

## **NOTES ON THE SCULPTURES OF THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST CYBARD, CERCLES, DORDOGNE**

In 1995 my husband and I first visited the former priory church of St Cybard at Cercles, in the Périgord. We were struck by the beauty of the church, its size, and the wealth of carvings from the porch to the capitals. At that time the church was in a state of disrepair: the stonework was turning green, birds flew in and out. More recently, the fabric of the church was restored and new lighting has been installed.

Despite the improved conditions, it is hard to count the number of foliate masks as they are not only numerous but very varied, ranging from the typical mysterious face sprouting and crowned with fig leaves to green beasts that are almost human to moon faces that bear no foliage and yet seem to belong to the genre.

Nothing was – or, to the best of my knowledge – is available in French, specifically on the “masque feuillu” where the genre is virtually unknown.

Professor Nelson, professor of History at the University of London, wrote a study of the church of St Cybard from a historical perspective, with reference to the architecture as it evolved, and as far as can be deduced, but she did not write about the sculptures.

Peter Hubert and I have both attempted to do this from our own perspectives, which I hope will complement each other. His notes and Professor Nelson’s article can be read on “The Work of Peter Hubert” :

[http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/notes\\_on\\_the\\_sculptures.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/notes_on_the_sculptures.pdf)

and on my Articles page,

[http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/the\\_church\\_of\\_cercles.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/the_church_of_cercles.pdf) respectively.

**...please click below to see the pictures**

<http://picasaweb.google.com/JuliannaLees/CerclesChurchOfStCybard>

<http://picasaweb.google.com/JuliannaLees/CerclesChurchAndVillage>

The church belonged to the diocese of Angoulême, in the Charente although since Cercles is in the Périgord, one might have expected it to come under the bishop of Périgueux.

### **Cercles, entrance to the cemetery**

Unusually, the cemetery is still in its original position next to the church, although a modern extension has been added on the outskirts of Cercles for the overspill. Where so

many French cemeteries have been made ugly with greenhouses serving as vaults, Cercles' has remained peaceful and aesthetically pleasing with mature tombstones and memorials.

## **EXTERIOR SCULPTURES**

### **Sculpture in bas relief of a crowned figure, small kneeling figure, coiled serpent and fleur de lys set in the wall of the transept**

Is this a representation of the bishop, Saint Cybard, with mitre and dalmatic? Professor Kanaan-Kedar has indicated that the figure is holding a sword, so the headgear is actually a crown, and this is a king. The fleur de lys might re-inforce this reading. The kneeling figure is likely to be a donor and the coiled serpent may be a punning reference to "Cercles". There are other coiled snakes forming a circle with their bodies inside the church.

This sculpture is probably a re-use from an earlier church on the site and may be 10th or 11th century.

### **Figure with arms raised in the "orans" position**

This figure, set in the transept wall to the right of the previous sculpture is probably also a re-use from an earlier church. It may be a representation of an Atlas, supporting an entablature.

There are very worn heads below the window of the North wall of the church, one on the right and a pair on the left.

### **Cercles, porch over entrance**

There is a female head below the rib which vaults the entrance. Although worn, the head is clearly wearing a head cloth and the folds of the material can still be seen.

All six "false capitals" are badly damaged but it is still possible to see that they were sculptures of excellent craftsmanship made of a fine-grained stone in the Angoumois style. They have re-used from another church or another position.

### **Cercles, sculptures to the left of the entrance. Winged serpent and running animal in foliage**

You can see how different is the stone used by the sculptor from the worn chalk used by the mason. Although damaged, the sculpted stone is not very worn, in contrast to the columns on which it has been placed.

**These are the same sculptures, but I have turned them round 90°. It is easier to see them this way.**

### **Cercles, capital with foliate entrelacs to the right of entrance**

The subject of entrelacs or interlace is a huge one, covering many centuries and a vast geographical area as well as every kind of media. Peter Hubert has made a study of their evolution and distribution and has an enormous collection of photographs to illustrate it.

### **Cercles, Griffins to the right of the entrance**

(I have made a study of Griffins which can be read here :

[http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/varieties\\_of\\_griffin.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/varieties_of_griffin.pdf)

on the Notes & Queries page.

