

## THE GREEN MAN IN BENIN? Some curiosities of cultural influence

### Photographs by Laurence Bétoin

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Portuguese missionaries began to evangelize Benin, influencing their art work and iconography. Almost from the start, European collectors sought their work, thus creating a market for African artists who were quick to produce objects that might be pleasing to their white customers. A two-way cultural exchange could not be said to exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when an exhibition of African art in Paris influenced, Picasso, Braque and other artists. But there exist some curious examples of Romanesque iconography among the artifacts shown during 2007 at the Musée du Quai Branly.

The missionaries are known to have had illuminated manuscripts with them, but did they have other portable devotional objects?

In my first example we see a bronze dish decorated with a Foliate Mask or Green Man like a grinning skull, its mouth filled with a row of teeth :



**Fig 1: bronze dish decorated with a Foliate Mask**

It is upside down; I have reversed it for easier viewing. The other side of the dish is far more complex :



**Fig 2: bronze dish decorated with a Foliate Mask, frogs and entrelacs**

The two masks are separated by two crouching frogs. Between each frog and the mask on this side are the heads of two Portuguese missionaries with long, curling hair and wearing a hat like a bowler. The upper half of this side of the dish is decorated with stylized flowers. The wide lower part (actually the upper part, since I have reversed the image), has a broad band of Celtic-style interlace, richly studded with round beads. The edge of the dish is decorated by a design like cowrie shells or, perhaps, coffee beans.

If it were not for the interlace and the missionary heads, one might be tempted to dismiss the foliate masks as being entirely African, and not Green Men in the European sense. However, the addition of ornament clearly influenced by the Portuguese makes it more likely that the foliate mask is not an intrinsic part of local culture but based on something seen among the items that the missionaries brought with them.

My next two examples are made of ivory.



**Fig 3: Ivory decorated with three warriors on a Mask with horns in the nostrils**

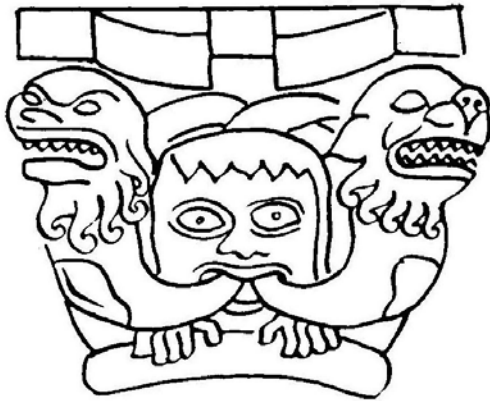


Three warriors with helmets and armour stand together on a curious head of African appearance. Their tunics reach to their knees and are decorated with interlace at the hem. They are barefoot but are wearing several bangles on their calves. They are arm-in-arm and the central one is wearing a pendant round his neck. They are partly framed by an inverted ivory arc decorated with lace-like loops. The two outer figures each stand on a frog, while the central person stands on the negroid head. Behind him is a decorated ivory semi-circle which reminds me a little of the top of a Celtic cross. This object may have been destined as a decoration to be applied to a larger object (see fig. 6).

The most curious feature of the head is that a pair of decorated ivory horns emerges from its nostrils. At this point, I would like you to click here:

[http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a\\_green\\_man\\_variant.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a_green_man_variant.pdf)

and look at the first few illustrations. I reproduce here the sketch by Baltrusaitis, fig. 4 in that article, and the detail of the head with horns from the previous picture.



