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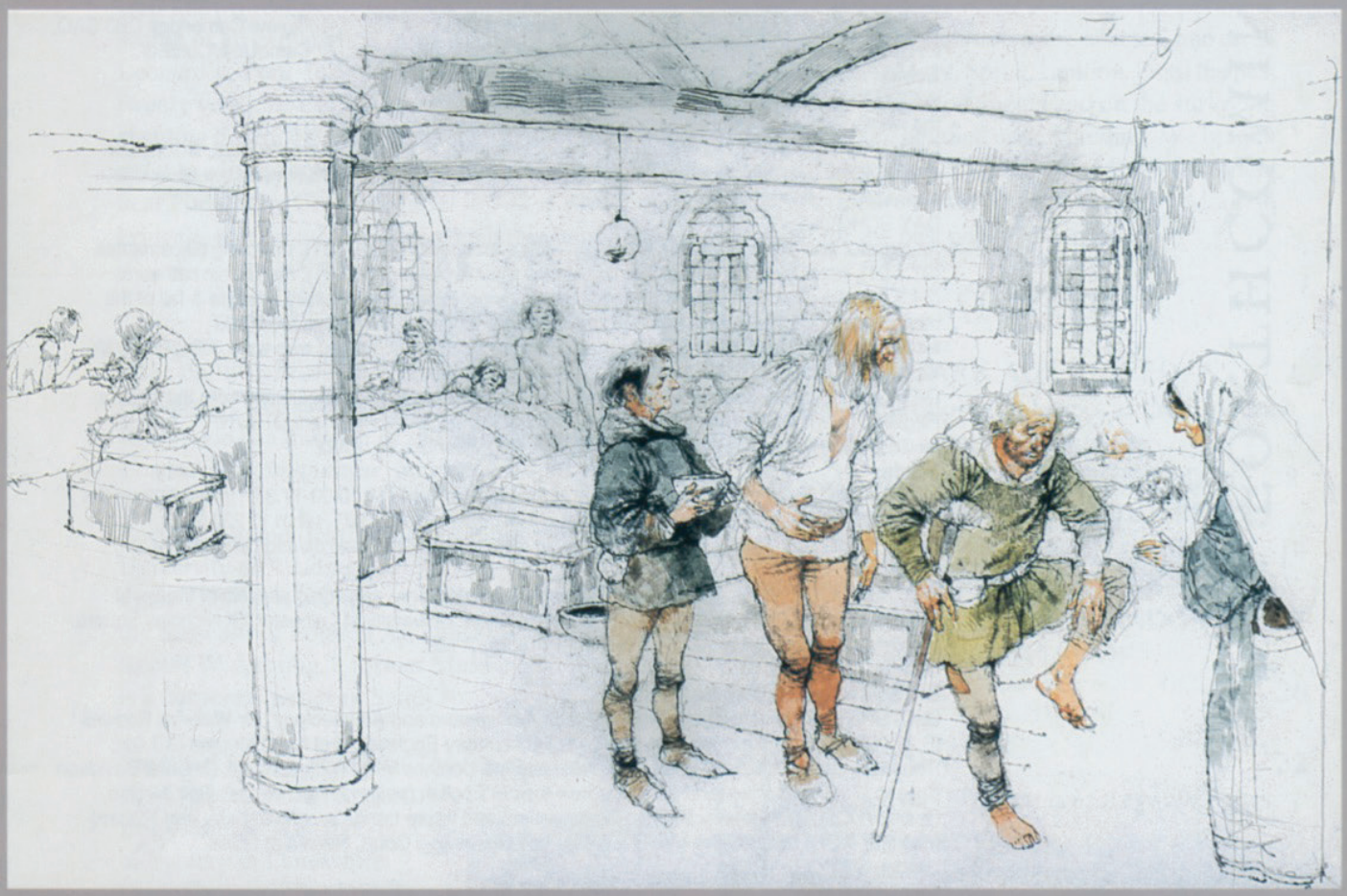


A Dark Age indeed
Before the Green Man
St Leonard's Hospital, York
St Mary Spital
The Pirates of St. Tropez

Fig. 1. Mount Nessing, Essex. A capital in the nave; 12thC. (Copyright, the Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art)

BEFORE THE GREEN MAN

Rita Wood

From about the end of the twelfth century a human head dissolving into foliage - nowadays described as the 'Green Man' - began to be carved in churches in northern Europe. Leaves arise imperceptibly from all parts of the surface of the face, and they are occasionally emitted from the mouth or the nostrils as well. The typical Green Man is more greenery than anything else, and a characteristic product of Gothic wood-carvers and sculptors. The wonderful proficiency of the craftsmen in this period enabled them to reproduce and then develop their model, which was the classical or Eastern motif of a foliate mask.