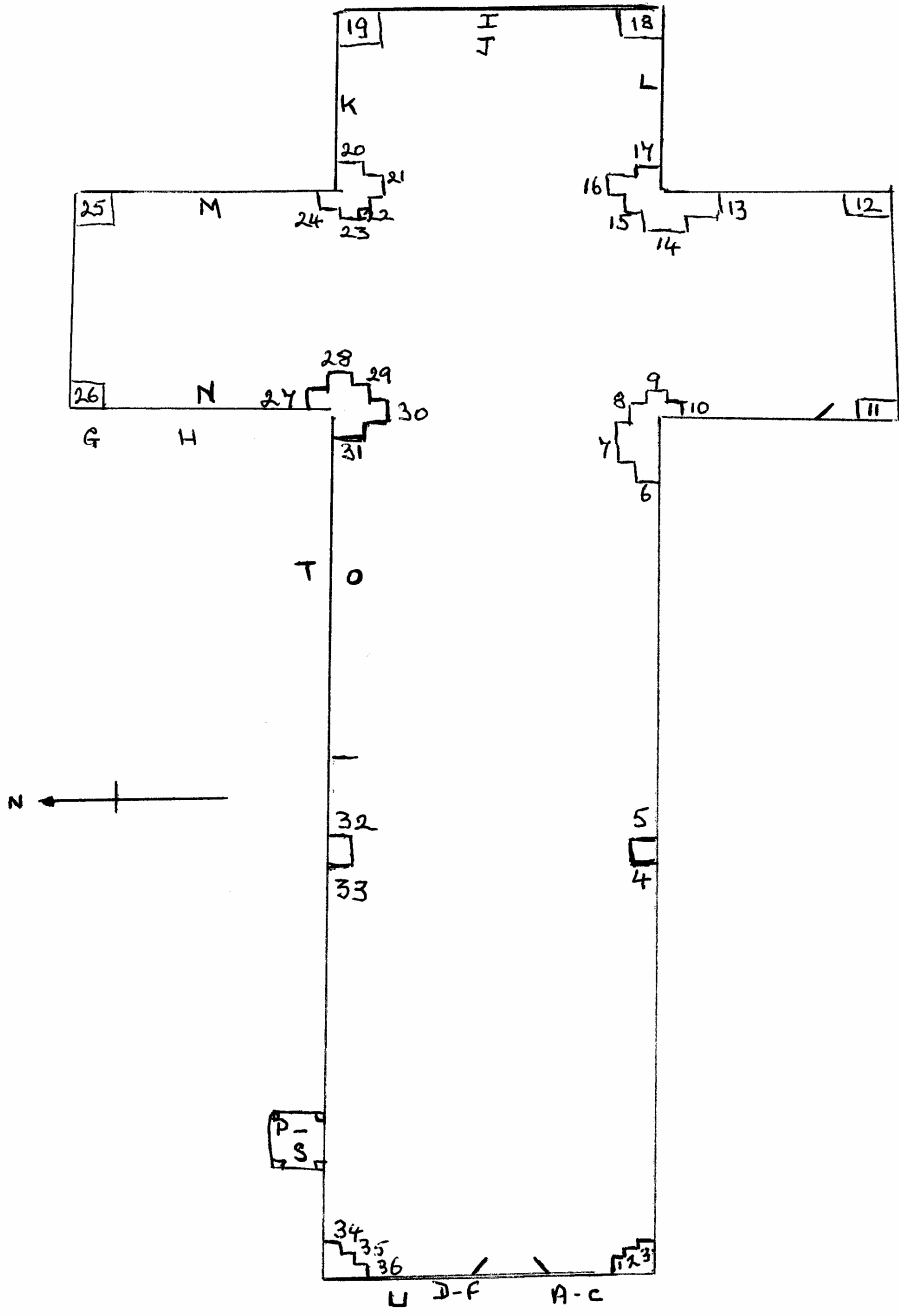
### **Double-bodied animal among interlaced foliage to the right of the entrance**

The twin animals have their hindquarters near the top of this capital and their heads hidden behind the knot of foliage. They may be dogs or deer. There is a capital with a similar subject but very different in style inside the church.

**INTERIOR SCULPTURES – numbered according to Peter Hubert’s plan of the church** – his notes on the sculptures can be read here :

[http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/notes\\_on\\_the\\_sculptures.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/notes_on_the_sculptures.pdf)

ST CYBARD, CERCLÉS



### **Cercles, 1-3, three capitals in the South-West corner of the nave**

The left hand capital is decorated with foliage including a fern; the middle capital with three masks : negroid, with a triangular beard, and with a rather oriental-looking mask with wide beard. The third capital has a large coiled serpent biting its tail on the left face. On the right, a mask surrounded by about 13 cupules. The humanoid leaf on the angle is similar to the slide from half way along the South wall.