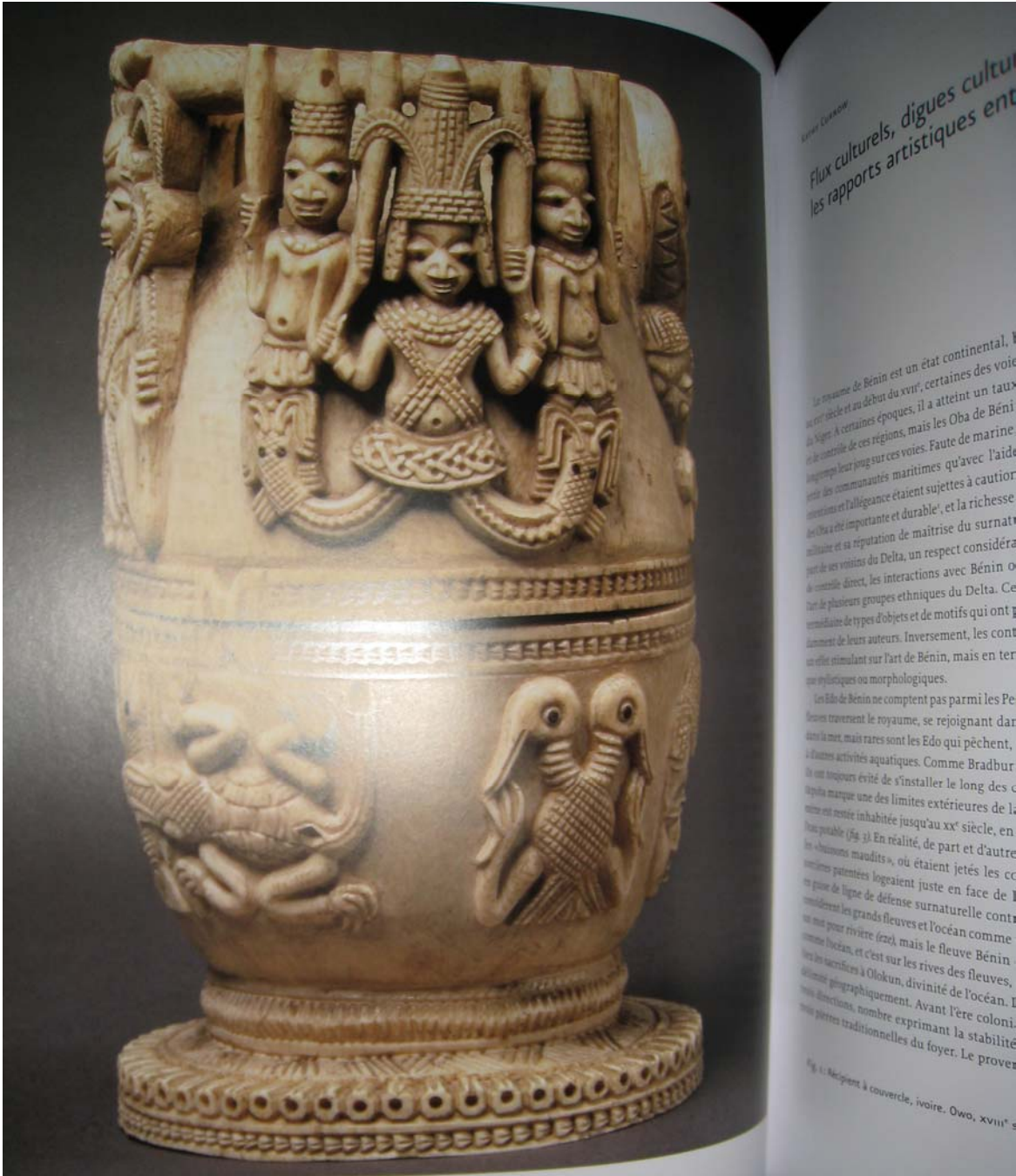
**Fig 4: Sketch by Baltrusaitis**



**Fig 5: Detail of Ivory mask with horns**

Despite the obvious and considerable differences, this type of image is part of a genre found frequently in Romanesque churches in France and Germany, and also in other European Romanesque churches. The fact that the horns emerge from the nostrils and not the mouth is mirrored in more traditional Green Man images where foliage may even emerge from the eyes and once (at Aulnay de Saintonge) from the anus. (There is a reproduction of this – fig. 22 in the same article.)