The Green Man has drawn much speculative interest in recent years but there is little evidence to support the suggestion that it represented a pagan spirit christianized or the assumption that it could have retained its meaning unchanged from an origin in some distant time and place. Crucially, these romantic theories do not take into account a similar motif which was already well-established in the West before the Gothic Green Man appeared. In the Romanesque, the face was not hidden in foliage nor did the leaves sprout like hair from the skin, but the motif was simply a man's head emitting symmetrical branches from the mouth (Fig. 1). The same elements of man and foliage are present as in the Gothic form, but the Romanesque heads do not arouse the same fancies in the viewer. Rather, there is shock at their unsubtle oddity, and aversion to the clumsy handling. However, it may be easier to discover what the Green Man meant to medieval people from a consideration of this plainer, less emotive, image. The discussion of Romanesque forms must include a few variants, such as the cat-like mask emitting symmetrical foliage, compositions where the foliage emitted is not symmetrical and others where a man holds up foliage in each hand.

It is natural that our attention centres on the man, or on any living creature in a motif, but here already we begin to go astray. Artists know that to add a human figure to a landscape painting is to change a beautiful view into an interesting story. This was the skill of Claude Lorrain in composing landscapes and making them saleable with tiny mythical figures; so also John Constable knew as he watched for the appropriate character to walk into his landscapes. In the motifs being discussed here, it is the foliage which was the original idea, and it should remain at the centre of any interpretation.

Foliage in Early Medieval art

Although the prophets compared careless Israel to an unprofitable vineyard, and there are the sermons of Ratramnus in which foliage was used as a figure for rampant lust, moralizing cannot have been a major preoccupation of monastic illustrators - if so, foliage would hardly be so common in all types of sacred picture, on everything from the throne of God to the borders of the richest illuminations. There was a stronger tradition which associated foliage with heavenly things. The earliest use of foliage in Christian art was to picture the True Vine (Jeremiah 2:21; John 15). The classical pattern of the scrolling vine was taken over by the Church, often with bunches of grapes and birds feeding in it. Christ the Vine is illustrated on a twelfth-century capital at Riccall (Fig. 2). The crosses on the crown are no doubt there to underline the connection between grapes, wine and blood. The vine no longer has Bacchic connotations, of course, but is a sign of self-sacrificing love.

The second use of foliage was for the trees of the Paradise garden. There are, for example, a number of tympana[1] in England with the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:8,9; Rev.2:7 and 22:1,2). A depiction of it in the *Hortus Deliciarum*, c.1170, is particularly relevant. On fol. 17r, the Creation of Eve takes place with Adam asleep under this Tree, and on fol. 19r the whole garden is pictured, again with the Tree of Life. In both drawings the Tree has large fleshy leaves very like those common in sculpture. These leaves differ from all the others shown in Paradise, which are small and flat. Additionally, the Tree of Life has human heads set like buds between an often symmetrical pair of leaves. There is no explanatory label for the heads in the leaves, but they might perhaps represent souls waiting for bodies to be formed. There is the strong possibility that this artist was familiar with the sculptural motif of the man's head emitting foliage, knew its meaning and expected the resemblance to be picked up by users of the book, as a comment on the Creation of Eve. This would relate the sculptural motif to life in Paradise.

Foliage and the Cross

Christ's death made possible a return to Paradise, in other words, it offered man life after death. The Cross is accompanied by foliage patterns on fifth- or sixth-century tympana in Georgia and Syria and on later funerary sculpture in Armenia and Turkey, showing that foliage symbolizes not only the resurrection of Christ but life after death for all men. Very similar forms to these were used in the West in the Romanesque. The popular idea of the 'life' offered by Christ - as imagined by Crusaders, for example - was not a new life experienced in this world, as some of the biblical texts suggest, but the after-life of the world to come. Foliage evokes this Paradise.

Deciduous foliage has the facility of combining the ideas of Death and Resurrection. The link between a tree and the Cross was made in the very first sermons the apostles preached. In order to bring home the fact that the Jews had initiated the case against Jesus, the apostles replaced mention of the Roman punishment, crucifixion, by talking about the Jewish form of death sentence, hanging from a tree (Deuteronomy 21:22,23; Galatians 3:13; Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29). The ivy and cypress, evergreens associated with classical funerary sculpture, were superseded by the imagery of deciduous plants - pruned stems, fresh sappy growths. The coincidence of springtime with the Easter festival clinched the adoption of deciduous foliage as a powerful Christian symbol of resurrection. It is no accident that the Cross is occasionally shown as bowed to by other trees, or that the Cross in French twelfth-century glass is often green (though sometimes blood-red). The twelfth-century writer 'Pictor' lists foliage along with three biblical types to be used as visual aids in teaching about the general resurrection.

