

## The “Green Man” in Church Architecture

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## THE "GREEN MAN" IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

BY LADY RAGLAN

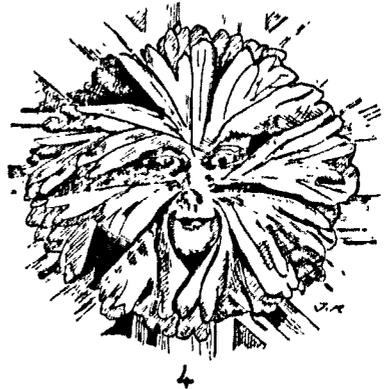
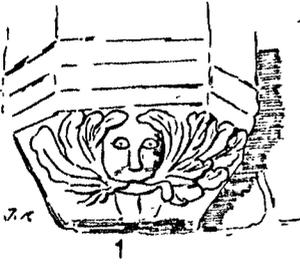
It is now about eight years ago since my attention was first drawn by the Revd. J. Griffith, then vicar of Llangwm, in Monmouthshire, and himself a folklorist, to a curious carving (Fig. 1). It is a man's face, with oak leaves growing from the mouth and ears, and completely encircling the head. Mr. Griffith suggested that it was intended to symbolize the spirit of inspiration, but it seemed to me certain that it was a man and not a spirit, and moreover that it was a "Green Man." So I named it, and the evidence that I have collected to support this title is the reason for this paper.

Although the carving is difficult to see because it is so dark behind the beautiful old rood screen, it occupies a very prominent position, namely the south corbel of the chancel arch. There are two more very like it on the opposite corbel, and in this fine old church it is, as in so many others where we have found it, the only carving in the church.

Shortly afterwards we found two more of the same kind, one on the font at Stow Minster in Lincolnshire, and the other on what had been the capital of a pillar in the nave of Melrose Abbey.

These three are by no means the best we have seen, but they served to show that the motif must have a very wide distribution, and since then we have found examples in twenty-three counties of England, as well as in Midlothian. In many of the cathedrals and minsters where there is a wealth of architectural detail, as at Southwell, Exeter, Lincoln, Wells and Ely, there are several examples.

PLATE I



1. CHANCEL ARCH, LLANGWM, MON.
2. ROCHESTER TOWER
3. LINCOLN CATHEDRAL, MISERERE SEAT
4. NORWICH CATHEDRAL, CLOISTERS

The faces vary greatly. In some the man wears a beard as well as a beard of leaves (Fig. 2 and 3); in others he is beardless, and the leaves spring from his forehead, cheeks and lips, as in two in Norwich Cathedral (Figs. 4 and 5), and one in the Church of the Dominicans, Ghent (Fig. 6). In others the branches issue from the mouth and ears, as in examples from Rochester tower (Fig. 2) and Norwich (Fig. 7) or from the mouth only, as in Southwell Minster (Fig. 8) and the church at Semur-en-Auxois (Fig. 9).

Now the general view of the origin of this figure is, I believe, that of the caption writer to the *Illustrated London News*, who said, in describing some of these figures in the cloisters at Norwich, that "the carver's imagination has run riot," but there are two reasons which make me think otherwise. The first is the extreme importance of the carving, and the second its realism.

I have already mentioned that in many churches it is the sole decoration, and surely if we were about to choose one carving only for the decoration of our church, we should choose the person or the symbol that was in our opinion the focal point of our religious ideals. Mr. C. J. P. Cave, who has photographed hundreds of roof bosses in cathedrals and churches says that in the majority the only alternative to these leafy faces or foliate heads, as he calls them, is oak leaves, and I also have noticed this predominance of oak. It is, however, by no means invariable. Sir Albert Seward, who has made a special study of the chapter-house at Southwell, where there is a number of "Green Men," has found a great variety of foliage there, and I have myself noticed a good deal of poison ivy, always a sacred herb. It is possible that there is no special meaning in the choice of foliage, but I think it is significant that oak predominates.

As to my second reason, I do not think that anyone who has seen these carvings can doubt that they are portraits. Gothic art at its height represented the extreme of realism.

Mystic meanings have since been read into many of the groups of people, animals and monsters, but that they all illustrate contemporary fables and tales, both religious and secular, those who have properly studied the subject are in no doubt at all.