The final example seen at the same exhibition is also an ivory, a cup or vase consisting of two halves, with a decoration of monsters.



**Fig 6: Ivory vase or box in two halves**

On the lower half we see a crouched frog, not unlike those on the previous artifacts, and a two-headed bird. The design of the bird is reminiscent of a heraldic spread eagle, or of the two-headed creatures so frequently found on the angles of Romanesque capitals. The foot of this object is decorated with a row of beads whose ends are drilled with holes, resting on a row of cowrie shells or coffee beans similar to those on the edge of the bronze dish (Fig 2).

The bottom of the upper half and the top of the lower half are decorated with identical bands of small objects like molars.

Let us now consider the upper half.



**Fig 7: Ivory vase or box - upper half**

Here we see a triad of female figures, a counterpart to the three males on fig 3. Those on each side are like identical twins. They are naked to the waist with small breasts and a pot belly with a prominent navel. Each figure is wearing a flower-pot hat with a wide, decorated lower part. Each has a bead necklace and a pleated mini-skirt. Their arms are folded at the elbow and they hold a truncheon in each hand.

All three have very similar faces with eyes with large lids and broad noses. The central figure is more elaborately clothed. Her hat is more like a mitre or even like the double crown of a pharaoh, with a pair of plumes and cheek pieces. She has three bead necklaces and wears more beads – three strands on each side – criss-crossed over her bare torso, like bandoliers, hiding her breasts. Her mini-skirt is not pleated but has a decoration of interlace.



The most curious feature of the person is her lower half. Instead of legs she has a pair of curved limbs very similar to those seen on certain Romanesque sirens or anguipèdes. Please return to my article :

[http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a\\_green\\_man\\_variant.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a_green_man_variant.pdf)

and look at figs. 13-16. A siren or triton clutching its legs or tails which have turned into a pair of little monsters is by no means unusual in Romanesque sculpture. An African goddess whose lower limbs have turned into clones of herself in a similar way is very surprising. Is she a triple goddess like Hecate or the Matrones? Is she a mixoparthenos? (See text between figs 18 & 19 in “A green man variant”). Above all, what devotional objects might those Portuguese missionaries of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries have been carrying, to inspire the Benin craftsmen of those, and later periods? Other Christian influences in Africa were far away in Egypt, Ethiopia and the Maghreb. How did these West Africans come to share our iconography of monsters?

One possible theory is that this group represents Olokun :



**Fig 8: Olokun a sea god from West Africa.**

This one is male, and holding the image of a splayed frog in each hand. The one grasped in Olokun's right hand has been broken. His legs in this example end in stylized stars, not snakes' heads, but compare the image with that of Abraxas :



**Fig 9: Abraxas, from a gem stone**      **Fig 10: Abraxas seal, French National archives**

The gem stone dates back to the time of its inventor, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD Gnostic, Basilides of Alexandria. The seal was used extensively by the Templars. This is explained here:

[http://www.maknap.com/MysteryTV/history/templars/articles/mhte\\_07a\\_gnosticism.htm](http://www.maknap.com/MysteryTV/history/templars/articles/mhte_07a_gnosticism.htm)

A baroque Abraxas from the Louvre indicates the persistent fascination for this kind of composite creature:



**Fig 11: Female Abraxas from The Louvre**



Is there a chance that one of the missionaries, merchants or slavers travelling from Europe to West Africa might have had some antique object with him representing Abraxas, which could have given rise to the image of Olokun?

Abraxas seems to have been invented by Basilides, presumably based on the Mixoparthenos/Angui-pède motif with added attributes. A ring with an image of Abraxas (for example) worn by a trader or slaver might have given an African craftsman the idea for supplying Olokun with these splayed and plastic legs.

