

The Green Man of Cercles

GREEN CATS – AND DOGS

“Green Cats” are often lions. In medieval bestiaries the lion is a symbol of courage, strength, royal power, and when winged, of St Mark the Evangelist. Most medieval masons were unfamiliar with real lions which is why they tend to look like cats in Romanesque sculpture.



Fig 1 : Green cat from the church of Saint Jacques, Conzac, in the Charente

There are countless fine examples of lion heads spewing foliage in the Aquitaine but similar ones can also be found in many parts of England. Those on the fonts at Stottesdon, Shropshire, and Lullington, Somerset seem to be of the same school.



Fig 2 : Green cat from font at Stottesdon, Shropshire

from Ruth Wylie's site :

http://www.motley-morris.co.uk/exploring_new_interpretations_of.htm

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Fig 3 : Green cat from font at Lullington

This image is from Anthony Weir's site,

<http://www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/column.htm> (3rd picture down)

Also, those on the pillar at Shobdon Arches, Herefordshire, which are said to be of the "Kilpeck School".



Fig 4 : Green cats from Shobdon Arches

<http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/crsbi/shobdon/intro.html>

How many cat heads can you see in this picture?

The sculptors of these images may have come from the Saintonge region of France, with Norman, Angevin or Aquitaine noblemen or their descendants.

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Fig 5 : Green beast from ivory crozier

This image comes from the catalogue of the 2005 Romanesque exhibition at the Louvre, Paris : a rather humanoid Green Beast on the ivory crozier of Yves de Chartres :

mask”.

The catalogue describes it as a “leonine

Another image from the exhibition is this miniature column-swallower from the Tau of Coulombs, Bishop of Chartres:



Fig 6 : Green cat from Tau of Coulombs

The Tau is made of wood. The inspiration for it may have come from an illuminated manuscript like the one below. Such beasts are frequently found embellishing capital letters like this one from the St Augustine psalter of Rouen :



Fig 7 : Green cat from Rouen psalter

I would have thought the "green cat" was spewing rather than swallowing, but it's always difficult to tell. I sent these images to Anthony Weir , who replied :

"Thanks for the picture of the Tau of Coulombs. Yes I think column-swallowers originated in

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Manuscripts (probably anglo saxon ones) then perhaps migrated to metalwork and then to stone. Swallowers and spewers are difficult to separate, of course, as with "Green Men".

More rare than “felines” are illuminated dogs. This pair of Jolly Green Push-me-pull-you dogs comes from a picture of St Thomas from the famous scriptorium of St Martial, Limoges – probable source of many sculptural themes in Aquitaine. (fig. 123 in the Romanesque catalogue).

If Thomas is known as “Doubting Thomas” perhaps the cheerful dogs are re-assuring him? Look at the whole picture, as there’s a lot happening :



Fig 8 : Green dog from St Thomas MS

The Dogs are connected to the Green Bird, the Bird to the Green Fish (as ICTHUS, emblem of Christ, of course). Then the fish makes up the circuit by attaching itself to the Bird’s tail. All are connected to Saint Thomas by the belt of his green cloak.

Could the source of this picture of dogs and saint derive from the Dog-headed Saint?

See Anthony Weir’s article on <http://www.beyond-the-pale.co.uk/dogsaints.htm> for more about St Christopher Cynephorus or Cynocephalus.

John Harding of the Sheela-na-Gig project sent me the next photograph : of the tympanum of Llanbadarn church, but he was unable to explain its significance. Let me fantasise : the object to the left of the cat’s head may be a wheel of life with a 9-point star on it; cats are said to have 9 lives. A Tree of Life springs from the cat’s head. The dogs’ tails are in a position which, in heraldry, signifies virility but they end in a fleur-de-lys, emblem of the French royalty. The dogs themselves are positioned each side of the cat’s head like bearers on a shield. The entire composition smacks of heraldry. The implication of this reading would suggest that the tympanum is of Insular manufacture, the cat representing the Saxons and the dogs the conquerors.

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Fig 9 : Green cat and dogs from Llanbadarn Fawr

Another possible cat and dog tympanum from the British Isles was sent to me by Peter Hubert :



Fig 10: Stow Longa, Hunts, Siren on tympanum over priest's door

The Siren's stance reminds me of one at St Georges d'Agout (see "A Green Man Variant", fig 29). These may be three sinful creatures in an unholy trinity, reminding the priest of the dangers of sin ever-present. But the church notes suggest that the "cat" might be the Agnus Dei!

Dr John Hunt, in his article, "Kilpeck Church: a window on medieval 'mentalité'", quotes from *The Bestiary* :

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“... the dog, noted for its understanding, was likened to priests. As a dog’s tongue heals wounds, so too are the wounds of sin cleansed by priests.” In the context of a tympanum over a priest’s door, this sounds quite plausible.

Cat and dog sculptures can be seen on two capitals at Carennac in Quercy and on capitals in the porch of the Basilica of St Seurin, Bordeaux.



I feel justified in suggesting that these are indeed dogs and not lions, because the sculptor carved proper lions on another capital in the same area :



Figs 11-13, capitals from the West porch of the Basilica of St Seurin, Bordeaux.

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Note that all the beasts shown here are associated with “Green” images, even if the rinceaux emerging from the mouth are (in the case of the dogs), the dogs’ tails. However there is a Green Man on the Gothic South porch, where the greenery is partly pheasants’ tails:



Fig 14, Green Man and pheasants frieze on capital from the Basilica of St Seurin, Bordeaux:

(To be continued)

Julianna Lees – Montagrier 2008

NB – for more pictures from the Basilica of St Seurin, including the early Christian sarcophagi in the crypt, please click here :

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