Professor Emile Mâle, in his *Religious Art in France in the 13th Century*, quotes various mediaeval documents to show that where legend and story were to be depicted the priests ordered most precisely what they wanted to be shown. The cathedral was to be, to an illiterate people, the sum of human knowledge in stone. This sufficiently accounts for the variety of subjects, religious and secular, depicted on every available space in some of the great cathedrals and religious houses.

This also, he says, explains what so greatly puzzled St. Bernard who, contemplating the decoration of the Cluniac churches, is aghast at the "fantastic monsters" in the cloisters, and blushes for these absurdities. He declares that they are dangerous—attracting the soul, and hindering meditation upon the will of God. They have for him no symbolic meaning such as has been read into them since.

Emile Mâle denies that the mediaeval sculptor ever invented anything. He copied what he saw, and one of these old craftsmen is at pains to state most definitely in his book of drawings that his characters were done from life. Even the lion and the parrot were drawn in a patron's private zoo.

There is one series of "Green Men" that does not seem to be quite in the same class as those already mentioned. These are shown in Figs. 10, 11, 12, 13. I think they have sprung from the same myth, but they certainly have a classical flavour and a stiffness and conventionality about them that is far removed from the liveliness of their later counterparts. Emile Mâle says that some of the patterns in the Byzantine and Romanesque churches, (from which our Norman style is derived) can be traced directly to

PLATE II



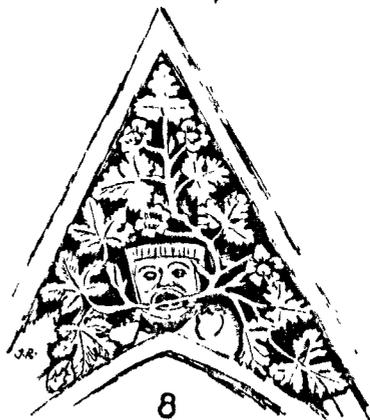
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5



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5. NORWICH CATHEDRAL, CLOISTERS
6. CHURCH OF THE DOMINICANS, GHENT
7. NORWICH CATHEDRAL, CLOISTERS
8. SOUTHWELL MINSTER, CHAPTER HOUSE

patterns in Persian and other Oriental carpets brought to France by Venetian merchants. The weavers did not understand their meaning, and the twelfth century craftsmen who copied them had no thought of any significance in their patterns. It seems to me that some such pattern will possibly be found to be the origin of these figures, but I have not been able to investigate them. I should, however, like the reader to notice the lion-like ears of Figs. 10, 11, 12. The fourth of the series (Fig. 13) has nothing in common with the other three except the foliage. The first is, of course, classical, so that the whole series may be possibly classical in origin.

This type of figure seems not to have survived Norman architecture, and from the thirteenth century onwards there appears the figure whose realism, importance, and wide distribution I have already described. This figure, I am convinced, is neither a figment of the imagination nor a symbol, but is taken from real life, and the question is whether there was any figure in real life from which it could have been taken. The answer, I think, is that there is only one of sufficient importance, the figure variously known as the Green Man, Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood, the King of May, and the Garland, who is the central figure in the May-day celebrations throughout Northern and Central Europe. In England and Scotland the most popular name for this figure, at any rate in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was Robin Hood. There are reasons for thinking that Robin Hood is really Robin of the Wood. Skeat suggests that "wood" originally meant a twig, and then a mass of twigs or bush, so that Robin Hood would be Robin of the twigs or bush, and this would very well describe the headdress worn by the Green Man to this day. We do not know when his cult became established in this country, but by the fifteenth century it formed an important part of the religious life of the people. We can infer this from the

fact that in 1499 the churchwardens of Reading received 19 shillings for the "gadering of Robin Hood," and in 1566 the churchwardens of Abingdon paid 1/6 for the setting up of Robin Hood's bower.

In a well-known passage in one of his sermons before King Edward VI, Bishop Latimer tells how he gave notice of his intention to preach at a certain church on a holy day. When he reached the church he found the door locked, and waited half an hour and more till the key was found. "And one of the parish comes to me and says, 'Sir, this is a busy day with us, we cannot hear you; it is Robin Hood's day. The parish are gone abroad to gather for Robin Hood, I pray you let them not.' I was fain there to give place to Robin Hood."