Fig. 2. Ricall, Yorkshire. A capital on the south doorway; c.1160.

[1] tympana - carved semi-circular panels above doorways.

Fig. 3. Powerstock, Dorset. Pillar of the chancel arch with a stem giving off leaves and tendrils or fernlike shoots - this may all be intended as a vine; early twelfth century. Note the modern stencilled pattern of vine leaves and tendrils on the adjacent wall. (Michael Tisdall)

Foliage in Romanesque Art

The drawing of foliage is a pleasure for the penman, and foliage became very popular in manuscripts, which were often used as models by sculptors. Nowadays the monks' eagerness for eternal life tends to be overlooked and consequently their foliage patterns can be dismissed as 'decoration' Exalted, exuberant, the forms are hardly ever descriptive of recognizable plants. Even when vines were known - as they must have been known to the artist who drew the well known waterworks plan at Canterbury the form used was not naturalistic but was dominated by this visionary foliage. Forms of leaves in sculpture too are conventional, though early post-Conquest foliage has simple diamond-shaped leaves or sometimes spiral shoots (Fig. 3) and these may have been in some sense observed rather than copied. In Romanesque sculpture, an image may be a compilation of incongruous signs, a conflation of a whole narrative or a token of the whole - almost anything rather than a straightforward pictorial representation. Because of this habit of abbreviation or abstraction, any small piece of foliage could be used to deliver nuances of one or other - or indeed all - of the basic messages.

Foliage as 'Life'

There are subtleties in the Hebrew, Greek and Latin words translated 'breath', 'soul' and 'life' The *Hortus Deliciarum* has another illustration on fol. 17r which shows God 'inspiring' or breathing life into Adam - not quite 'mouth-to-mouth', but with what could have become a reeded strand between them if turned into sculpture. The puzzling motif of a man with branches of foliage coming out of his mouth depicts this 'breath of life', first given in the earthly Eden, restored in the heavenly Paradise. Occasionally, as on the doorway at Bishop Wilton, the breath is shown coming out of the man's nostrils instead of his mouth (Fig. 4). A figure, with branches coming out of his mouth, stands surrounded by

Fig. 4. Bishop Wilton, Yorkshire. Voussoir with a man's head and a small mask; c. 1160

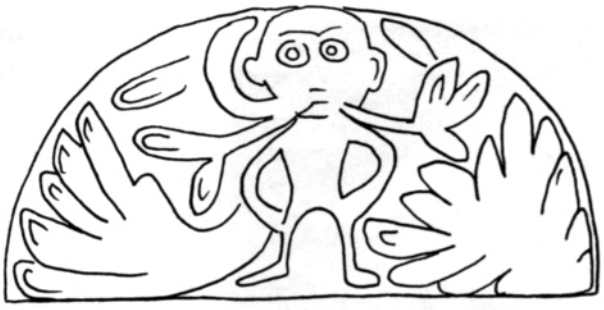


Fig. 5. Linley, Shropshire. Tympanum on the north doorway showing a man in foliage. The arch around this has a star pattern; early twelfth century.

foliage and stars at Linley (Fig. 5). As a human soul, he is conventionally naked, and also sexless, as life in heaven is defined in Matthew 22.30. A similar figure is on a capital in the chapel in Durham castle, and a grinning man on a capital at Selby Abbey holds up stems of foliage (Fig. 6). Even sophisticated Autun cathedral in Burgundy has examples of the man's head emitting foliage and the naked man holding up foliage. Their use in such places defies any suggestion that these motifs could be 'survivals of pagan tree-worship'

The Cat-like Mask

Although there are many species of grotesques, it is usually a cat-like mask which emits symmetrical foliage. The possibility that the mask is the face of a

