THREE HARES AND CINTAMANI: TWO WELL-TRAVELLED MOTIFS:

Part One: HARES JUXTAPOSED WITH GREEN MEN

The Three Hares Project, started by Sue Andrew, Tom Greeves and Chris Chapman http://www.chrischapmanphotography.com/hares/index.html was the subject of a BBC 4 programme: http://db.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/hares.shtml


My first image shows three hares chasing each other round in a ring, and sharing three ears (which form a triangle) and also three eyes between them. This seems to be a popular visual puzzle of the solar symbol type, such as the swastika, the wheel motif, or the triskele which is associated with the Isle of Man.

Fig 1: Three hares window on the Cathedral at Paderborn, in Germany, XIIc

The town of Paderborn, where the remains of Charlemagne’s palace are to be seen, is proud of this motif, which it has adopted as its logo. Three Hares like the one at Paderborn can also be seen in the abbey churches at Haina, Hardehausen and Münster Cathedral.

Ruth Wylie photographed this roof boss in Chichester Cathedral showing six chubby and rather angelic Green Men with just six eyes between them:
The picture appears in “Explore Green Men” by Dr Mercia MacDermott, for which Ruth was the photographer. Note the six triangles of hair above each nose, which together resemble a spider’s web.

Each angel has golden foliage in its mouth: those who see “Green Men” as symbolising sinners or devils have an example here of an opposing interpretation. This roof boss can only be a positive image of divine inspiration, re-birth or renewal.

The Three Hares also appear on a floor tile from Long Crendon, Bucks; this photograph was kindly sent by Ruth Wylie :
The search for the origin of the motif led the project founders to China and Ladakh, where the symbol has been used in Buddhist shrines since the VI century,

Wei Zhang and Peter Rasmussen have a short web site: http://www.threerabbits.net where they write of the image of three – and sometimes four – hares in China, concentrating on Dunhuang, where some of the earliest examples can be seen. These are in Buddhist temples of the 5th-8th centuries:

“Beginning in the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), Dunhuang was an important stop on the Silk Road, the ancient trade route which stretched from Chang’an (present-day Xi’an) in the east to Central Asia, India, Persia—and, eventually, the Roman Empire—in the west. And in the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms (366-439), at Mogao, less than a day's journey from Dunhuang, Buddhist monks began digging out hundreds of cave temples from the cliffs along the Daquan River. The caves were decorated with statues, murals and decorative images, and construction of new caves continued at Mogao for over 500 years.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907), three-rabbits images were painted on the center of the ceilings of at least 17 caves. Typically, the circle of rabbits is surrounded by eight large lotus petals and forms the focal point of a large painted canopy covering the entire ceiling.”
On “The Origin, Meaning and Migration of the Three Rabbits”, the authors quote Guan Youhui, a retired researcher from the Dunhuang Academy, who spent 50 years studying the decorative patterns in the Mogao Caves:

“He believes the three rabbits image came to Dunhuang indirectly from the West (Central Asia) by way of Central China—even though no ancient examples of the motif have been found in Central China. The three rabbits are just a small part of the whole decorative art of Dunhuang, and when we look at the surrounding patterns on the ceilings we notice that a lot came from the West. But the ceiling designs were not transported as a whole to Dunhuang. The local artists chose the artistic elements and assembled them into the Dunhuang designs. The rabbits—like many images in Chinese folk art that carry auspicious symbolism—represent peace and tranquility.”

Ultimately, the team of Sue Andrew, Tom Greeves and Chris Chapman traced the origins of the motif to Persia in the 2nd century via Sassanian silk designs which were copied by Chinese silk weavers.
“Silk weaving did not occur in the Mediterranean region until the reign of Justinian (527–65), when, according to tradition, silkworm eggs were smuggled out of China into the Byzantine Empire. Silk production then spread from Syria into Egypt, into Constantinople and as far as Italy”. (Quotation from the Dumbarton Oaks site: http://museum.doaks.org/Obj27134?sid=1345&x=371433&port=2607#)

This does not, of course, preclude Sassanian images of earlier date appearing on 6th century textiles, nor indeed, of earlier textiles being produced on different cloths, embroidery, etc.
Fig 6: Pairs of lions in roudels, Chinese silk influenced by Sassanian art, 8thc, Cleveland Museum of Art

This silk panel, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, and probably from the 8thc, is a typical example of this kind of exchange.

Fig 7: Pairs of horses in roudels, Sassanian art 8thc, private collection
The source of the designs of these examples would seem to be from the Sassanian and Byzantine Empires. It is generally accepted that Byzantine silk, reaching Europe from the Middle East in the Romanesque period arrived with returning Crusaders or pilgrims and as wrapping around relics. Many beautiful silk panels are preserved in European cathedrals, such as this silk panel:

**Fig 8: Hares in foliage and a hunt in a roudel, Coptic art 5thc, private collection**
The Green Man of Cercles

Fig 9: Twin peacocks in roudels, Byzantine silk, 6th c, Aachen Cathedral Treasury

The Ashmolean museum web site states that the Byzantine designs were based on earlier, Persian motifs. The Victoria and Albert Museum makes a similar statement regarding this fragment of silk woven with a senmurv: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93151/woven-silk

Fig 10: Silk panel woven with senmurvs, Sassanian silk, 7th-8th c, Victoria & Albert Museum
May it not be that while some luxury goods travelled along the silk routes from East to West, others started from Persia and Byzantium and were appreciated and used by craftsmen from the Far East before returning as merchandise back to the Western world?