### **Cercles, 1-3, the same capitals as on the previous slide, with the Greek cross in a circle carved on the South wall**

A cross like this is often seen painted in red in the ancient churches of Cappadocia which may have influenced the Romanesque churches of the Périgord via the returning crusaders, especially as regards their cupolas. A similar cross can be seen at Segonzac on the other side of the Dronne valley.

### **Cercles, capital 4, primitive mask with 6-pointed flower in circle, left corner near exit (or entrance) to the church**

To the right of the mask are 4 rhomboid-shaped leaves, then a strange humanoid leaf on the angle, followed by a geometrical device on the other face. Is this another reference to "Cercles"? There are also 3 cupules, as on the previous capital.

### **Cercles, capital 4, primitive mask with 4 fat fingers for hair on corner near exit**

There is an extraordinary variety of skill and sophistication (or lack of it) in the capitals of Cercles. Perhaps some of them are of earlier date than others. The most primitive sculptures, possibly by the same hand, seem to be these ones clustered around the right hand corner of the nave as one enters the church, and up to half way down the right hand side of the nave.

### **Cercles, capital 5, with 2 masks wreathed with snakes half way along the South wall of the nave**

The snake on the left is a "pushmepullyou", with the heads on each end of its circular body talking, or kissing each other above the head of the mask. If this is a play on the name of the village, it may also represent the average parishioner - encircled by sin!

### **Cercles, capital 5, second face of the capital shown on the previous slide, masks wreathed in birds on capital near entrance**

Here, the two-headed creature encircling the head may be a snaky kind of monster with birds' heads. What is the cupule on the top left? Meaningless decoration? A small bird's nest? The right half of this capital has obviously been truncated. Either the wall has encroached since it was placed there or this capital has been re-used from elsewhere.

### **Cercles, capitals 6-8 on the fourth set of columns on the crossing seen from the right**

To the right of the Twin Green Men is the final capital of this series. It is decorated with a large leaf with 7 points similar to those on the capital to the right of the choir, and 2 masks. The small one next to the large leaf is perched on a smaller (damaged) fig leaf. The big mask on the corner has negroid lips.

### **Cercles, capital 7 Twin Green Men with beards on their chins**

Like the dogs (or deer) in the South transept, these Green Men seem to have been much restored in fairly modern times. Each has a large leaf issuing from each side of their mouths, meeting in the middle and forming a leaf-bud cowl. The leaf bud headgear reminds me of that very early sculpture from the crypt of St Benigne, Dijon.

### **Cercles, three capitals 8-10 on fourth set of columns by crossing with goat head and several Green Men**

The head pecked by birds is on the far left, and then the horned goat head. Then we have a third Green Man similar to those on the previous picture, but with a leaf-bud on his head surrounded by branches with up to 8 leaves. Then the "twin Green Men" on the capital facing the "classic" Green Man across the nave.

### **Cercles, capitals 9-10, two Green men on adjacent capitals on fourth set of columns by crossing**

The heads are long and solemn, each with a pair of vine-type leaves held in the mouth and similar leaves standing upright on each side. The head on the left appears to be crowned and may have a small beard. That on the right has a pair of birds pecking the flat top of his head.

### **Cercles, capital 12 in right corner of South transept decorated with foliage and entwined dogs or deer**

Much restored, the animals may be greyhounds but are probably deer. They have been designed to fit into an inverted triangle, their necks entwined, their gaping jaws biting their own bottoms. Their forepaws appear to have turned into stems ending in linked foliage forming a fleur de lys below their heads. Similar foliage appears to the left of the animals and above them.

### **Cercles, capital 13, Mask on corner of capital, among foliage. Left corner of South transept**

The smiling mask appears to be crowned with a pointed diadem. The large, acanthus-like leaves are all standing upright, on each side of the mask and his crown.

**Cercles, capitals 14-16, group of three capitals by the third set of crossing columns to the right of the choir**

On the far left you can just make out the Green man in the choir; on the left a capital with foliage decoration, in the middle, decorated with two pairs of felines and on the right, a feline nibbling, and foliage.

**Cercles, capital 14, feline nibbling, by a branch of laurel-like leaves on capital to the right of the choir (third set on crossing)**

The animal could be a cat but was probably meant to be a lion. It sits and nibbles like a squirrel. The object it is chewing is shaped like a Roman funeral monument marked with 2 large XX on the base. It might be an up-ended sarcophagus.

**Cercles, capital 17, small Green Man in corner of choir facing the altar**

The mask has a pair of stalks coming from its mouth, each ending in a cinquefoil. More cinquefoils are placed by the top of his head and on each side of his neck. A similar stalk rings his head like the edge of a cowl.

