into the Middle Ages. Examples are found upon many English churches constructed up to the fourteenth century." [107] Hutton, by the way, believes that the sheela is "a representation of the hideous nature of female lust." [108]

Those Pesky Mermaids

One of the most ancient, fascinating and erotic images that humans have conceived of is the mermaid. Made popular in the animated movie, *The Little Mermaid*, she has been an important figure in folklore and mythology since Babylon and is known in every culture from the Middle East to those of the North American Indians. She also shows up in church architecture.

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[106] Weir and Jerman, op cit., 147-148.
[107] Hutton, Ronald. *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles.* Oxford: Blackwell 1991. 314.
[108] Ibid.

Double-tailed Romanesque Mermaid at St. Die Cathedral (France), 11th century. [109]

Stories about mermen and mermaids can be traced back to ancient Babylonian mythology, from the Old Babylonian times onward through the history of Mesopotamia and into the modern world. In fact, as Richard Carrington so aptly put it, "There is not an age, and hardly a country in the world, whose folklore does not contain some reference to mermaids or to mermaid-like creatures. They have been alleged to appear in a hundred different places, ranging from the mist-covered shores of Norway and Newfoundland to the palm-studded islands of the tropic seas." [110]

The Babylonian god Oannes, a half-man half-fish deity, has been depicted on ancient sculptures dating back at least to 2000 BCE. Like all

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[109] From *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc. 1930 by Lester Burbank Bridaham.
[110] Carrington, Richard. *Mermaids and Mastodons: A Book of Natural & Unnatural History.* New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc. 1957, 5.

mermen, he is shown with the body of a man but from the waist down, he is in the form of a fish. Oannes taught the Babylonians the arts, sciences and letters and possessed vast knowledge.

"To the Assyrians," wrote Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, "the creature was known simply as kulullû, 'fish-man'...representations of these figures were used in Neo-Assyrian art for the purpose of protective nature..." [111] This "fish-man", wrote Black and Green, "is perhaps the prototype for the merman figure in Greek and medieval European art and literary tradition."[112] The kulullû obviously was an important mystical symbol for the Babylonians as priests were often garbed in the fish-man guise as part of healing rituals.

Vishnu, one of the most venerated and sophisticated deities of the Hindu pantheon, known as the "preserver and restorer," is depicted at times as a man-fish. One of his forms is that of Matsya, the Fish, which saved humankind from the Flood. According to traditional lore, Vishnu, in the form of a fish, told King Manu that a flood would occur in seven days. He told the king to build a boat and to ensure that the seven sages, or hermits, were on board along with seeds of all plants and one animal of each species. When the boat was finished and loaded the fish (Vishnu) told the king to tie the boat to the fish. The king used the royal serpent Vasuki as a rope and tied the boat to the back of the giant fish. The fish then towed the boat to Mt. Himavan until the flood waters reseeded. The world was then repopulated with plants, animals and humankind. Matsya is Vishnu's first incarnation as a protector and preserver of the world.

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[111] Black, Jeremy & Anthony Green. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia.* Austin: University of Texas Press 1992, 131-132.
[112] Ibid, 131.

Folklorist Horace Beck wrote "it is my belief that what we are dealing with when discussing...mermaids is really a fractured mythology—beliefs so old as possibly to reach back to Neolithic times, beliefs long since vanished into limbo, with only fragments remaining."[113] Beck believes that the core myths of the mermaids have a northern European origin but I believe that they have a common origin that was "hard wired" in our minds as a species and not as geographical mythology. It would seem that a common religious and cultural tradition existed at one time in our ancient history; a tradition that still surfaces now and then in our mythology and folklore. Like the Fairy, the legend of the mermaids may also come from this tradition.

Mythic stories of mermaids, nymphs and water spirits may be survival tales of the sea Goddesses. Through time, the original stories became more and more elaborate and took on a flavor of their own from the people who passed the stories on. Folklorist Shahrukh Husain, in her book The Goddess, wrote, "the sea goddess survives in a debased form as water-sprites, sirens or mermaids. Probably the first mermaids were images of the fish-tailed Aphrodite—they are famously able to seduce men away from the land, and draw them down to their underwater kingdom. A reminder of their lost divinity lies in the tales of a mermaid....receiving the souls of drowned men." [114]

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[113] Beck, Horace. *Folklore and the Sea.* Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum Incorporated 1973, 266.

[114] Husain, Shahrukh. *The Goddess.* Alexandria: Time-Life Books 1997, 51.

Double-tailed merman, California

Part of the fascination we have with Mermaids is not only their beauty, but also the danger associated with them. In fact, according to Joseph Campbell, the mermaid image reflects the life threatening as well as the life-furthering aspects of water.[115] Legends of sailors capturing these creatures for a short time or living with them longer as husband and wife are interspersed with other stories with more dire results. Fiske noted, "it has been a common superstition among sailors, that the appearance of a mermaid, with her hair comb and looking-glass, foretokens shipwreck, with the loss of all on board." [116]

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[115] Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. New York: The Viking Press 1959, 62.

[116] Fiske, John. *Myths and Myth-Makers: Old Tales and Superstitions Interpreted by Comparative Mythology*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1881, 103.

Native Americans possess many legends of River Mermaids. The ancient Greeks had Eurynome, who was said to be the daughter of the God Oceanus. Eurynome was "a woman down to the buttocks and below that like a fish."[117] Of Eurynome Brewster wrote she "was most probably a local river nymph with the body like a mermaid's."[118]

In African (Benin) folklore the River Goddess Igbaghon ruled the underworld, which was under the waters surface. She was waited upon by mermaids who informed her of trespassers who went to the river to wash or to fetch water—they never returned from their tasks.[119]

South African anthropologist Penny Bernard, who has studied water spirit lore and traditions in that part of the world, has found that many of the traits of the Native American river mermaids also exist in South African tribal beliefs. These water spirits are referred to as the "River People" and are believed to live in certain deep pools of water, especially below waterfalls. Bernard notes, "some informants say they are fair skinned, with long dark hair, are naked and some have half-human, half-fish physical attributes (mermaid like)." [120] She also reports that these creatures only live in "living water"—that is, water that is flowing in rivers, the ocean or waterfalls. Some, however, are also reported to reside in wells in Zimbabwe. Normally this tradition is found only in the more arid areas of Africa.

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[117] Brewster, Harry. *The River Gods of Greece: Myths and Mountain Waters in the Hellenic World.* London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. 1997, 97.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Osoba, Funmi. *Benin Folklore: A Collection of Classic Folktales and Legends.* London: Hadada Books 1993, 40.
[120] Bernard, Penny. "Mermaids, Snakes and the Spirits of the Water in Southern Africa: Implications for River Health", lecture given in *Shortcourse on the Role and Use of Aquatic Biomonitoring.* Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, 2000.

Water spirits as well cannot simply be dismissed as metaphors. The almost universal application of human-like characteristics and supra-natural powers, like those of the Fairies, demands a broader approach. At least through the 19th century the people of Christian Norway left offerings to water spirits every Christmas Day. The following account appeared in the December 17, 1859 issue of the British journal, Notes & Queries:

"...a fisherman wished on Christmas Day to give the Spirit of the Waters a cake; but when he came to the shore, lo! the waters were frozen over. Unwilling to leave his offering upon the ice, and so to give the Spirit the trouble of breaking the ice to obtain it, the fisherman took a pickaxe, and set to work to break a hole in the ice. In spite of all his labour he was only able to make a very small hole, not nearly large enough for him to put the cake through. Having laid the cake on the ice, while he thought what was best to be done, suddenly a very tiny little hand as white as snow was stretched through the hole, which seizing the cake and crumpling it up together, withdrew with it. Ever since that time the cakes have been so small that the Water Spirits have had no trouble with them."

Mysterious water creatures have been reported throughout the world's folklore for hundreds and thousands of years. Like the Fairy, these creatures also have almost universal characteristics and descriptions. California Miwok Indians called these creatures He-Há-Pe, or "River Mermaids" and described them as "beautiful fish-women [that] had long black hair and lived in deep pools and rivers." [121] Other California tribes referred to these creatures as "Water Women" in their mythology. The

[121] Varner, Gary R. *Sacred Wells: A Study in the History, Meaning, and Mythology of Holy Wells & Waters.* Baltimore: Publish America 2002, 129.

"River Mermaids" reportedly pulled victims to their deaths in these deep waters.[122]

Nineteenth-century writer S. Baring-Gould reported several instances of the capture of supposed mer-people. One such instance was the capture of a "Marmennill" or merman off the Icelandic island of Grimsey in the early 14th century, one also reportedly washed up on the beaches of Suffolk in 1187.[123] Baring-Gould notes other cases as well of mermen not only being seen but caught in 1305 and 1329 off Iceland, 1430 in Holland, 1531 in the Baltic, 1560 on an island west of Ceylon, and 1714 in the West Indies.

According to Baring-Gould, the 1560 incident occurred near the island of Mandar. It was here that "some fishermen entrapped in their net seven mermen and mermaids, of which several Jesuits, and Father Henriques, and Bosquez, physician to the Viceroy of Goa, were witnesses. The physician examined them with a great deal of care, and dissected them. He asserts that the internal and external structure resembled that of human beings." [124] Baring-Gould gives several other accounts of mer-folk being captured, and examined by sailors and other villagers from Ceylon, Holland and the Shetland Islands. Other reported sightings include one made by Henry Hudson's men on June 15, 1608, Captain Richard Whitbourne in 1620 at St. John's Harbor in Newfoundland, and Captain John Smith in 1614 in the West Indies. Even today, mermaids are commonly reported near the Isle of Man.