Fig. 6. Selby Abbey, Yorkshire. Capital in the nave showing a naked, sexless man among foliage. He appears to be wearing a vest; it has a pattern often used in tympana as indicating heaven; c.1140. (John McElheran for the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*)

lion, and so perhaps represents Christ, should always be considered - this is case at Barton-le-Street (Fig. 7). Typically, a mask is distinguished by details like a deep frown, lined cheeks and glaring eyes with tiny pupils, features which are intuitively understood as threatening or evil: some observers react by saying that the mask seems out of place decorating a church at all. Certainly, if the man emitting foliage meant 'man has eternal life', it cannot be that the mask emitting foliage was understood in exactly the same way. It is the occasional amplified example which can help to break such a code and indicate where the meaning may lie. For example, the voussoir[2] illustrated from Bishop Wilton includes a small cat-like mask on the right of the man's head - this mask is sideways, or even slightly inverted. A second example of a cat-like mask from Yorkshire is at Birkin, near Pontefract (Fig. 8). This mask is alone on its voussoir, it has a deeply lined face and its eyes are pierced by horizontal

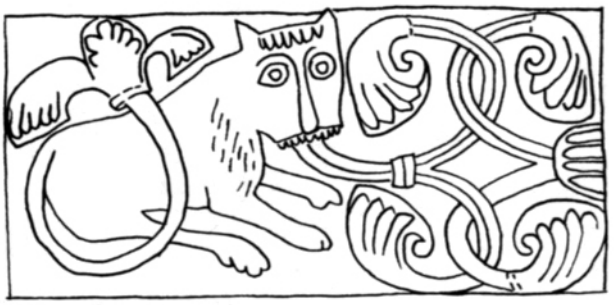


Fig. 7. Barton-le-Street, Yorkshire. Voussoir of the south doorway with a couched lion. The foliage emitted from the lion's mouth is intertwined with the branches of a symmetrical tree; c.1160.

slits. The mouth has a long tongue hanging limply out, but the most striking feature is that on the left the teeth have been drawn. There are four holes bored deep in the upper jaw and grooves provided below where the teeth would have lain - long fangs remain on the right side of the mouth. The mask at Bishop Wilton can be understood as being overturned, defeated, by the resurrection of the man beside it; the mask at Birkin can be seen as Death itself almost dead, its eyes dazed, its power diminished (compare, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:24-26,55 and passages from John Chrysostom). It is suggested that the mask emitting symmetrical foliage was intended to symbolize Death and the eternal life which may flow out of, or follow, it.

The doorway at Stillingfleet has several variations in which emission represents resurrection, in particular of the lion that stands for Christ (Figs. 9, 10). Nowhere would this symbolism be more appropriate than on funerary sculpture and, even if we discount as mere patterns the masks and foliage fans on the Gundrada slab (see Further reading), there still remain the large mask emitting foliage on the Conisbrough tomb-cover, the bearded man emitting foliage on the Northampton slab, and the Tree of Jesse design at Lincoln - this slab is thought to have been commissioned for or by Alexander of Blois, bishop of Lincoln, and the unusual choice of subject could have made a gloss on the Tree of Life.

The earliest known example of the motif of the man's head emitting foliage is on a tomb, that of St Abre in St. Hilaire-le-Grand, Poitiers, said to date from the fourth or fifth century. The head rests on a

[2]voussoir - wedge shaped stone forming part of an arch.

Fig. 8. Birkin, Yorkshire. Voussoir of the south doorway. A dazed mask with lolling tongue and teeth drawn; c.1160 (the author, for the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculture in Britain and Ireland*).

fringe of leaves and emits a flowering shoot out of each nostril.

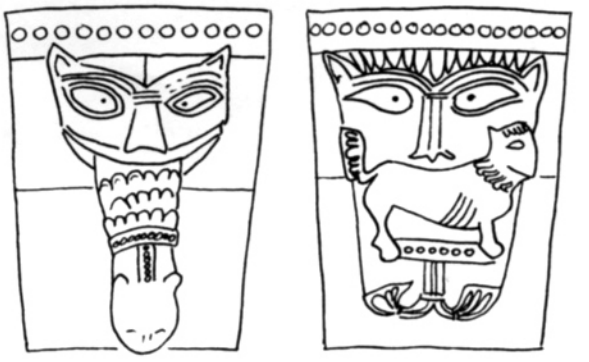
Symmetry vs. disorder

Most foliage is symmetrical, orderly and luxuriant. Symmetry and order were an ideal taken from classical models and used to picture heavenly perfection. Illustrations in Caedmon's *Paraphrase* and the *Hortus Deliciarum* show the pretender Lucifer aping the symmetry of God on his throne, before being cast down from heaven for his pride. Regularity was not easily obtained under the conditions of production in early medieval cultures, when each repeat had to be obtained by concentrated effort. (Indeed, nowadays it is one of the charms of work of that period that slight variations will occur within any extended run of repeats: these are a relief and entertainment to eyes used to mechanical repetition.) The theologians saw in this striving for regularity an apt parallel to man's sinfulness and God's orderliness. Hugh of St Victor in *The Soul's Betrothal-gift* says 'he gave us also to be beautiful in order that we might excel all that is not, by our form (excel) all that is unordered or ill-constituted.' Augustine had defined sin as a word, deed or desire contrary to the eternal law, and Aquinas was to redefine it as an action lacking the order it should have. Imperfect foliage would thus picture the distortion of creation brought about by sin.