**Cercles, capital 18, Green man in choir, right**

The streamers of foliage in the man's mouth may be compared to those issuing from the donkey (or lion) opposite. They are stalks ending in leaves or flowers, with more leaves above the man's head and replacing his ears, as well as below his chin.

**Cercles, capital 19, heads appearing from foliage, left corner at back of choir**

The clumps of foliage might be hyacinth leaves, from which the heads emerge like flowers.

**Cercles, capitals 20-24 on the crossing to the left of the choir : 2 animal heads, 2 birds on 2 lions and (right) 2 Green Men and 2 cocks**

This is a very sophisticated series of inter-connected capitals, the animals and heads set among a large number of leaves. The animal head on the left may be a lamb, that on the next angle a calf with a tongue that has become foliage.

**Cercles, capital 20, donkey (perhaps) in the choir, at the reverse of the second group of capitals by the crossing**

The donkey is wreathed in foliage which issue from its long muzzle, so it is a "green" donkey. It has huge, staring bug eyes.

### **Cercles, capital 20, close-up of "green" quadruped**

The animal's face is long, but its ears are not very long so may be the sculptor intended it to be a lion. Certainly, lions are much more common than donkeys in Romanesque sculpture. The stems of foliage end in flowers.

### **Cercles, capitals 22-23, two Green Men on the angles of the capitals on the second series of crossings to the left of the choir**

The Green Man nearest to the altar seems to be crowned with a kind of triple tiara by a pair of long-tailed cocks or cockatrices. Both Green Men hold in their mouth stems or stalks that unite them with all the green leaves on their capitals.

### **Cercles, capital 22, detail of Green Man crowned by cockatrices**

Are the leaves ivy or vines? Both have Dionysiac associations.

### **Cercles, capital 24, detail of animals on the capitals left of the series by the second crossing**

The birds are perched on the backs of the lions and are pecking their necks. This may mean that they are offering divine inspiration to the creatures representing strength and fortitude. The lamb, presiding over all may be a reference to the Agnus Dei.

### **Cercles, capital 25, leaf-bud man and heads covered by ferns, right corner of North transept**

This capital is exactly opposite capital 26. There are 6 small heads, like birds in a nest. The biggest one on the angle is the leader; he has 3 little brothers on one side and 2 on the other.

### **Cercles, capital 26, leaf-bud head and fern leaves in the left corner of the North transept**

I see this as possibly representing a new-born soul, still in a very immature state, capable of becoming good or evil.

### **Cercles, capital 27, Head pecked by birds on reverse side of the first set of crossing capitals**

Compare this to the very simple head pecked by birds on capital 5, which seems like a much-reduced version of this one. Wherever there is no head on this set of capitals, there is foliage.

### **Cercles, capitals 29-31, Green man capital and other capitals, first crossing on the left**



This is a classic Green Man of a style that goes back to a Hellenic model. He is crowned with a fig leaf and has a young fig leaf protruding from each side of his mouth.

### **Cercles, capital 30, classic Green Man, close up**

The Green Man can also be seen as a "Tree nose", with the nose as tree trunk and the fig leaf above it as the branches. The choice of fig leaf reminds us that the Green Man can be seen as a representation of sinful Adam.

### **Cercles, capital 31, Head pecked by birds, left of the "classic" Green Man**

There are several capitals at Cercles (and elsewhere) where heads are pecked by birds. If birds are heavenly messengers, these can be seen as good people accepting wise counsel and heeding the word of God.

### **Cercles, capital 32, head with wig-like hair on capital half way along the North wall of the nave**

The hairstyle reminds one of John Bunyan, so looks later than Romanesque to the average modern viewer. However, there is a very similar head - believed to be a portrait of the master mason - in the Chapel of Nine Altars in Durham Cathedral.

The chapel on the right, as you leave Cercles church is probably 18thc and of little interest, with undistinguished small capitals decorated with leaves.

### **Cercles, the nave and entrance viewed from the crossings**

The "classic" Green Man is under the light on the right, the "twin Green Men" under the light on the left of this slide. The door on the right leads to the bell tower and a lovely little square room with views over the countryside. The door on the left once led to the cloister - now indicated only by the roof beam holes.

### **Cercles, the church entrance (or exit) with a distant view of the tours of La Tour Blanche**

The ruined tower of La Tour Blanche, about 2 kms distant, is medieval but it sits on a gallo-roman oppidum. This is in alignment with the altar of Saint Cybard, Cercles.

NB – Professor Nelson's notes on the history of Cercles on the Articles page can be read here : [http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/the\\_church\\_of\\_cercles.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/the_church_of_cercles.pdf)

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