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[122]Merriam, C. Hart. Editor. *The Dawn of the World: Myths and Tales of the Miwok Indians of California.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1993, pg. 228-230.

[123] Baring-Gould, S. *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages.* New York: John B. Alden, Publishers 1885, 205.

[124] Ibid, op cit., 227.

John C. Messenger, in his ethnography of a small Irish island he called Inis Beag, noted during his study that "At least one and maybe three mermaids are associated with particular locations along the coastline of the island. The spirit usually is found sitting on a rock with her tail in the water and combing her long hair, although she has been seen hovering over the surface of the sea in a 'robe of mist.'" [125]

Angelo Rappoport noted, "The sacred wells are a very favourite place with the fair children of the sea. Here, undisturbed by men, the green-haired beauties of the ocean lay aside their garb and revel in the clear moonlight." [126] There are very few sacred wells at the ocean however, and Rappaport does not say how they journey to these places.

In Zulu lore mermaids would, at times, possess mediums and give them healing powers. They were also believed to come out of the waters at night, causing humans to avoid rivers and the ocean after nightfall.

Both American Indian and African beliefs stipulate that the River Mermaids and the River People must be treated with respect and fear—for both of these creatures would often lure unsuspecting individuals to their deaths or to live the remainder of their lives under water. This fear is universal among the world's indigenous peoples. Among the Udmurt people of Estonia, water spirits would drown those humans who swam at the wrong time or swam without wearing a crucifix. [127]

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[125] Messenger, John C. *Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland.* Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1969, 100.

[126] Rappoport, Angelo. *The Sea: Myths and Legends.* London: Senate 1995, 184. A reprint of the 1928 edition published by Stanley Paul & Company, London. Originally titled *Superstitions of Sailors.*

[127] Lintrop, Aado. "On the Udmurt Water Spirit and the Formation of the Concept 'Holy' Among Permian Peoples" in Folklore, Vol. 26, April 2004, 9. Published by the Folk Belief & Media Group of the Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu.

Russia has its own tales of dangerous Water Spirits. "Water Grandfather," according to Joseph Campbell, "is an adroit shapesshifter and is said to drown people who swim at midnight or at noon." [128] Like the beautiful Mermaid, this shapeshifter likes to sit in the moonlight and comb his long green hair and beard. He is not above asking humans for help however. He often seeks out a village midwife when one of his wives is about to deliver a baby and she is paid handsomely in gold and silver.

There are, indeed, many similarities among the African water deities-mermaids and those of other parts of the world. All seem to possess beautiful long hair, combs, mirrors and very fair skin. Other explanations for such tales may be the sighting of unexpected but perfectly natural animals appearing in many of the eerie water locations around the world. Would the flash of a large fish in a "spooky" lake be misinterpreted as a mermaid? Perhaps. But can such an event explain the mermaid tales from other areas that did not have the same exposure to such primal cultural symbols?

The Pascagoula Indians of Louisiana not only respected the mermaid—they worshipped one. According to E. Randall Floyd, "legend has it that an entire...tribe—the Biloxi, also known as the Pascagoula—marched into a raging river at the command of a mermaid-like sea-goddess and drowned." [129] This happened, according to legend, in the 1500's. It was said that within a week after a white priest journeyed to the tribe, commanding them to "abandon their superstitions in an underwater goddess", they disappeared in the waters of the Pascagoula River.

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[128] Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.* New York: MJF Books 1949, 80.
[129] Floyd, E. Randall. *Great Southern Mysteries.* Little Rock: August House Publishers 1989, 118.

Some Native American lore states that a merman actually was responsible for their arrival on American shores. According to Rappoport, such a creature led the ancestors of modern Indians from Asia to America when he took pity on them one day when they were suffering from hunger. "Following the fish-man" Rappoport wrote, "they ultimately reached the American coast."[130] The merman was described as having green hair and beard, a forked tail and a face shaped like a porpoise. This creature, according to Baring-Gould, appeared suddenly one day "in the season of opening buds."

"The people of our nation," so says the legend, "were much terrified at seeing a strange creature, much resembling a man, riding upon the waves. ...But if our people were frightened at seeing a man who could live in the water like a fish or a duck, how much more were they frightened when they saw that from his breast down he was actually a fish, or rather two fishes, for each of his legs was a whole and distinct fish." [131] Contemporary accounts of mermaid sightings read like daily news reports. Explorer Henry Hudson, on one of his attempts to open the Northwest Passage, wrote of one such event:

"This evening [June 15] one of our company, looking overboard, saw a mermaid, and, calling up some of the company to see her, one more of the crew came up, and by that time she was come close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men. A little after a sea [wave] came and overturned her. From the navel upward, her back and breasts were like a woman's, as they say that saw her; her body as big as one of us. Her skin very white, and long hair hanging down behind, of colour black. In her

[130] Rappoport, op cit., 165.
[131] Baring-Gould, op cit., 222.

going down they saw her tail, which was like the tail of a porpoise, speckled like a mackerel." [132]

Mermaids are also found in medieval church architectural ornament. However, she does not appear to be regarded as simply "ornamental," on the contrary the mermaid is "a symbol of the lure for mankind" to sin. [133] The mermaid gargoyle (see photo page 66) at Reims Cathedral in France, according to Bridaham, was a "Symbol of Enticements of the Flesh."[134] As Simpson and Roud wrote, the mermaid "was regarded as a natural if freakish creature, not a supernatural being....She made an excellent moral symbol for preachers, who identified her with the fatal attractions of wealth, sex, drink, etc. For this reason, mermaids are common in minor church sculpture; it is presumably as symbols of vanity that they acquired their comb and mirror, not known in classical art." [135]

Indeed, "the theme of luring men to disaster," wrote Weir and Jerman, "by sensual and sensory means was exactly the sort of thing that appealed to medieval moralizers." [136]

Carvings show the mermaid as both as single-tailed and double-tailed. While the single-tailed creature was regarded as symbolic of fornication by the church, the double-tailed creature was linked to "luxury" or lust—both being mortal sins.

Obviously, these characteristics were later attributes applied by Christianity for the mermaid's original meaning was far different. In

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[132] As quoted by Richard Carrington in "The Natural History of the Mermaid", in Horizon, January, 1960, Vol. II, Number 3, 131.

[133] Cave, C.J.P. *Medieval Carvings in Exeter Cathedral.* London: Penguin Books 1953, 21.

[134] Bridaham, Lester Burbank. *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc. 1930, 11.

[135] Simpson and Roud, op cit., 234.

[136] Weir and Jerman, op cit., 49.

Russia, mermaid figures were carved on wooden paddles used in washing clothes and were meant as protective rather than sexual symbols. Their long association as water goddesses cannot be denied.

Some scientists believe that sightings of mermaids are the result of seals, sea-cows and manatees seen from afar. However, it is not that simple to explain these ancient tales through scientific analysis. Anthropologist Richard Carrington wrote "...the natural history of mermaids cannot be understood by the methods of natural science alone. These hauntingly beautiful goddesses of the sea, full of mystery and danger, were surely conjured from the chaos of the waters in answer to some primal human need. Their genus and species may not be carefully docketed in the Nomenclator Zoologicus, but their reality in terms of poetic truth is firmly established in the impassioned imagination of men." [137]

The existence of mermaids was certain to 17th century man. The 1688 issue of *Aberdeen Almanack, or New Prognostication for the Year 1688* read:

"To conclude for this year 1688. Near the place where the famous Dee payeth his Tribute to the German Ocean, *if curious Observers of wonderfull things in Nature*, will be pleased thither to resort, the 1, 13, and 29 of May; and on diverse other days in the ensuing Summer; as also in the Harvest tyme, to the 7 and 14 October, *they will undoubtedly see a pretty Company of MAR-MAIDS, creatures of admirable beauty*, and likewise hear their charming sweet Melodious Voices."

[137] Carrington, 1957 op cit. 19.

A BESTIARY

Griffins, lions and unicorns abound as some of the images and decorative art that appears on our structures. All are important aspects of pagan mythology and meaning. Aniela Jaffe' wrote in *Man and his Symbols:*

"In the religions and religious art of practically every race, animal attributes are ascribed to the supreme gods, or the gods are represented as animals.

"The boundless profusion of animal symbolism in the religion and art of all times does not merely emphasize the importance of the symbol; it shows how vital it is for men to integrate into their lives the symbol's psychic content--instinct." [138]

Winged Lions and Griffins

The most common animal portrayed in the local architectural motifs is that of the lion. As Jaffe' indicated in the above work, "the elephant and the lion stand higher" [139] in the hierarchy of being than does man.

It is easy to see why the lion has evoked such sentiment among people as it has. It is a noble beast. Frazer wrote that the Namaquas people of Africa would not eat the flesh of a hare, as they believed that by doing so they, themselves, would become faint hearted. However, Frazer

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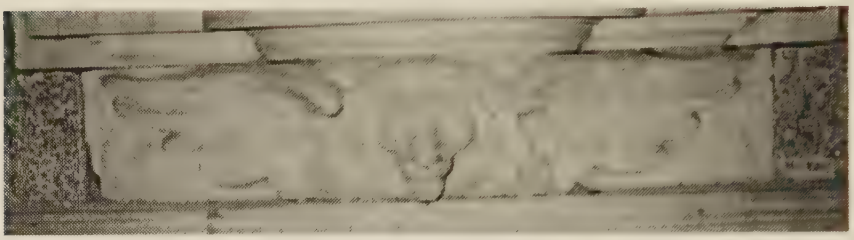
[138] Jaffe', Aniela. "Symbolism in the Visual Arts", in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. by Carl G. Jung, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964, 237

[139] Ibid, 238

continues, "they eat the flesh of the lion, or drink the blood of the leopard or lion, to get courage and strength of these beasts." [140]



Winged-lion carving, England

The lion is not only an important symbol to the Pagan. It also stands out in Christian theology. E.P. Evans notes that the lion "appears to have been a favorite symbol of the resurrection of Christ, as well as of the general resurrection..." [141]

Evans continues to say, "the belief that the lion never closes its eyes in sleep caused this animal to be placed at the doors of churches as guardian of the sanctuary." [142] It is interesting to note that Evans also says that while this was a Christian practice, the ancient Egyptians also observed this belief--predating the Christian usage by thousands of years.