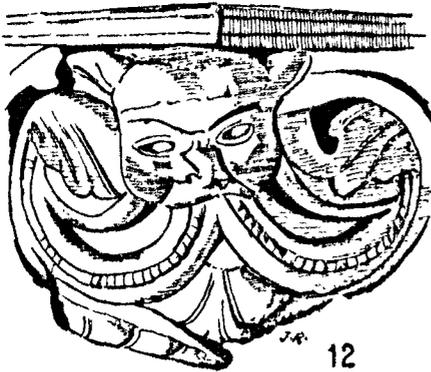
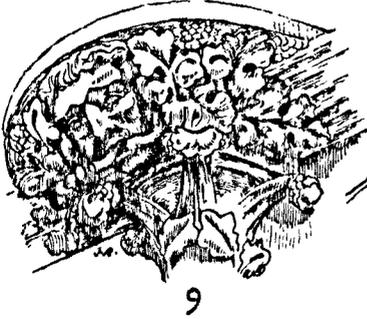
Later on the cult, with its exuberance and excesses, seriously troubled the leaders of the Reformed Church in Scotland, and in England it was sternly suppressed by the Puritans.

We must be thankful, however, that something like the ancient May-day ceremonies survived into modern times in the isolated village of Castleton in Derbyshire, which was visited in 1901 by one who wrote a full account of the ceremonies for *Folk-Lore*.<sup>1</sup> It appears that on the 20th or 29th May the church bell rings at 2 o'clock to call all the ringers together to make a garland of May flowers, which have been gathered by the villagers in the morning. This so-called garland is rather like a bell in shape (see Note at end), and as when covered with leaves and flowers it weighs about twelve stone, it naturally calls for an extremely powerful man to carry it. Robin Hood's bower may have been the same kind of thing.

The bower is made of flat laths of wood, as for the hoops of a barrel. (Fig. 14). At the top was a circular piece of wood with a hole in it about an inch in diameter. Into this

<sup>1</sup> S. D. Addy, *Folk-Lore*, 1901, pp. 394-430; 1902, p. 313.

PLATE III



9. CHURCH OF SEMUR-EN-AUXOIS, FRANCE  
10. JANIFORM BUST, ROME  
11. MONMAJOUR, NEAR ARLES, FRANCE, CLOISTERS  
12. ST. WOULO'S CHURCH, NEWPORT (MON.)—FONT

the topknot or Queen (Quane in the local dialect) was inserted, made of the choicest flowers, tulips called Moly flowers and the like, mounted on a wooden knob. Much of the framework is filled up with twigs of oak. Two men standing on barrels then lift it on to the head of the chosen King, as he is now called, though formerly he was known as the Man. He is accompanied by a woman wearing a crown and called the Queen, though formerly she was known as the Woman. We know that the part of the King of May's consort used to be played by a man dressed as a woman. Mr. Hall, of Castleton, told the recorder how he used, when he played the part of the King, to make a little hole in the branches to see through, and this Green Man in the chapter-house at Southwell is doing the very thing (Fig. 15). (Note. It is interesting to notice that the present state crown is exactly the same shape as the garland, and that so far as I know it was first made in this shape for Charles II, the regalia of Charles I having been destroyed.)

The King cannot guide the horse, as the garland encumbers him too much, and nothing can be seen of him but his legs. The horse is led by a ringer, and the Moly or Morris dancers follow, the Queen bringing up the rear. Formerly a man dressed as a sweep went in front carrying a besom, with which he brushed people out of the way. They proceed through the village, pausing for the dancers to dance before every inn. I should like to remind you that there is an extraordinary number of "Green Man" inns all over the country. I have noticed them particularly in East Anglia. My belief is that they take their title from this ceremony. (Note. In London until fairly recent times the part of the King was taken by a chimney sweep, who was known as the Black Boy. Chimney sweeps still bring luck at weddings.)

At last the procession reaches the church. The quane or topknot is removed, and the King enters the churchyard

alone upon his horse, and stands under the south wall of the tower. On the tower are the ringers who, using a projecting piece of masonry as a pulley, lower a rope to the King, who fastens it into the hole left by the removal of the topknot. The garland is then drawn up to the top of the tower, where it is fastened to a pinnacle, and there remains until next year, or until it is blown away by the winter gales. The quane is given by the ringers to some prominent villager, who usually rewards them with money.

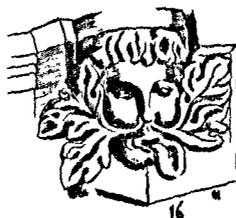
Now it seems to me that not very deeply buried in this rite we have the bones, the framework, of the magical rite of the spring sacrifice. All who have read the *Golden Bough* are familiar with the theory that a man was chosen to represent the god, and he, after conferring by the proper magical ceremonies his strength and fertility upon his people, was sacrificed (perhaps by hanging), decapitated, and his head placed in the sacred tree. We know that Odin and Attis were both hanged, and it is possible that our Green Man is a descendant of the same myth.