There are two instances at Barton-le-Street where a man's head is carved in the same voussoir as a mask emitting distorted foliage, that is, the man sees the consequence of sin (Fig. 11). A variant of this idea on another voussoir shows a man emitting a small lion, while a mask emits a little mask: a lesson about the 'fruits' of good and evil (Matthew 7:15-20) is probably intended here (Fig. 12). Similar imagery is used in the Prayer-book of St Hildegard, illustrated by Katzenellenbogen in his work on *Virtues and Vices*. In this, gesticulating men who emit beasts from their mouths are labelled *'maledicti'*, while the bare-foot poor are blessed by God and, standing meekly either side of a fruitful tree, appear like a new Adam and Eve.

Reading the messages

These are only a few instances of the skill of the medieval designer to turn text into image. They should be recognised as orthodox teaching, designed and ordered by those in charge and based on biblical texts.



Figs. 9 and 10.
9 (left) Stillingfleet Yorkshire. Voussoir of the south doorway with a mask emitting a little lion; c.1160.
10 (right) Stillingfleet, Yorkshire. Another voussoir with a little lion erect in front of a mask..

Figs. 11 and 12.
11 (left) Barton-le-Street, Yorkshire. Voussoir of the former south doorway with a man's head beside a mask emitting distorted foliage; c.1160.
12 (right) Barton-le-Street, Yorkshire. Another voussoir, with a man emitting a little lion, and a mask emitting another mask; c.1160.

Such a bewildering work as the fourth order of the massive chancel arch at Tickencote (Rutland) with its 40 different motifs becomes manageable once it is appreciated that the motif on every alternate voussoir is a foliage pattern. The other set of subjects includes many which can be understood in the ways outlined above. Figure 13, for example, shows a human face emitting foliage and also a snake, one bestiary meaning of which was rebirth; next is a foliage pattern and then heads of a man and a woman, wearing the 'crown of life' (Rev. 2:10, etc.).

The Gothic Green Man

From about the end of the twelfth century a human head sprouting foliage - nowadays called 'the Green Man' - began to be carved in stone and wood. In these heads, leaves arise imperceptibly from all parts of the surface of the face, but are occasionally emitted from the mouth or the nostrils as well. The Romanesque motif was not a stage in the development of the Gothic Green Man but is clearly a different form, and it continued to be carved as before. The adoption of the Green Man depended on the introduction of a classical motif by means of accurate record or actual sight, and was encouraged by a greater facility in carving which allowed the classical forms to be copied and outdone. Since the combination of a man's head with foliage was established as a useful symbol for eternal life, the new foliate head could have been seen as a better form of the symbol. If there were any other meanings applied, we do not know them.

Does the foregoing interpretation of the Romanesque man emitting foliage help us when faced by the myths propagated about the Gothic Green Man? It must inform our looking to know that the symbol of 'resurrection' continued to be used in the same centuries that the Green Man was so popular, and in the same positions. Another cautionary point to make is that having foliage sprout from the face or the mouth inevitably alters the expression: commentators should take account of this effect before speculating about a character for the Green Man. In many cases the faces that look down from the greenery are placid human faces much like those that Gislebertus put in Paradise on the tympanum at Autun, no more and no less.

Suggested Reading

J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, New York 1961.
Herrad von Landsperg, *Hortus Deliciarum*, ed. R. Green, M. Evans, etc., 2 vols. London 1979.
M. R. James, 'Pictor in Carmine', *Archaeologia*, 94 (1951), pp. 141-166.
P. Reutersward, *The Forgotten Symbols of God*, Essay 5, 'The Lion, the Lily and the Tree of Life', Uppsala 1986.
D. Grivot and G. Zarnecki, *Gislebertus, Sculptor of Autun*, London 1961.
K. Basford, *The Green Man*, Cambridge 1978.
For the tomb slabs at Lewes and Northampton, see *English Romanesque Art, 1066-1200*, London 1984, items 142 and 145;
for the Conisbrough memorial, see
N. Pevsner, Buildings of England series, *Yorkshire: the West Riding*, pl. 38.

Fig. 13. Tickencote, Rutland. Three voussoirs at lower left of the fourth order of the chancel arch; mid twelfth century. (Michael Tisdall)