In fact, the lion was used extensively as a symbol of the sun god in Greece and Rome and was associated with the Goddess as well. The Goddesses Cybele, Astarte and Ishtar all have been depicted as riding upon lion or having lions pull their chariots. Campbell, in *The Masks of*

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[140] Frazer, Sir James. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions 1993, 495.
[141] Evans, E.P. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture.* London: W. Heineman, 1896, 82.
[142] Ibid, 86.

God: Primitive Mythology, stated, "in India and the Near East the usual animal-mount of the goddess was the lion; in Egypt, Sekhmet was a lioness; and in the arts of both the Hittites and of the modern Yoruba of Nigeria the goddess stands poised on the lion, nursing her child." [143]

Donald Mackenzie wrote lions are "the guardians of the world deity" and that the seals of Crete "depict the mother goddess on a mountain-top supported similarly by a couple of lions, and also standing or seated between a lion and a lioness." Mackenzie theorized that the lion "was evidently the symbol of the earth, and the various figures of lions devouring animals, found in various countries, probably symbolized the earth receiving its propitiatory sacrifice."[144]

A guardian lion peering down from a lofty cornice.

[143] Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology.* New York: Viking Press 1959, 330.

[144] Mackenzie, Donald A. *Crete & Pre-Hellenic Myths and Legends.* London: Senate 1995, 307.

The lion has long been associated with potency and rulership. Saunders wrote in *Animal Spirits* that the lion, in Greek mythology, "represented the ravening power of death" [145] and was regarded as the guardian of the underworld in Egyptian mythology. According to William Olcott, the Egyptians also associated the lion with the sun due to, Olcott states, "by the fact that the Egyptians placed the figures of lions under the throne of Horus." [146] The lion was also representative of the sun by the ancient Sumerians. Olcott wrote that the lion was regarded as the solar symbol not only by the Egyptians, but also by the Hindus, Chaldeans and Persians as well. He goes on to state that the Egyptian Osirian funeral rituals included the following prayer:

"Let me not be surpassed by the Lion god: Oh, the Lion of the Sun, who lifts his arm in the hill: I am the Lions, I am the sun. The white lion is the phallus of the sun." [147]

The lion was also important to the early Britons during the Dark Ages and figures in the Merlin-Arthur chronicles. It should be noted that as the lion was not a natural animal in the British Isles, its symbolism was imported from elsewhere.

Another lion-like beast, the griffin, is also represented among the various symbols in architectural motifs. Evans indicates that the griffin is associated with "carnal passion." In addition, according to Evans, griffins "are the demons that, in the form of winged lions, flew aloft on the pinions of pride and fell from heaven into the abyss of hell for their

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[145] Saunders, Nicholas J. *Animal Spirits*. Boston: Little Brown & Company 1995, 62-63.
[146] Olcott, William Tyler. *Sun Lore of All Ages*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1914, 157
[147] Ibid., 294

misdeeds." [148] Bullfinch wrote in *The Age of Fable* that the griffin originated in India and that they built their nests of gold. Bullfinch stated, "their instinct led them to know where buried treasures lay..." [149] However, Bullfinch did not equate the griffin with "carnal passion." Saunders notes that the griffin was also regarded by Medieval Christians as a symbol the "dual human/divine nature of Christ." [150]

The griffin was also representative of the elements of the earth and the air and, to the Graeco-Roman world, was associated with the sun god Apollo. Among other things, the griffin was regarded as a guardian by the Minoans and the Greeks and was associated as well with the goddess Athene.

Benton notes that griffins, while popular in medieval art, were not popular as gargoyles. [151] They did continue to be important images on heraldic devices, however but only occasionally served as gargoyles.

The photograph below shows a griffin-demon from the royal palace of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal dating from the 9th century BCE. These figures represent the Seven Sages of ancient Babylon.

The Seven Sages, according to Babylonian tradition, lived before the flood and appeared "from the sea in the 'first days.'" [152] In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Seven Sages were said to have built the walls of the Babylonian city of Uruk.

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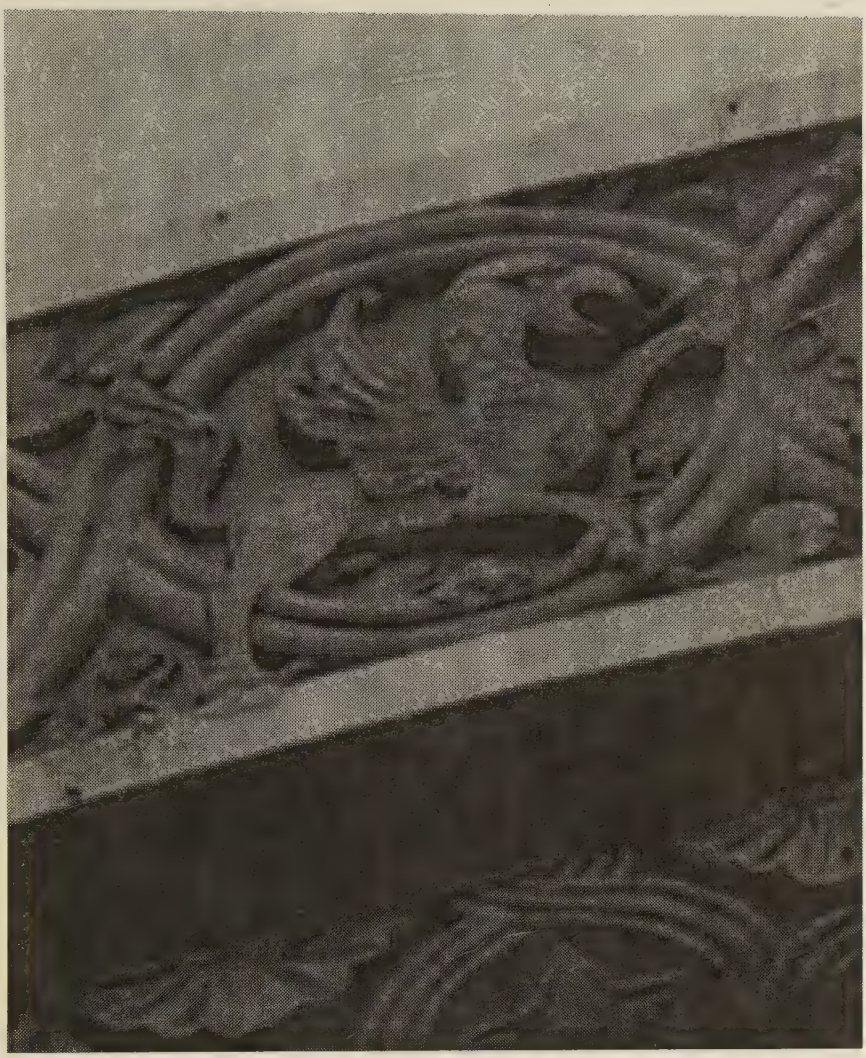
[148] Evans, op cit., 39.
[149] Bullfinch, Thomas. *The Age of Fable.* New York: Nelson Doubleday 1968, 133.
[150] Saunders, Nicholas J. *Animal Spirits.* Boston: Little Brown & Company 1995, 150.
[151] Benton, Janetta Rebold. *Holy Terrors Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings.* New York: Abbeville Press 1997, 115.
[152] Black, Jeremy and Anthony Green. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia.* Austin: University of Texas Press 1992, 163.

Photo of griffin-demon now at the British Museum, London.



A griffin carved on an American church façade, 1927.

A griffin in Britain's Parliament Building.

The photo below shows a kneeling man turning away from a griffin, reluctantly letting go of one of the griffin's wings. Evans would write of a similar sculpture found in the Freiburg Minster that "shows a man contending against a griffin, which signifies the effort to overcome carnal passion."[153]

[153] Evans, op cit., 192.

Man and griffin, ca. 1930, California.

Martin Henig suggests that griffins are symbolic agents of death. [154]

The winged lion is another ancient symbol that has been used in architectural art. While the early Christian church used the winged lion to represent the "Saviour's majesty", it was used much earlier by the Babylonians. Babylonian seals show the god Marduk riding upon a winged, fire belching lion, as well as Marduk fighting a winged-lion. Evans remarks that "the colossal winged lions of Nineveh and Persepolis, originated in the priestly proclivity to symbolize and to express mystical ideas in material forms..." [155]

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[154] Henig, Martin. *Religion in Roman Britain.* New York; St. Martin's Press 1984, 105.
[155] Evans, op cit., 10.

A winged lion carved on a church façade, California 1927.

In Hebrew symbolism, the winged lion represents the Lion of Judah, or the Southerly direction. Christian lore adopted the winged lion also as the Lion of Judah representing St. Mark. Benton notes that while winged lions were occasionally crafted into gargoyles such as those on the Cathedral of Saint-Pierre in Poitiers, France, "there is no evidence that it was intended to represent Mark..."[156] because of its close proximity to

[156] Benton, Janetta Rebold. *Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings.* New York: Abbeville Press 1997, 119.

other less religiously inspired figures. It was, perhaps, simply created because the stonemason desired to do so.