In support of this theory of hanging, it has been pointed out to me that several of the faces have their tongues hanging out a long way, and that this grimace is a characteristic effect of hanging. Good examples are to be found at Llantilio Crossenny, Monmouthshire (Fig. 16), and at Norwich Cathedral (Fig. 7).

It is difficult to believe that in Christian times the Green Man could actually have been sacrificed, but it appears that the idea of such sacrifice was not foreign to the minds of the common people even as late as the sixteenth century. According to Hilaire Belloc, bystanders at the burning of Ridley and Latimer were heard to remark that it was a pity that this burning had not been performed earlier in the season, as then it might have saved the crops.

Dr. C. B. Lewis (*Folk-Lore*, 1935, p. 73) says that "it would be a mistake to think that because Christianity

PLATE IV



13. KILPECK CHURCH, HEREFORDSHIRE—PORCH  
14. FRAMEWORK OF WITHY FOR GARLAND  
15. SOUTHWELL MINSTER, CHAPTER HOUSE  
16. LLANTILIO CROSSENNY CHURCH, MON.—NORTH TRANSEPT  
17. CHURCH OF ST. MARY REDCLIFFE, BRISTOL—WINDOW

finally triumphed in the long struggle with its pagan rivals, the latter disappeared the moment the former was officially recognized." The fact is that unofficial paganism subsisted side by side with the official religion, and this explains the presence of our Green Man in a church window with the Virgin beside him and below him the sun (Fig. 17). This extraordinary figure may be seen in mediaeval stained glass at the church of St. Mary Redcliffe at Bristol. He is crowned, and it would seem that to the artist who made the window, and presumably also to the priests who ordered it, he was equally venerable with the Virgin. We can only conclude that Dr. Lewis is right when he says that the source of our folk customs is religion, turned into folklore when the religious origin of the themes was forgotten, (*ib.* p. 74).

Something of the kind has resulted in the keeping of Oakapple Day on old May Day, the 20th or 29th of May. The May Day festivities, which had been suppressed by the Puritans, were revived at the Restoration of Charles II, who returned in triumph to London while people danced round Maypoles in the towns and villages through which he rode. He was nicknamed the "Black Boy" from his dark complexion (see note p. 53 above). (Note. I wonder whether the "nuts in May" of the nursery rhyme are oakapples).

In Mr. G. D. Hornblower's possession is a snuffbox of the late seventeenth century engraved with a likeness of Charles II, whose head appears among the leaves of an oak tree. Soldiers are riding below, and over him an angel holds three crowns. After his flight from Worcester fields he hid in the Boscobel oak, and it seems that this and other chances of fate caused him to become one of the long line of sacred beings whom we have here illustrated under the title of the "Green Man."

I must apologize for the scrappiness of this paper, but

it is really impossible, as yet, to do justice to the significance and variety of the subjects which seem to be involved. I hope that the pictures will atone in some measure for the deficiencies of the text. In conclusion, I should like to thank those who have sent me pictures of Green Men, and in particular Mr. C. J. P. Cave, Mr. G. D. Hornblower, Mrs. D. P. Dobson, Mrs. Bertram Pollock, and Mr. le Grice of Norwich.

NOTE

It is still the custom to hang bells of flowers over the bride and bridegroom at the wedding ceremony, and one had thought of them as wedding bells, but I now see them to be none other than the Garland of the sacrificed Green Man and his sacred bride. The bell-like shape of the sub-structure of the Garland has already been noted, and it seems to me that some confusion of thought has resulted in bells being garlanded with flowers and blessed by priests before being hung or rehung.

"After that we went to read in the Great Officials about the blessing of Bells in the Church of Rome," says Pepys, (Jan. 15, 1659-60), and his editor notes that "Baronius informs us that Pope John XIII in 968 consecrated a very large new bell in the Lateran Church, and gave it the name of John." This is the first instance I meet with of what has been since called "the baptizing of bells," a superstition which the reader may find ridiculed in the "Beehive of the Romish Church, 1579." A list of the ceremonies is quoted, and an instance given of the practice in 14 Hen. "VII, when Sir William Symes, Richard Clerk and Maistress Smyth were godfathers and godmother to a bell at Reading." See Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, ed. Hazlitt, vol. ii, pp. 239-240."