

GREEN MEN and SIRENS at St Michel d'Aiguilhe, le Puy en Velay, Auvergne



The pilgrimage chapel of St Michel d'Aiguilhe, high above Le Puy en Velay, has a marvellous façade where Green Men spew an arc of vegetation with more Green Men among foliage in the spandrels standing upon foliate masks.



St Michel d'Aiguilhe, entrance

They surround an unusual pair of sirens on the lintel.



St Michel d’Aiguilhe, sirens

This Xth-century chapel of St Michael the Archangel was implanted - as so often with churches dedicated to St Michael - on a pagan shrine of a Gallo-Roman Mercury. Such places are normally found on heights, and are among the earliest Christian emplacements. The two St Michael’s Mounts, in Normandy and in Cornwall are examples, as is Mont Mercure in the Vendée. The chapel was re-built and the sculpture added in the second half of the XIIthc.

Xavier Barral I Altet has described the upper level of the façade as having ‘five niches each containing a bust.



St Michel d’Aiguilhe, upper façade



St Michel d'Aiguilhe, sculptures in five niches

In the centre, Christ in Majesty, to the right the Virgin with halo and veil proffering a vase, and to the left, the Archangel Michael. Below, the oculus is framed by four pairs of palmettes on stalks.' (see Bibliography)



St Michel d'Aiguilhe, sculptures above entrance

A pair of dramatic heads with staring eyes are spewing a rainbow of foliage over a blind tympanum which rests on a pair of sirens. The Agnus Dei in a mandorla rests above the apex of the arch, while kneeling men worship on each side. To left and right of the Lamb of God, a small Green Man, entwined in foliage, appears in the spandrels of the Mozarabic tri-cusped frame. Below each of these is a tiny masque feuillu, spewing yet more vegetation. Another Man in Foliage is carved on the supporting capital to the right, flanked by an eagle in the pose of a phoenix on the left. This unusual series of images also appears on my “Notes & Queries” “Are Harpies Sirens?” and “Green Men and Snakes Strangely Placed”.



St Michel d'Aiguilhe, close-up of sculptures over entrance

In the next view, we can see the “uttering” Green Men above the sirens more clearly :



St Michel d'Aiguilhe, close-up of Green Men and sirens

Here is the Green Man on the left, showing the birds seated on the foliage :



Two small birds share a fruit on the branch emerging from his mouth. Surely this is a reference to the Parable of the Mustard Seed, especially viewed in conjunction with the seven birds among the little Green Men above. Being so close to the Adoration of the Lamb frieze just by it, this "Green Man" could never be diabolical. Green Man images can be either good or bad,

according to context, (like the Tree in Genesis). There are usually clues in the way the image has been depicted.



I have turned the right-hand Green Man through 90° for clarity. The stonework has been damaged, but you can see the end of a stalk in the mouth, and you can see how the foliage would have been continuous.

The heads of the men are placed in each corner in a design that is similar to the lintel at Anzy le Duc, in Burgundy, with their whorls of foliage.



Anzy le Duc, close-up of Green Man on left corner, and foliage

However, the St Michel heads are more Roman in influence, the Anzy heads more medieval, as well as being at a different angle. The way in which the narrow branch of leaves issues from the mouth of the head at Anzy is reminiscent of the great arc produced by the St Michel head; but the Anzy foliage, being on a flat lintel, then forms a pattern that is more static, with the central, acanthus-like leaves also resembling scallop shell motifs. The foliage at St Michel is, by the nature of the design, more dynamic.

When we come to the Men in Foliage above and below the blind tympanum, one is reminded of the fleur de lys both for the man on the upper level on the right and the one on the capital on the right below.



St Michel d'Aiguilhe, close-up of Green Men and Agnus Dei

Now you can see the little masques feuillus below the Green Men more easily. Even the Lamb of God is lapped by six acorn-like leaves, which is quite unusual. Both men are clutching the stalks which also shield their manhood, like Adam's fig leaf. The one on our left is straddling the stems that have issued from his mask's mouth with his feet, while balancing on the mask. His twin is in a similar attitude, but his feet are hidden : we can just see his knees through the stalks, while his "fig leaf" reaches right up to his breast. The little masks are pop-eyed and round-mouthed, rather like the giant uttering heads below them. Note the five birds among the foliage : there are seven in all, not counting those below.



Phoenix-like eagles capital



Clothed men in foliage holding leaves

This pair of capitals is placed to left and right of the twin sirens on the lintel, so they are in the position of Guardians of the entrance, but also of Atlantes, supporting the arch above. Each of them has a double face, the inside face being a twin image of the one that faces the ascending pilgrim. The Spread Eagle rises above the foliage, fanning it with his wings like a phoenix fanning the flames from which it is reborn.

The man, rising from similar, acanthus-like foliage, is clothed in righteousness, smiling sweetly and looking straight ahead, with a bon-enfant expression that is entirely benign. In each hand he clutches a double fleur-de-lys or a plant that resembles one. I understand these sculptures to represent the Good Catholic, shriven and reborn, so permitted to enter into the chapel in a state of grace. The lily is a symbol of the Madonna and of purity, while being trifoliate it also represents the Trinity. The fact of being double re-inforces the message. The man holds them aloft in a triumphant attitude, like a martyr's palms.