The Ram

The ram is well represented as a pagan symbol in western architecture. The ram is also one of the most recognized and disputed symbols is history. While Evans states that the ram symbolizes "spiritual leadership" [157] for early Christians, Barbara Walker, in *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, notes that the ram is "one of the 'horney' animals embodying the phallic god...."[158] She also states that the Egyptians referred to the ram as Amen-Ra, "the Ram, the virile male, the holy phallus, which stirreth up the passion of love, the Ram of rams." Before the Christian church turned these ancient symbols into caricatures of evil, the God of the Jews wore ram's horns and the Jewish armies were led into battle by priests using ram's horns "to make victory magic." [159]

In ancient Egyptian and other North African paintings and carvings, it is common to find the ram represented with the sun-disk placed between its horns. Campbell mentions that one of the sacred beasts of the Upper Nile was the ram. [160] Amon became associated with the ram after the god disguised himself as the animal and then announced to the world that the ram was sacred "except once a year, when a ram was flayed and beheaded in offering to him." [161] Saunders writes, "The ram was one of

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157 Evans, op cit, 76.

158 Walker, Barbara G. *Encyclopedia of Women's Myths and Secrets.* New Jersey: Castle Books 1996, 841.

159 Ibid.

160 Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology.* New York: Viking Press 1959, 382

161 Veronica Ions, *Egyptian Mythology.* Middlesex: Paul Hamlyn, 1968, 94. See also Frazer, *The Golden Bough* pages 500-501 wherein he states that the images of Ammon appearing

the first objects of cult worship, as is evident from 10,000-year-old Saharan rock paintings which depict humans worshipping a ram with a solar disk between its horns." [162]

The Ram was the symbol of the thunder god to the Yoruba of Africa. The ram is also associated with the Norse god Thor and the Egyptian god Khnum—both closely associated with thunder. [163] Khnum was self-created and created the heavens, the earth and the underworld...being as well the creator of all that is and all that will be. Being represented by a ram standing on its hind legs, Khnum was "the living soul of Ra."

Viaud notes that the ram was thought to contain the soul of Osiris. "Thoth himself, said his priests, had formerly decreed that the kings should come with offerings to the 'living ram'." [164] The ram was depicted in Egyptian art as representing Amon when the image was that of a ram with curved horns, and Khnum, Hershef or Haraphes when depicted with wavy horns.

The ram was also an important cult-animal of the Celts. John X.W.P. Corcoran wrote in his article *Celtic Mythology* "the ram enjoyed considerable importance as a cult animal among the Celts and was frequently associated with the horned god Cernunnos...Its connection with fertility rites are age old." [165]

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with the body of a man and the head of a ram "only shows that he was in the usual chrysalis state through which beast-gods regularly pass before they emerge as full-blown anthropomorphic gods. The ram, therefore, was killed, not as a sacrifice to Ammon, but as the god himself...."

[162] Saunders, op cit., 94.

[163] Biedermann, Hans. *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons & The Meanings Behind Them.* New York: Meridian 1994, 278

[164] Viaud, J. "Egyptian Mythology: The Sacred Animals", in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology.* London: Prometheus Press 1959, 45.

[165] Corcoran, John X.W.P. "Celtic Mythology", in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology.* London: Prometheus Press 1959, 239

The photo below shows an impressive ram decorating the Hotel Regis, a building constructed in 1911 in Sacramento, California. The Hotel Regis is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The ram is adorned in royal splendor befitting the representative of both pagan and Christian deities.

In addition, the ram is associated with the Tibetan goddess Khon-ma, ruler over earth-demons, who, dressed in golden-yellow robes and carrying a giant noose, rode on a ram. The ram is symbolic of renewing fertility and the returning warmth of the sun and is associated with the ancient gods Baal and Ea in the Middle East, Indra and Agni in India and Apollo in Greece. The ram was sacred to Zeus, Pan and Dionysus—all

known for their powers of fertility. The ram was also a sacrificial animal in Islam and in the Old Testament where it became a substitute for Isaac. In Christianity, it was a symbol of Jesus as leader of the flock. [166]

A ram appears as a gargoyle at the Church of Saint-Ouen in Rouen, France where the figure has a human face—another of the composite creatures created with an unknown meaning.

Another interesting figure adorning the front of an American Masonic Temple constructed in 1918 shows a small child resting between the horns of a ram. This appears to have been a Christianization of an ancient Egyptian symbol. The sun-disk was often displayed between the ram's horns but in this image a child, or "son," sits between the curved horns. There is a duality of meaning in these depictions of the ram being both symbolic of Jesus leading the flock and in other Christian lore identifying the ram with "lustful sinners" and the devil.

[166] Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.* London: Thames and Hudson 1978, 136.

The Bear

Another symbolic animal, the bear, is found in abundance throughout California. This is not unusual, as the Golden Bear is prominently displayed on the state flag and is well known as the California state symbol. However, the bear as an important icon is almost a universal figure around the world.

Evans noted that the bear, at least in Christian mythology, is synonymous with the devil. Evans describes one relief on the door of a cathedral in Hildesheim, carved in 1015, which depicts "a bear stand(ing) behind Pilate, whispering into his ear and filing his mind with diabolical suggestions." [167]

However, according to Geoffrey Ashe in his book *Dawn Behind The Dawn,* the she bear is identified as "an ancient maternal symbol" [168] and the bear in general is one of the oldest identified deities. This is evident in the pre-historic altars found in cave settings that have bear skulls arranged carefully around and on top of the altars. The importance of the bear is deeply rooted in ancient cultures from Japan to Siberia and eastward to include Native Americans.

The bear is a symbol of creation, rebirth, wisdom and fertility among ancient cultures. The bear is also associated with the goddess Artemis and because of this, was sacred to the Greeks.

Among the Norse, the "berserkers" went into battle "dressed only in bear skins, yet...remains unharmed by sword or fire." Christians in the Dark Ages believed that the bear was, according to Saunders, "a cruel and

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[167] Evans, op cit., 88

[168] Ashe, Geoffrey. *Dawn Behind the Dawn: A Search for the Earthly Paradise.* New York; Henry Holt and Company, Inc. 1992, 30

vicious animal, an image of carnality and the devil." [169] However, the bear was also of symbolic importance in the legends of the Christian saints Gall, Columban, Ursinus, Sergius, Corbinian, Hubertus and Maximin of Trier.

Campbell records that the Athapaskan people of British Columbia believed that the bear was the guardian of fire. [170] The bear was also regarded as a spirit guide by the Native Americans, and like the ram, is representative of the Celtic deities of war, revenge and smithing.

Our bear figure shown below appears to represent an ancient maternal symbol. Looking very benign, the bear is shown with two children climbing onto its back, apparently for a ride. Interesting as well are the spiral patterns, which surround the bear and children. The spiral as it appears in this carving represents the "web of life and the veil of the Mother Goddess, controller of destiny and weaver of the veil of illusion." [171] The photo reflects the Bear Mother, which is not only present in most Native American mythology but also in Old Norse stories. Christopher Manes wrote in *Other Creations: Rediscovering the Spirituality of Animals*, that the Bear Mother is representative of the Mother Goddess. [172]

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[169] Saunders, op cit. 76.
[170] Campbell, op cit. 338.
[171] Cooper, op cit., 156.
[172] Manes, Christopher. *Other Creations: Rediscovering the Spirituality of Animals.* New York: Doubleday 1997, 162-163.

Children playing on the back of the Bear Mother.

Manes continues:

"Invariably, the feminine animal spirit represents a force for good, even cultural heroism. In the Bear Mother stories....a woman is kidnaped by a bear in the form of a man, who takes her to his village to be his bride. In her new life among the bears, the woman learns their 'songs,' at the same time teaching the bear spirits about human society. The woman usually gives birth to several children by her bear husband who grow up to become leaders or warriors." [173]

The bear is perhaps the most ancient of the sacred animals. Cave paintings dating to 32,000-75,000 BP in France and discovery of the intentional arrangement of bear skulls on rock altars, also in caves, indicates that the bear cult was active at least 32 millennium ago in

[173] Ibid.

Europe. The bear cult has continued as an important part of the indigenous Ainu culture in Japan. The Ainu, direct decendents of the ancient Jomōn culture, are possibly related to the Tlingit Indians of Alaska who are well known for their artistic renderings of the bear in their tribal art. The bear in Ainu belief is the god of the mountain, a sacred messenger and culture hero. During one of the Ainu ceremonies, called the *iyomante*, a bear is ritually slain so that its soul is sent back to the land of the gods. There are many legends among indigenous people around the world that tell of a human woman mating with a bear and producing offspring. The Ainu have a similar story. Sir James Frazer wrote, "they have a legend of a woman who had a son by a bear; and many of them who dwell in the mountains pride themselves on being descended from a bear. Such people are called "Descendents of the bear"..., and in the pride of their heart they will say, "As for me, I am a child of the god of the mountains..." [174]

The bear as a sacrificial animal is not only important to the Ainu but to the Delaware Indians living in Ontario, Canada. During the Big House ceremony, which is held at Hagersville, Ontario on the first full moon in January, a hibernating bear is driven from its den, brought to the Big House and killed with a blow to the head. It bear is eaten in a ceremonial meal and its spirit "rises to Patamawas ('to whom prayers are offered'), bearing with it the prayers of mankind."[175] The bear is viewed as a lunar power around the world and the astronomical signs of the Big House ceremony indicate this is true to North American Indians as well.

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[174] Frazer, Sir James. *The Golden Bough: A study in magic and religion.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions 1993, 505-506.

[175] Krickberg, Walter & et al. *Pre-Columbian American Religions.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1968, 166.