“The Three Hares” images can be found in the British Isles and all over Europe from the Romanesque period, but particularly in the Gothic period.

These examples, the first two from English MS and the third from a French Bible of the 13thc can be seen here: [http://trois-lievres.skyrock.com/5.html](http://trois-lievres.skyrock.com/5.html)

The owner of the site, Michel Terrier, has amassed a vast collection of images from both the West and the East, including a map indicating all their sites of origin. His site shows numerous examples of places in France where similar images can be seen.
Fig 11: Three hares from English and French MS of 13thc
The fact that a symbol which is capable of being seen as a representation of the Holy Trinity became at home in Christian churches is not in itself surprising. What surprised me, however, is the close juxtaposition of the Three Hares and the Green Man in two churches: Wissembourg in Alsace illustrated on Chris Chapman’s site under "Britain and the Continent", and Throwleigh in Devon, (illustration under “What do the symbols mean?”)

Now, if this were an isolated instance of the two images being found together in such close proximity there might be no significance. However, across the Channel and beyond, in the Alsace region of France, we have Wissembourg, an abbey church whose origins go back to the VII century. The church you see today is mainly the result of work undertaken between the X & XIII centuries.

Fig 12: Three Hares from Wissembourg, and Fig 13: Green Man of Wissembourg.

Fig 14: Three hares from Throwleigh, and Fig 15: Green Man from Throwleigh.
Is it significant that both pairs of “twinned” images are roof bosses? Did itinerant craftsmen specialise in roof bosses and work their way around Europe with sketch pads and pattern books? (This would certainly be true of sculptors).

**Fig 16: Modern Three Hares plate.**

This modern plate was bought in Strasbourg, not far from Wissembourg. The potter also makes a similar plate showing three fish entwined: even more appropriate as a symbol of the Holy Trinity.

In “Le Moyen Age Fantastique” subtitled “Antiquités et Exotismes dans l’art Gothique” by Jurgis Baltrusaitis*, we see the Three Fish motif as sketched by Villard de Honnecourt, who must surely have seen it as a symbol of the Trinity.

**Fig 17: Three Fish design & others.**
Fig 18: Three and Four Hares designs on a 13thc MS in the Auxerre Library

Fig 19: Three and Four Hares designs.

Baltrusaitis lists many places in France and England where these and similar optical illusion designs can be seen. Click here to see examples from the Cathedrals at Vienne and Lyons:

http://trois-lievres.skyrock.com/5.html

He also writes of and illustrates examples – including turning horses and turning people – from Egypt:
Fig 20: Three hares from Egypt or Syria 13thc

This brass dish comes from Iran:

Fig 21: Three Hares dish from Iran, inlaid brass, 13th or 14thc, Keir Collection, London

as does this one:
Fig 22: Three Hares dish from Iran, inlaid brass, 13\textsuperscript{th} c

Chris Chapman photographed this reliquary which also features on the BBC programme, in the Cathedral at Trier, with the three hares motif on the base plate:
The participants on the radio programme were in no doubt that the casket had been made by Moslem craftsmen.

Among the oldest artefacts displayed on Michel Terrier's site, on p.18, is this Ghandaran terracotta roundel, now in the Swat Museum, Pakistan, believed to be 3rd c.
Looking curiously recent, it bears considerable resemblance to this Three Hares roundel allegedly dredged from the Seine in the 19thc by M. Picketty-Taté:

Some of the objects belonging to M. Picketty-Taté and his son were given to the Musée Carnavalet, Paris; others were bought by the museum in an auction. However, the plate (above) is not in the museum, and the curator does not know where it is, and is not
convinced of the attribution. I was informed that some collectors pretend to have dredged items from the Seine in order to disguise their real provenance.

This little verse – well-known in Germany – describes the Three Hares motif:

**Mit Vereinten Kraften und Ohren**

Jedweder Hase hat zwei Ohren
Und hierging jedem eins verloren;
Das Soll ist sechs, das ist nur drei
Und schein und sein sind zweierlei.

Was führt der Steinmetz wohl im Schilde?
Welch ein Gedanke liegt im Bilde?
Die Ohren sitzen an der Stirne,
Gehörtes fliesst in drei Gehirne.
Drittselbst wird hier somit bedacht,
Was Sorgen oder Freude macht.
Vereint geht manches leichter eben
Im Hasen wie im Menschenleben.
Und überdies ist, was ihr seht
’ne Spielart von der Trinität.

**PART TWO: ANOTHER “THREE IN ONE” SYMBOL, CINTAMANI, to follow**