Most Olokun images DON'T have this feature. It may well have been a later addition – after the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the Templar seal was still in use into the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it may be a possible candidate for an artifact that provided the germ of an idea, sparking off similar images in the craft of the Benin artists.

Dr Vess of Georgia University explains the strange legs as representing mudfish:

<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~dvess/ids/fap/benin.htm>

while accepting the European influence. She explains that these Mudfish legs are traditional on the image of the Oba, the ruler of Benin. When were such representations first made? Before or after the arrival of Westerners? The vase shown above is said by Dr Vess to represent Portuguese men as well (presumably on the reverse). She also states that Africans from Benin visited Portugal, so were clearly open to many European influences.

The mudfish, (*Pylodictis Olivaris* or flat-head Catfish) is very important in Benin theology and is represented frequently in their art, but normally as entire fish.

Two observations : I have seen just three objects in one exhibition to give rise to these notes and queries. It is therefore likely that they represent a larger body of similar objects scattered around museums and private collections.

Secondly, I would like to draw an inference from this apparent borrowing from Romanesque iconography by an “exotic” and very different culture. It has become fashionable recently to suggest an Oriental (Indian or far Eastern) origin for the Foliate Mask, quoting the Kirtimukha or “Face of Glory”. I do not subscribe to this theory. The Kirtimukha rarely pre-dates the Romanesque period, but in any case there are many Graeco-Roman foliate masks as has been observed by Kathleen Basford. If there is a direct connection between the two genres, I believe it is from West to East. I think it is also possible that the resemblance is fortuitous, and that the concept of a head disgorging foliage (or horns or snakes or anything else) could appear in different cultures independently.

In the case of the Benin bronzes and ivories, however, I think the co-incidences are very striking. Combined with the knowledge that the Benin craftsmen certainly did copy Christian artifacts, European furniture and other objects, for their profit, I have little doubt that they did, somehow, come across some examples of Romanesque iconography, which they wove into their own art and crafts.

As a footnote, I append a quotation from a web site featuring Peru, where wall paintings and other artifacts might seem to belong to the canon of imaginative art representing exotic heads with foliage, snakes, sea monsters, or sunrays emerging or radiating from them.



This illustration, in particular, would seem to favour a connection between the art of the Moche people and some Romanesque images with their roots in Classical Antiquity.

(See, [http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a\\_green\\_man\\_variant.pdf](http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a_green_man_variant.pdf) For examples).

Since this mural is pre-Hispanic, we must accept that there is “nothing new under the sun”, and people anywhere, and at any time, may have dreamed up similar images.

*The Moche were farmers, artists, fishermen and warriors (1st- 6th century AD) on the northern coast of Peru. The Moche were an heirarchical, advanced and complex civilisation, known through their temples, fortifications, irrigation systems, populated centres, cemeteries, ceramics and metal work.*

*Huaca de la Luna*



*The friezes of the Huaca de la Luna decorate the walls of the ramps leading up to the top ceremonial platform.*



*The temple is built alongside the Huaca del Sol on the Bank of the Rio Moche by the Moche (200BC - 850AD), made with thousands of mass produced mud bricks. The bricks were amassed in columns and built upwards in layers with connecting ramps to ceremonial courtyards.*





*At the huaca de la Luna there were many brutal adult male sacrifices to the deity known as `Ayapec`, a pre Quechua word translating as all knowing. Human sacrifice also included the consumption of human blood by the Lord of Sipan, who was a Moche spiritual, military and civil leader. This act is believed to have been done to appease the Decapitator, mostly depicted as a spider, but also depicted as a winged creature or a sea monster.*



*The Moche believed in dualism and everything was connected from the sun, to the moon, to the land and to the sea. The fishermen were the most highly esteemed after the priests and the ruler. Their biggest fear was El Niño.*

This quotation is taken from a travel blog, "Lou in Peru", which you can see in its entirety here: <http://louperu.blogspot.com/>

**(To be continued)**

**Julianna Lees – Monatgrier 2008**