The bear is associated with resurrection (due to its hibernating ability), and thus with rebirth and renewal. It also is known for its supernatural powers, strength, bravery and stamina. It was sacred to Artemis and Diana—both goddesses of nature. Young Greek girls used to dance to Artemis in the guise of bears, wearing both bear masks and bear costumes and were called "Arktoi", meaning "she-bears." [176] Norse warriors also dressed in bearskins for battle and were so fierce and impervious to sword and fire that they became known as "berserkers."

In Mongolian shamanism, the bear is regarded as lord of the animals and is revered as an ancestor. The bear is called *baabgai,* which means "father." Stewart tells us that the Mongolians regard the literal name for the bear as taboo, "given that the bear is recognized as an ancestor by almost all Siberian peoples." [177] While the bear is hunted at times it is treated with great respect, the skulls placed on poles or in trees or placed on a platform as shamans are after death. Like the dog in some cultures, the bear is believed by some Siberian people to oversee the journey of the soul to the underworld.

The bear is a messenger of forest spirits in shamanism and this concept carried over to the Slavic traditions. The *Leshii,* that fairy-like shape-changer who was master of the forest and protector of animals, used both the wolf and the bear as special servants. The bear would not only serve the Leshii but also protect him.

Inuit and Lapp shamans will shape-shift into bear form for their spirit journeys.

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[176] Baring, Anne and Jules Cashford. *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image.* London: Arkana/Penguin Books 1991, 326.

[177] Sarangerel (Julie Ann Stewart). *Riding Windhorses: A Journey into the Heart of Mongolian Shamanism.* Rochester: Destiny Books 2000, 33.

Like the Mongolians, the use of the "regular" name for the bear in Apache culture was also prohibited. According to ethnologist Morris Edward Opler, "...the Chiricahua would seldom say the regular word for bear. They would call it 'mother's sibling.' It doesn't like to be called by the regular word. It gets after you when you say that." [178] In other words, the bear will cause illness if it is addressed directly with its regular name. The Apache did not hunt, eat or use the skins of bear and avoided it as much as possible. According to one of Opler's informants, "If you come in contact with the track of a bear, or a tree where the bear has leaned, or bear manure, or if you sleep where a bear has sat down, or if you come in contact with a bear by smell or touch, you can get sick." [179]

Like many other sacred icons of other more ancient religions, the bear, in Christian theology, represented the Devil, evil, cruelty and carnal appetite. Evans describes one relief on the door of a cathedral in Hildesheim, carved in 1015, "which depicts a bear stand(ing) behind Pilate, whispering into his ear and filing his mind with diabolical suggestions." [180]

While it may seem incongruous that the bear, known for its size and savagery, has been worshipped for its Mother Goddess aspects it is the loving relationship that the adult bear has with its young that denotes this special association. Tamra Andrews noted "Bears were almost always connected in some way to the female life force, either being female themselves and giving birth or being the offspring of a human female.

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[178] Opler, Morris Edward. *An Apache Life-Way: The Economic, Social, and Religious Institutions of the Chiricahua Indians.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1941, 224.
[179] Ibid. 225.
[180] Evans, E.P. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture.* London: W. Heineman 1896, 88.

This quality reinforced the bears' intimate connection with fertility, renewal, and, often, the moon." [181]

The goddess Artio ("bear goddess"), worshipped in the Berne (Celtic for "bear") area of Switzerland during the 4th century CE, was the protectress of bears against hunters. She also protected humans from the wrath of the bear! Artio was a goddess of plenty, which ties into the bear's associations with fertility and renewal. Bear amulets have been found in North Britain and other areas and have been found in burials. A small child was found buried near Malton in Yorkshire with a tiny black bear-amulet [182] showing perhaps the belief that the bear helped the soul on its way to the underworld.

Aside from the Apache, the bear was an important spiritual totem to many Native American people. The bear is associated with sacred and powerful water sites and was regarded as a major deity and source of power. Bear doctors could shape-shift from human to bear by swimming in a special pool. Once in the water the doctor would emerge in a bear form and could only change back into his human form by submerging once again in the same pool. The bear has many of the characteristics of water. It is symbolic of rebirth and renewal; it is connected to the feminine life force and fertility. The bear was thought to be the creator of geysers in California; the spirit of the bear was believed to heat the water for curative purposes, which were utilized extensively by the local tribes.

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[181] Andrews, Tamra. *A Dictionary of Nature Myths.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, 25.

[182] Green, Miranda. *The Gods of the Celts.* Glouchester: Alan Sutton 1986, 184.

In Lakota belief, the bear "is the friend of the Great Spirit. He is very wise." [183] The bear instructed the shaman in ceremonial secrets, song and medicines. To the Lakota, if a man sees a bear in his dreams or visions he must become a medicine man. The Lakota believe that the bear is the only creature that knows all things about the Great Spirit and is totally conversant in the language of the shaman. The bear is referred to as "the God the Bear," and presides over "love and hate and bravery and wounds and many kinds of medicines." He was also "the patron of mischief and fun." [184]

"The Bears" is one of the Oglala Sioux sodalities, a "dream cult" made up of individuals who have had the same vision. Called the *Mato ihanblapi* ("they dream of bears") the members would dress for their ceremonies as bears, parade around the camp, growling like bears while they chased people. According to Powers, these "bear dreamers" were "astute curers." [185]

At one California Miwok site, a large standing stone called the "Northstar stone" was used for ceremonial purposes. It stands with several mortars (areas used for the grinding of food and other materials) on one side, two on the top, and with several incised lines that run the length of one side. It is believed that this stone was a central piece used during bear ceremonies thanking the Grizzly Bear and to welcome the change of season from winter to spring. The mortars were used to grind berries and other food items with the juices running down the incised

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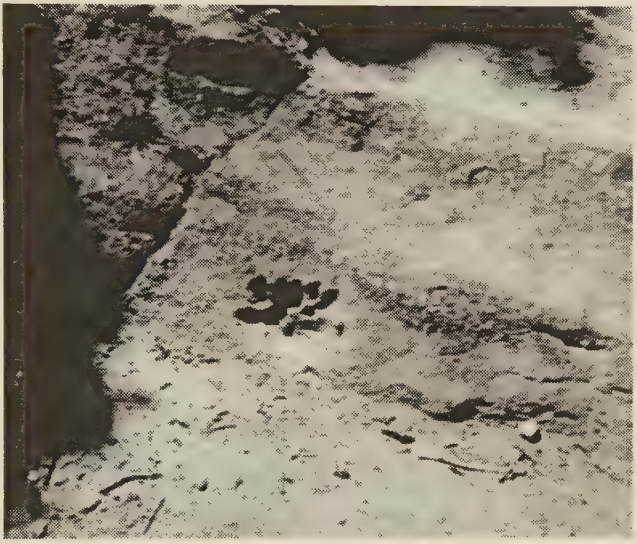
[183] Walker, James R. *Lakota Belief and Ritual.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1991, 116.
[184] Ibid, 121.
[185] Powers, William K. *Oglala Religion.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1982, 58.

lines into a catchment at the bottom. It is assumed that the Grizzly was lured into the area and would eat from the catchment, performing its part in the ritual. A bear "footprint" was carved into one portion of the Northstar stone representative of a bear walking in a docile manner, the back print overlapping with the print of the forepaw.



Incised bear "footprint" carved into the Northstar stone.

The footprint and incised grooves on Northstar are similar to other "rain rocks" found in Northern California. A similar bear footprint carving is located in Northwestern California and a large carving representing the claw marks of a bear can be seen at Chaw'se, Indian Grinding Rock State Park near Fiddletown, California.

The importance of the bear in Native American culture and religion cannot be minimized. During an archaeological excavation in 1966 in the Sacramento delta area east of Oakley, California, a Plains Miwok burial of

a small, five-year old Indian girl was uncovered. The unusual aspect of this burial was that the child was buried with a Grizzly Bear cub of approximately the same size. It appeared to the excavators that the bear cub was slain deliberately to accompany the child to the afterlife. According to the excavation report, the bear was positioned directly behind and to the side of the child with one paw draped over the child's body. [186] To the Plains Indians the bear is believed to be the ruler of underworld creatures so its association with death and the underworld may have been instrumental for its inclusion in the child's burial.

The Athapaskan Indians of British Columbia believe the bear to be the guardian of fire; however, it is the "Bear Mother" that remains the most endearing characterization of this animal. Christopher Manes wrote that the Bear Mother is representative of the Mother Goddess. According to Manes:

"Invariably, the feminine animal spirit represents a force for good, even cultural heroism. In the Bear Mother stories....a woman is kidnapped by a bear in the form of a man, who takes her to his village to be his bride. In her new life among the bears, the woman learns their 'songs,' at the same time teaching the bear spirits about human society. The woman usually gives birth to several children by her bear husband who grow up to become leaders or warriors." [187]

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[186] Cowan, R.A., Clewlow, C.W. Jr. & et al. "An Unusual Burial of a Bear and Child From the Sacramento Delta", in Institute of Archaeology, University of California Los Angeles Journal of New World Archaeology, Vol 1, Number 2, December 1975, 25-30.
[187] Manes, op cit., 162-163.

The Bat

Normally one would not picture the bat as being a chosen subject to carve on a Christian church or cathedral. However, they do appear from time to time. Bats have had a dual nature for hundreds of years—as do most cultural icons. The bat has been used as a protective agent against demons and has also been viewed as a demon or the Devil himself. The bat has long been associated with black magic and witchcraft as well.