What are we to make of the twin sirens on the lintel, between these entirely Christian capitals? In the first place, sirens, in Romanesque art, are always images of Lust, sinful, pagan creatures, temptresses of men. They flirt with their hair with the lascivious intent of drawing attention to their attractions, and revealing their breasts. This, at a time when virtuous women covered their hair in Christian countries as well as in Moslem ones.

Seen closely, these sirens seem to be short-haired and playing with wigs or towels held over their heads though they are, in fact, flaunting their own tresses:



Twin sirens close-up

In fact, the siren on our right might be seen as male, were it not for the breasts. Could this be a deliberate attempt to underline the deceiving nature of the creatures, tempting men to sin and dragging them down to Hell?

It is relatively unusual for Romanesque sirens to be mono-caudal. The mannish siren on our right has a single tail with fins, like a fish; the one on our left has a long, looped and imbricated tail like Leviathan.



Le Magny, Berry, Siren clutching tail

Is this a siren clutching a single tail in her right hand? Does she have WINGS? (That would be unique in my experience.) There is a Roman soldier on the other face of this capital.

Another monocaudal siren is to be found on a corbel at Ste Marie du Mont, Normandy, where she appears to be swimming vigorously.



While at Civray, Vienne, a siren appears to be doing the breast-stroke among foliage (or seaweed?) in pursuit of a Green Lion, watched by a monkey – all symbols of lust :



More common would be the double-tailed siren (one of a pair), like this one on a capital at the Cathedral of Le Puy:



Cathedral of Le Puy, Porche du For, siren

This siren appears to be wearing a crown. Perhaps she is Mélusine herself?

Another royal siren flaunts her tails on a corbel at the church of Loupiac where we can also see a superb Green Man over a sculpture of Adam and Eve (see my article on “Green Men strangely placed” <http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/olite.pdf>) . Other sirens abound in the same area.



Crowned siren, Loupiac,

siren, Lestiac,

siren, Haut Langoiran, Gironde

It seems that the message may be : Temptation is everywhere, even within the sacred space of the chapel itself!

The beautiful twin sirens from Tavant, near the Loire, are right by the altar and choir :



With the tiny breasts of young girls, they look quite naïve and innocent!

A final query : Why has the tympanum been left blank? Is it unfinished? Or did the sculptor wish to emphasise the importance of the symbolism of the other sculptures by not distracting our attention with a central sculpture on the tympanum?

Here is a little gallery of bi-caudal sirens from a number of Romanesque churches in France :

Sometimes the sirens have a modest little skirt of seaweed like this one from Mailhat, where there is also a splendid Green Man capital :



or this one from Charlieu, in contrast to the shameless siren of Brommes, Rouergue.



Charlieu, Burgundy, siren



Brommes, Rouergue, bottom-displaying siren



Roffiac, Haute Auvergne, inside and outside the same church



Le Puch, Gascony, siren on corbel to right of entrance



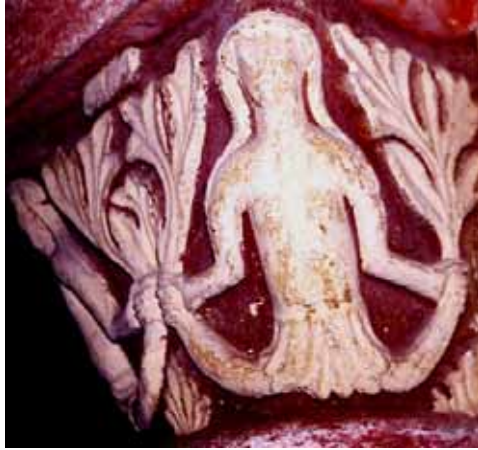
Marillac, Angoumois, siren-like figures with pine cones



Matha Ste Hérie, Saintonge, siren



Villesalem, Vienne, siren



Chauriat, Auvergne, Green Sirens

In this unusual image, the sirens' tails have turned into foliage, so they have become "Green Women". Compare this to a Roman mosaic from St Romain en Gal, Vienne :



The loveliest Green sirens must surely be those from Brioude and Chanteuges in the Auvergne, thought to be by the same school as the sculptures of Mozac :



Brioude, St Julien, capitals of female and male sirens



Chanteuges, capitals of "green" male and female sirens



At Paulnay, in the Berry, there is a double capital featuring a Green Man and a siren side by side :



Paulnay, Berry, Green Man and siren capitals

Each of them appears to be wreathed in snakes but the foliate mask is actually wreathed in entrelacs of his own stalks and foliage while the siren is performing contortions with her snaky tails.

Another unusual siren capital is this one from Bessuejols, Aveyron :



The siren seems to be performing a circus act with a pair of centaurs, each of which holds one of her tails with one hand while claspng a branch of foliage in the other. The siren, meanwhile, clutches her tresses while leaping over their backs. The centaurs' tails emerge from between their hind legs in the phallic way so frequently seen on Romanesque lions.

At Toulouges, Rousillon, an unusual siren capital :



shows both male and female bi-caudal sirens watched over by a male head. The male siren is clutching his beard, so he also belongs to another category of marginal image, the Beard-puller; all three heads support an entablature so they are also atlantes.

(To be continued)

Julianna Lees – Montagrier 2010

See also my other “notes and queries”:

“Green Men strangely placed”, <http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/olite.pdf>

“Are Harpies Sirens?”, http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/are_harpies_sirens.pdf

and “A Green Man Variant”,

http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a_green_man_variant.pdf.pdf

Bibliography :

Xavier Barral I Altet : “The Romanesque Towns, Cathedrals and Monasteries”, Taschen, 2001