

Men among Vines : The Romanesque image of figures among vegetation

Many Romanesque and Gothic sculptures depict figures – usually male – among vines, tendrils (in French, “rinceaux”), and other vegetation.



Fig 1: Green Men and beasts among rinceaux, Chateaufort en Charente



Fig 2: Green Men among rinceaux, Conzac, in Charente

At some level, there is always a connection with Green Men. Sometimes there are simply heads surrounded by foliage rather than with foliage emerging from their mouths and other facial orifices.



Fig 3: Green Man among rinceaux, Conzac, in Charente



Fig 4: Green Men of St Michel d'Entraygues, Angouleme region

The head often stands as “shorthand” for the whole body, so these heads may be seen in parallel with the figures among greenery. They may also be seen as bridging the gap between the “classic” Green Man, and the figures among vegetation.



Fig 5: Green Men among rinceaux, Plassac, Saintonge

I had wondered if some of these sculptures might be a transformation of "Laocoon & his sons", the much-copied group of figures by Athanadoros and associates, of Rhodes. Of course, medieval masons could not have known this sculpture, since it was only unearthed in 1506. However, Pliny the Elder described it, and the myth was common knowledge among educated people.



Fig 6 : Laocoon and his sons, 1st century BC, Vatican Museum

The marble group was actually a copy of an earlier Greek bronze. Perhaps some medieval sculptors drew their inspiration from this myth.

On the other hand, there are many Roman depictions of putti working in vineyards, making wine, etc. These cheerful and innocent decorative panels, sometimes painted, sometimes sculpted in bas relief or depicted in mosaic, might have decorated many a Gallo-Roman villa.

But what did the medieval spectator make of these figures? The more sinister ones may be viewed as sinners, entangled in their sins, struggling vainly to free themselves.

Professor Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, of the Art History faculty of Tel-Aviv writes:

"Most of the figures intertwined with rinceaux or with emerging rinceaux from their mouth are part of the material world. I think that on the one hand the myth of Lycurgus and his punishment and its formal traditions are a very important source. (Look at the mosaic pavement in the city of Vienne, now in the new archeological museum of Saint-Romain-en-Gal). On the other hand, the tradition of the peopled scroll has also a very great impact with its changing meanings. When it is situated on the margin it has generally a meaning of sin, while in the center of the composition as in San Clemente in Rome for instance, it is symbolizing salvation as the wine stands for the blood of Christ."

(San Clemente, incidentally, has a splendid Mithraeum in the crypt.)



Fig 7 : Lycurgus mosaic from St-Romain en Gal, Vienne

The reference to the Lycurgus mosaic is very interesting. (After looking up the images I noted that there is another one at Narbonne). The mosaic at St-Romain en Gal is a splendid prototype of men among vines.



Fig 8: The Lycurgus Cup

The Lycurgus Cup
London, The British Museum

The Lycurgus cup in the British Museum is made of glass and dates from the 4th century AD. It changes from green to red and is one of only a handful of glasses of this kind, all of them Roman. Click here to see it change colour :

<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/science/images/cupa.gif>

Here is another Lycurgus mosaic, this time from Sicily.



Fig 9 : Lycurgus mosaic from Sicily

Lycurgus and Ambrosia – mosaic from Villa Romana del Casale, Sicily

The mosaic in the S. apse depicts the Dionysian myth of Lycurgus and Ambrosia. Lycurgus is standing in the middle, nude and muscular, with his axe raised ready to hit the Manaed Ambrosia to the right. Behind him is a group of three Manaeds, one of whom touches Lycurgus on the shoulder while threatening him with her raised *thyrsus*, in an attempt to stop him from finishing his insane act. Below the Manaeds is a spotted panther, ready to attack Lycurgus, but it is held back by a nude boy wearing a crown of flowers. To the right of Ambrosia, the Bacchic group of Pan, Silenus and Dionysus is rushing to her help. The metamorphosis of Ambrosia has already begun, and her legs are changing into a vine that extends to the left, below Lycurgus. The entangled branches of the vine

cover the lower part of the mosaic, and a number of winged cherubs are playing between the branches.

Major parts of the mosaic have been lost, mostly to the right, where parts of Pan, Silenus and Dionysus are missing. The elongated panel under the columns that precede the apse is completely lost.

Compare the description of the metamorphosis of Ambrosia to the depiction of the naked woman in the bas-relief below :



Fig 10: Figures among vines from the Moselle

This large (2 metre wide) marble panel is in the museum of Luxembourg, but comes from the Moselle region and is 2nd century AD. It is described as representing Vitis, “a personification of the deity of the Vine”, but it reminds me of Ambrosia. Her knees are metamorphosing into vine branches which she grasps with her hands. A little chap like a cupid without wings stands on the right. Is Ambrosia (or Vitis) the original Green Goddess? Is there a semantic connection between the Latin words for Vine and for Life?

In early Christian iconography, Jesus, as the True Vine is depicted surrounded by wreathing vines and vine tendrils. There is a beautiful mosaic in the church of Santa Constanza, Rome, in which people can be seen working among the vines :



Fig 11: Figures among vines from the 4th century mosaic of Santa Constanza, Rome

While three Good Shepherds on a marble sarcophagus, also in Rome, flank a bucolic scene of putti among the vines :



Fig 12: Figures among vines from the 4th century “Good Shepherds” sarcophagus, Rome

For an article on the Peopled Scrolls at the Umayyad Palace in Jericho by Hana Taragan of Tel-Aviv University, click here :

http://www.tau.ac.il/arts/projects/PUB/assaph-art/assaph3/articles_assaph3/05Taragan.pdf

For more about possible sources of Romanesque iconography in early Christian and Classical sculpture and mosaic, please see my article, “From Roman to Romanesque”.

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

(To be continued)

Julianna Lees – Montagrier 2008