Bats do appear in many of the grotesque carvings throughout Britain and Europe that adorn ecclesiastical structures however, Yenne notes "we almost never see a bat literally depicted as a gargoyle." [188] Yenne does state, however, that composite bat creatures are present, writing "there is a grotesque on the front of St. Séverin Church in Paris that appears to be exactly bat-like in its head and body until one notices that it has four legs and no wings."[189]

The photo below shows a bat grotesque carved on the wall of Chester Cathedral, in Britain. Originally built in the 900s, the church was made a cathedral in 1541. Obviously portraying the Devil or a demon due to its horns, it is a perfect example of religious art utilized to instill fear in parishioners. In Christian lore, the bat is regarded as "the bird of the Devil." [190]

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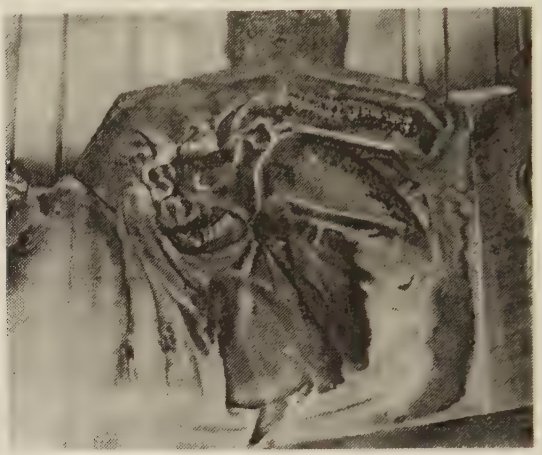
[188] Yenne, Bill. *Gothic Gargoyles.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books 2000, 40.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Cooper, J. C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.* London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. 1978, 18.



While the bat symbolizes death, idolatry, witchcraft and Satanism it has a different meaning in Native American culture where it was considered a rain bringer. In Chinese lore, a pair of bats is symbolic of longevity, happiness and good wishes. Central America and Brazil where it is an important underworld divinity—although one still associated with death. In Postclassic Mexico, bats were associated with decapitation and sacrifice. Like our bat in the photo above, it appeared on ceramic funerary urns in Classic Zapotec society. [191]

As part of its dual nature as both demon and protector, the bat was, in classical antiquity, nailed to door as protection against black magic and demons. This practice is still common in some rural areas around the world.

The Dragon

We have previously discussed the dragon and will once again in some detail in the next chapter but the dragon as an icon deserves some special

[191] Miller, Mary and Karl Taube. *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya.* London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. 1993, 45.

attention here as well. While dragons are commonly associated with the Orient, and rightfully so, it is in London where the dragon is so commonly seen carved on building facades, steeples and city gates.

The photo below shows a group of dragons, tails twined together, wings flexed back in a threatening manner, crawling down the face of a London building.

A group of dragons poised on a building, London, England.

"The dragon," wrote Janetta Benton, "was depicted more requently in medieval art than any other fantastic creature." [192] What is the origin for the dragon in medieval legend and folklore? Why did the dragon assume such an important place in humankind's vast repertoire of fantastic beasts and monsters? The dragon has been called the primal enemy of man, "an opponent of human heroes." [193] The dragon, in legend, is at once a supernatural creature born of the earth and a real creature of the animal kingdom fighting for its survival in a world increasingly pushing into its domain.

In ancient Greek myth, the dragon guards the Golden Fleece and this treasure guarding aspect is commonly repeated in Old English and Norse sagas through the middle ages. In Christian lore the dragon, even though seen as symbolic of evil, was a guardian of knowledge. [194] In a previous age it was believed that legends concerning dragon were a "race memory" of a time when man lived alongside the dinosaur until it was determined that millions of years separated the two. However, there may be some truth to this theory if we consider that fossils of dinosaurs have been uncovered for thousands of years and would have demanded some explanation. How else to explain the remains of a T-Rex, an allosaur or a raptor?

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[192] Benton, Janetta Rebold. *Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings.* New York: Abbeville Press 1997, 103.

[193] Evans, Jonathan. "Dragon" in *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 100.

[194] Gibson, Clare. *The Hidden Life of Art: Secrets and Symbols in Great Masterpieces.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books/Saraband (Scotland) Ltd. 2006, 142.

A dragon grotesque on an English cathedral symbolizing the ancient adversary of man and God.

Do the many depictions of dragons as grotesques and gargoyles in Britain and throughout Europe indicate that people of the middle ages believed in their existence? Benton notes, "Medieval reports of fabulous creatures were as detailed and descriptive as those of actual animals. In art, the dragon that Saint George slays is shown to be as believable as the horse on which he rides." [195]

However, she continues, "gargoyle imagery, like other imagery in medieval art, had little to do with direct observation of the natural world," but, rather "emphasis was, above all, on the moral edification a creature provided." [196]

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[195] Benton, op cit 122-125.
[196] Ibid., 125

The answer to our question as to the origin of the dragon in medieval legend may be simple misidentification. In an article in the January 18, 1851 edition of the British periodical *Notes and Queries* a contributor wrote:

"...mention is made, in the account of the church of St. Maria delle Grazie, near Mantua, of a stuffed lizard, crocodile, or other reptile, which is preserved suspended in the church. This is said to have been killed in the adjacent swamps, about the year 1406. It is stated to be six or seven feet long.

"At the west door of the cathedral of Cracow are hanging some bones, said to have belonged to the dragon which inhabited the cave at the foot of the rock (the Wawel) on which the cathedral and the royal castle stand; and was destroyed by Krak, the founder of the city.

"It has struck me as possible that the real history of these crocodiles or alligators, if they are such, may be, that they were brought home by crusaders as specimens of dragons, just as Henry the Lion, Duke of Brunswick, brought from the Holy Land the antelope's horn which had been palmed upon him as a specimen of a griffin's claw, and which may still be seen in the cathedral of that city. That they should afterwards be fitted with appropriate legends, is not surprising." [197]

Another contributor to the same journal noted "...the head of a dragon said to have been strangled by St. Martha's garter, and preserved with great veneration at Alix, is undoubtedly the fossilized head of an extinct Saurian reptile." [198] In addition, the writer mentioned that several "continental churches" with reputations of containing the preserved bodies of dragons, "shown as dragons killed by saints" were, in reality,

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[197] "Dragons" in *Notes and Queries*, vol. 3 (64) Jan 18 1851, page 40.

[198] "Is it a Fossil?" in *Notes and Queries*, vol.73rd (165) Feb 25 1865, page 158.

parts of preserved crocodiles. Undoubtedly, any crocodile encountered by a knight during the Crusades would have been an adversary to be reckoned with.

While the actual artifacts of supposed dragon remains may be the bodies of unfortunate crocodiles, the legends are based on much older traditions dating back thousands of years before the Crusades—traditions firmly entrenched in the human mind and expressed in the form of gargoyles and grotesques.

Ancient mythology and folklore concerned with dragons can be traced back to the days of ancient Babylon. Historian Fred Gladstone Skinner tells us that the Hittite dragon was associated with rivers and was celebrated seasonally in a festival called Puruli. He wrote, "the ritual of the slaying of the dragon, if enacted each year, would guarantee that the rivers would stay within their bounds."[199]

Legends of dragons slain by a cultural hero (including Saints) became universal over time. "In many communities of modern Europe," he continues, "the slaying of the dragon is enacted in an annual pageant..." A primeval "Dragon goddess", known as Tiâmat, was worshipped in ancient Babylon...in what is now devastated Iraq. As evil as Satan, she was described as a "she-devil...revolting in appearance, and evil in every way." [200] However, while she was the "personification of chaos, night, darkness and inertness" [201] Tiâmat was also the "Universe-Mother." The Dragon goddess was linked to the dead and had in her possession the

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[199] Skinner, Fred Gladstone. *Myths and Legends of the Ancient Near East.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books 1993, 158, 159.
[200] Budge, E. A. Wallis. *Babylonian Life and History.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books 2005, 63.
[201] Ibid.

Tablet of Fate on which the fate of even man was written before the creation of the world. Similar characteristics have been associated with Europe's dragons as well. In Germanic lore, the fiery dragon was regarded as the guardian of the burial mound. [202] It was this dragon with fiery breath, pointed tail and folded wings that Beowulf killed before he, himself, died—the same image that has played such an important part in our contemporary literature and fairy tale.

A London dragon watching over its city.

[202] Davidson, H. R. Ellis. *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*. New York: Bell Publishing Company 1981, 159.

Because of these ancient legends, the dragon became an important icon for thousands of years and still finds itself carved upon our buildings as grotesque and gargoyle and in our psyche.

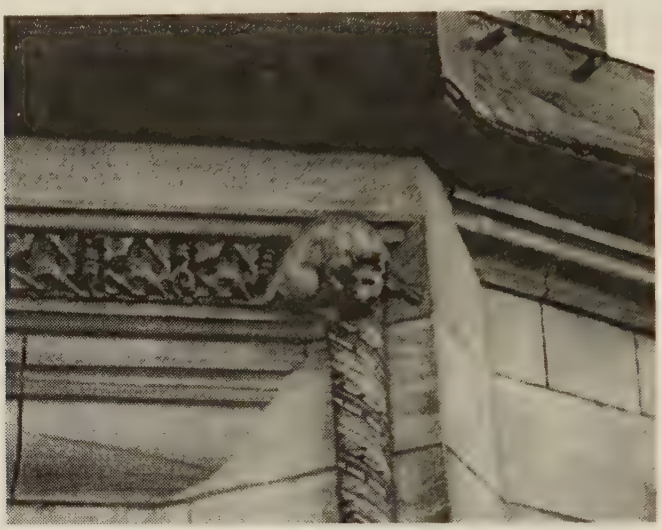
A California dragon grotesque, ca. 1914.

The Rat and Monkey—Two Examples of Social Commentary?

The rat, considered a dirty and evil animal, is hardly one that would be expected to be carved on any significant structure. However the do show up occasionally as carved grotesques on churches and secular buildings.

The photo below, taken of an animal carved on a secular building in Chester, England, is that of a composite creature, a creature with a rat's body but with long ears and a semi-human face. What its significance is no one seems to remember. Benton remarked that these composite

creatures, "carved with assurance…their faces expressive and their poses animated, convey a remarkable sense of energy." [203]



Composite grotesque with animal and human features.

This particular grotesque may signify only the carvers attempt to amuse or to call the character of an individual into question.

The rat is often equated with Satan in Christian lore, this relationship inspired no doubt by the rats destruction of food stores and as a transmitter of disease. In India, however the rat is the companion of the god Ganesha and in China the rat was believed to be the "bringer of rice to humanity." [204]

Finally, we have a carving executed (shown below) during Victorian days of a group of monkeys playing pool in Dublin. Is this also a social

[203] Benton, op cit., 33.

[204] Biedermann, Hans. *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons & The Meanings Behind Them.* New York: Meridian Books 1992, 279.

commentary on the wealthy gentlemen who played pool in their men's clubs while the poor struggled to survive day to day?

Dublin pool-players

What better way to make a long lasting comment on any social ill than by carving meaningful images in stone?

The Unicorn

Our last example of real and mythical animals appearing as architectural motifs is the unicorn. There are many animals that sport a single horn from the head but only one known as the unicorn—a horse of mystical qualities with a majestic horn projecting from the forehead.

The unicorn's horn was sold as a valuable medicine for poisons, the plague, epilepsy, and the bite from a mad dog. One such horn was kept in the Tower of London but the majority of "unicorn horns" turned out to be narwhal tusks, rhino horns and walrus tusks. "True" unicorns were said to exist in Ethiopia, Tibet, Mongolia and South Africa. [205] However,

[205] Gould, Charles. *Mythical Monsters.* London: Senate Books 1995, 338-365.

the magic and mystery of the animal continued to entrance the world and it still survives as a popular figure into the 21st century.

The unicorn symbolizes purity and strength and, in myth, it could only be captured with the aid of a virgin.

The unicorn in the photo above is located outside the Parliament building in London where it continues to symbolize the strength of royalty.

ARTISTRY FOR THE DEAD: SYMBOLISM IN GRAVEYARDS

Perhaps some of our most mysterious, impressive and artistic symbolism can be found in our cemeteries. Ancient pagan, classical Greek and Roman, and the eternal symbols of hope, love and despair appear in many of our older places of rest. Unfortunately, with the gradual demise of the hand carved headstone, which has been replaced by the flat, two-dimensional and plain metal plate, these ancient and mystical representations are becoming harder to find.

Researcher Douglas Keister noted that the majority of American cemetery architectural motifs can be divided into six categories:

1. Ancient pagan architecture
2. Egyptian architecture
3. Classical architecture
4. Gothic architecture
5. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture, and
6. "Uniquely funerary architecture." [206]

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century architectural styles include Art Nouveau, Art Deco and modern classicism.

Many of the symbols we find in cemeteries are representative of the many secret societies that exist in the United States, such as the

[206] Keister, Douglas. *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography.* New York: MJF Books 2004, 13.

Freemasons. The Freemasons utilized many of the pagan symbols for their rituals and iconography. These were freely left as well on headstones and tombs.

Humankind has marked the graves of its loved ones for hundreds of thousands of years. In many examples they were marked by upright stones, stone circles or complex burial chambers. In others, images of beasts and monsters or the symbols of metaphor adorned the stone markers—and these have carried over into contemporary times. That is until very recently. Today it is more common to find flat slabs of unadorned granite or metal with only the name, birth date and date of death engraved to mark the final resting place of the body. It would appear that money and the lack of the stonemason's talent has reduced our markers to a purpose that is more utilitarian than as a loving piece of art hand carved for the mourning family.

Like those anonymous sculptures of the gargoyle and grotesque, the craftsmen that created these exquisite carvings on old headstones utilized both approved religious themes and those of an ancient pagan past. "Much of the sculpture's work," wrote Potok, "is startling in its mastery; some of it goes beyond craft into the subtler realm of art. Variation and prodigality of symbolism and decoration abound, as if they were entirely without fear of condemnation for idolatry." [207]

However, what about those strange carvings of dragons and other mythical beasts that are found on tombstones around the world and among diverse cultures of differing religions? "Dragons, monkeys and griffins," writes Chaim Potok on images found in Jewish cemeteries,

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[207] Potok, Chaim. "Forword" in *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone* by Arnold Schwartzman. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1993, 14

"seemed to emanate from some primal apocalyptic beastiary." [208] Dragons have long been equated with the Devil in Christian lore, the supreme leader of the enemies of God. In other lands, however, the dragon "represents the highest spiritual power, strength, and supernatural wisdom." [209] It is not uncommon for various symbolic representations to have the most opposite of meanings between cultures. Christianity is expected to find evil and the Devil in symbols that were, and still are, important among cultures of other faiths and ages as positive images.

St. John used the dragon, as a representation of Satan, in the New Testament chapter of Revelation: "And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angles were cast out with him." [210]

Griffins too suffer from this duality of meaning. Griffins have appeared in ancient art from Babylon to Greece, Rome and the Orient as a symbol of the sun and the guardian of treasures. The griffin symbolized dominion over the land and the sky and was used symbolically as a sign of power. In the East, the Griffin was symbolic of wisdom and enlightenment—just as the dragon. But, alas, in Christian tradition the griffin depicts evil. The image was used as a symbol of Satan flying away with the souls of those who persecute Christians, or, as Evans relates, demons that "flew aloft on the pinions of pride and fell from heaven into the abyss of hell for their misdeeds." [211]

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[208] Potok, op cit., 13.
[209] Keister, op cit, 93
[210] Revelation 12:9, King James Version
[211] Evans, E. P. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture.* London: W. Heinemann 1896, 39.

Sometime in the 14th century, the griffin became a symbol of the dual nature of Christ rather than the evil of Satan. As is often the case with Christian symbolism, the griffin in its aspect as master of the heavens and the earth was absorbed in Christian iconography and eventually symbolized the Pope as head of spiritual and temporal power.

Many of the symbols found on burial markers have even more obscure meanings and origins. Hands are one of the most common images found in pre-twentieth century cemeteries.

The hand pointing up acts as a road sign, telling visitors to this grave that the occupant no longer resides on the earth but has gone onward to heaven.

The image shown above appears in graveyards from California to Virginia. While hand images are common elsewhere, a hand pointing up appears only in Christian cemeteries. Hands carved on Jewish headstones are shown with the fingers separated "to form openings through which the blessed Shekhinah (radiance of God) streams down upon the congregants." [212]

Other hand motifs include hands that appear to be shaking. This normally represents matrimony if the sleeves shown appear to be masculine and feminine. If the sleeves are gender neutral the image may be that of a heavenly welcome or an earthly farewell. In Chinese symbolism, clasped hands represent friendliness and allegiance.

The dove is another common figure that has been used to decorate headstones. Perhaps the most common animal figure used in cemeteries, the dove is most frequently depicted as holding an olive branch in its beak. The meaning, of course, refers to the flood myth and the dove that Noah released which returned with an olive branch signifying that the flood waters had receded from the earth. The dove also signifies purity and peace. The symbol of the dove with an olive branch is universally representative of peace.

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[212] Schwartzman, Arnold. *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Grave Stone.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1993, 22.

In Christian symbolism, hands appearing in the midst of clouds represent the power and presence of God.

The dove is an appropriate symbol for burial markers as it also represents "the passing from one state or world to another." [213]

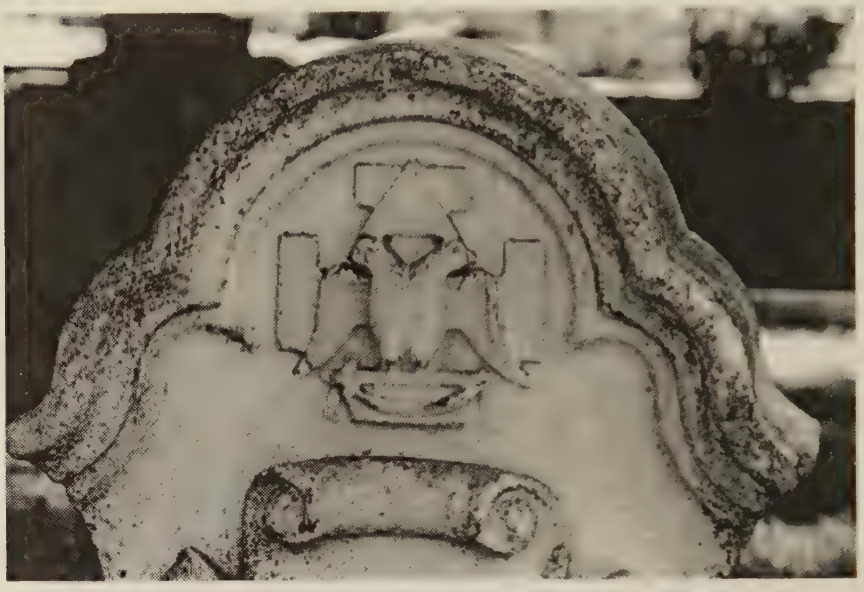
Across time, the sacred dove has been associated with funerary cults and was sacred to all Mother Goddesses, depicting femininity and maternity.

[213] Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.* London: Thames and Hudson 1978, 54.

The dove of purity and peace.

A double-headed dove, much like the double-headed eagle, signifies the dual nature of unity. The double-headed dove shown below appears to be part of an older Masonic emblem which time has effectively erased. This symbol represents the dual nature of unity and is also an imperial emblem of power and protection. According to the Association for Gravetsone Studies, it also symbolizes a 32nd or 33rd degree Mason. [214]

[214] *AGS Field Guide No. 8: Symbolism in the Carvings on Gravestones.* Greenfield: The Association for Gravestone Studies (AGS) 2003, 5



Double-headed dove representing the dual nature of unity and protection.

Other common symbolic motifs on grave markers include various forms of vegetation—both mythical forms and common species. As unlikely as it may seem, a sheaf of wheat is a popular Masonic symbol and is used on grave markers to indicate "someone who has lived a long and fruitful life of more than seventy years." [215] Other interpretations include the "divine harvest at life's end" and a life fulfilled. [216]

Wheat is symbolic of immortality and resurrection. Being a staple of life, wheat has been thought of as being a gift from God. Like other cereal crops such as corn and barley, wheat symbolizes the fertility of the earth, renewal, rebirth and abundance. In Christian symbolism, wheat represents the body of Christ, the righteous and the godly.

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[215] Keister, op cit., 60.
[216] AGS, op cit., 7.

A sheaf of wheat on a headstone denotes a long and fruitful life.

Flowers are often found in cemeteries not only as fresh offerings to departed members of the family or to friends but as carved images on headstones. Flowers are important symbols in many cultures, representing gods and goddesses, the soul and the spiritual flowering of the spirit, immortality and the brevity of life, and of course, rebirth. During the Festival of Rosalia in ancient Rome, roses were scattered over graves.

The rose, as carved on this headstone, commonly adorned the graves of Victorian women.

The rose has, as many symbols do, a dual nature. It has represented "heavily perfection as well as earthly passion." [217] It also symbolizes life and death, immortality and the limits of Time. As used in association with funeral traditions, the rose symbolizes eternal life and resurrection. In Christian lore, the rose grows on the Tree of Life, signifying regeneration and eternal life.

[217] Cooper, op cit.,141.

The shell represents a journey and regeneration or rebirth. This grave marker of an infant is a touching reminder of the journey we all take.

The more unusual graveyard decorations include the shell—normally the scallop shell. Symbolically, the shell represents a pilgrimage or journey, however it has also been used to symbolize baptism and fertility. According to Jack Tresidder, the shell is a symbol of the vulva, "linked with conception, regeneration, baptism and, in many traditions, prosperity—probably through its association with fecundity." [218]

[218] Tresidder, Jack. *Symbols and Their Meanings.* New York: Barnes& Noble 2006, 13.

During the Victorian age, and its associated neo-pagan revivalist era, other interesting pieces of symbolic art found themselves incorporated in cemeteries as well as on secular architecture.

Purely decorative or does this stone ball represent something more ethereal?

One of these items is the stone ball. Keister wrote that stone balls in cemeteries are "almost always purely decorative." [219] A cluster of three such stone balls, however, connotes a gift or money. However, there are other meanings behind this symbol as well. Cooper notes that balls may represent either the sun or the moon and symbolic of the power of the gods to hurl comets from the heavens. [220] Carved stone balls have appeared in widely diverse areas of the world and apparently represent mystic and archaic meanings. According to the Association for Gravestone Studies, these balls may represent the endlessness of time, or eternity, which would be very appropriate for cemetery symbolism.

In Mesoamerica, where the ballgame was played for ritual reasons and the results were often deadly, the ball itself symbolized the sun that not only journeyed across the sky but also in and out of the underworld. [221]

Victorian influence also was responsible for the introduction of ancient Egyptian motifs into secular architecture and graveyard decoration. The "rebirth" of ancient architectural styles during the neo-pagan revivalist period resulted in some of the more interesting changes to American homes and buildings. The photograph above shows how this style also came to be used on the tombs of our wealthier citizenry, who, according to some researchers, did not know the ancient symbolic meaning the image but chose the design due to the popularity of anything Egyptian.

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[219] Keister, op cit., 110.
[220] Cooper, op cit., 17.
[221] Miller, Mary and Karl Taube. *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya.* London: Thames and Hudson 1993, 43.

The winged sun-disk represents the solar power of Ra and Aton and also the renewal of life.

Many of the headstones in our cemeteries also commonly show fraternal symbols. The Masons, also known as the Free Masons, have left their symbols throughout American burial grounds. The primary symbol used is that of the square and the compass, normally shown with a "G" inside the symbol. According to Keister, the square, or carpenter's square, and the compass represents the interaction between mind and matter, or rather "the progression from the material to the intellectual to the spiritual." [222] Biedermann elaborates on this, stating that the square, as it indicates a right angle, stands for what is right, justice and the true law. [223]

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[222] Keister, op cit.,191.

[223] Biedermann, Hans. *Dictionary of Symbols: Cultural Icons & The Meanings Behind Them.* New York: Meridian 1994, 321.

The compass symbolizes the ideal circle of "all-embracing love" for humanity. The "G" which is centrally located in the image either stands for *Geometry* or *God*—or both. The exact meaning is clouded by the organizations reluctance to define their symbols and their meanings.

Masonic symbol on 19th century grave marker.

Trees are also found in cemetery art—the symbolism is obvious—depending on the tree, they represent the Tree of Life, longevity, resurrection, eternity and incorruptibility. The beautiful carving in the

photo below, of a Celtic style, may represent a stylized weeping willow, which symbolizes grief, and sorrow or it may be, in fact, a form of the Tree of Life.

CONCLUSION

If nothing else this book will serve as a reminder that we should be aware of our total surroundings. If we look above us or straight ahead rather than at our feet, as we traverse the streets and grounds where we live, work, play, and where our bodies are placed after death—a whole new (albeit, "old") world is there awaiting our appreciation.

Walker and others refer to the images shown and discussed in this book as "grotesques." In Europe these figures were either incorporated into ecclesiastical structures built over sacred pagan sites, or, in later times as Walker writes, "were perpetuated by secret societies among the artisans, especially masons and smiths, whose fraternities preserved Gnostic symbols...." [224]

During the early years of the Christian church, when churches were built over the ancient pagan holy grounds, existing pagan figures were left in situ and were worshipped alongside the new Christian idols. This was intentionally done so that the "heathen" folk would feel more comfortable in the new houses of worship with familiar pagan figures about them. These pagan images were given new Christian names and placed in the hierarchy of Christian lore. It also is apparent that many of the monks and priests of the early church still maintained their dual belief in the Christian God and the pagan pantheon as well. Janet and Colin Bord wrote,

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[224] Walker, Barbara G. *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, New Jersey: Castle Books 1996, 356.

"Churchmen in those centuries, especially in the more remote areas, combined the ancient pagan practices with the newer Christian ones....in the fourteenth century the Bishop of Exeter was shocked to learn that the monks of Frithelstock Priory in Devon were wont to worship a statue like the 'unchaste Diana' at an altar in the woods." [225]

Certainly it is true too that the craftsmen who painstakingly created these architectural wonders were utilizing their knowledge of ancient symbols to continue traditions that were familiar to them—many times with the approval of Church leaders who saw a way to use the same images to impart a different message.

Images are powerful icons in all societies and many have dual meanings that may be important for different people and cultures at the same time. The swastika held terror for the whole world prior to World War II but for thousands of years before that it was a sacred symbol of the four directions, the changing seasons, light, and life and good fortune.

The images in this book are examples of the artistic efforts of man to relate their religious beliefs and traditions as well as their humor, hope and fears across the ages. It is very important that these carvings be preserved and renewed so that future generations will view them with same wonder as generations before them have. It is also important that the art of stone carving not be lost but continues so that generations to come will have the same skill and knowledge to transform a blank slab of stone into something wondrous and beautiful.

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[225] Bord, Janet & Colin. *Earth Rites: Fertility Practices In Pre-Industrial Britain.* London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1982, 275.

As these works of art were important in past ages, they remain part of our own tradition and, while ignored for the most part, they link contemporary man to an ancient past filled with lost legends, forgotten skills and mythical beasts which may or may not have actually existed.

The gargoyle and the grotesque remain both attractive and repellent as they ever have and continue to play an important but silent part in our lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary R. Varner has written several books and numerous articles about ancient mythology and folklore and how these elements continue to appear in, and influence, contemporary culture.

Varner's previous books include *Essays in Contemporary Paganism* (2000); *Sacred Wells: A Study in the History, Meaning and Mythology of Holy Wells & Waters* (2002); *Water of Life Water of Death: The Folklore and Mythology of Sacred Waters* (2004); *Menhirs, Dolmen and Circles of Stone: The Folklore and Magic of Sacred Stone* (2004); *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature* (2006); and *Creatures in the Mist: Little People, Wild Men and Spirit Beings Around the World* (2007).

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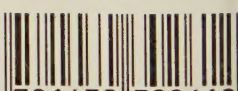

In his seventh book on folklore and symbolism, Gary R. Varner provides a look at strange and grotesque images we see everyday on our churches, banks, government buildings and even in our cemeteries. Images with origins far older than the structures they adorn.

Varner explores the meanings behind these mythical creatures and symbols as well as why carvings of griffins, dragons, unicorns and Green Men are found around the world on ancient and contemporary structures.

Illustrated with over 50 original photographs, Varner provides a fascinating tour of grotesques and gargoyles from France and Britain to New York and California.

This is a book for anyone interested in symbolism and folklore, architectural history and the development of religion.

Gary R. Varner is a member of the American Folklore Society and the Foundation for Mythological Studies.

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