

From Roman to Romanesque : Some possible sources of various elements of Romanesque Iconography.

Introduction

The Romanesque Renaissance flourished simultaneously all over Christendom, wherever the Roman Empire had left monuments extant or capable of being unearthed.

Elements of classical iconography as well as of architecture and decorative details were re-used, hence the term “Romanesque”. In some cases there may have been a deliberate intention to supplant earlier religions by subsuming them within Christian images.

The scope of this paper is not to explore the significance of the images except where there is an obvious divergence in their meanings over the centuries, but rather to indicate earlier use of some Romanesque images in Pagan times.

I have not touched on decoration without human or animal content as this has already been covered by the late René Crozet in “Survivances Antiques dans le décor Roman”.

Summary

Paleo-Christian representations using Pagan iconography

The cult of Sabazios as a possible source for some elements found in Romanesque art including the “femme au serpent” image

Sabazios becomes identified with Mithras, the importance of bulls and rams in sculpture, associated worship of Cybele, taurobolic altars

Mithraic religion associated with the signs of the Zodiac, Zodiac images used in Romanesque sculpture

Mythological creatures such as centaurs and mermaids, hybrid monsters and grotesque people, blowers of horns and trumpets, hunting scenes

Foliate masks, masks spewing vegetation, heads surrounded by foliage

Paleo-Christian representations using Pagan iconography

A typical example is this mosaic of Jesus as Sol or Helios, the Sun God, from the tomb of the Julii family in the Vatican grottos, under St Peter's, Rome :



Fig 1 : Jesus as Sun God, Rome

Note the liberal use of vine leaves : Jesus is also the True Vine, and Christians may have wished to establish His supremacy over the cult of Dionysos as well as of Apollo.

A similar motivation may have led to the choice of depicting Jesus as Orpheus on this mural from another Roman catacomb, that of Marcellinus and Peter :



Fig 2 : Jesus as Orpheus, Rome

Jesus is wearing a Phrygian bonnet, presumably to emphasize the connection with beloved gods of the past; the instrument in his right hand looks more like a dagger than a plectrum. The bird and the tree in which it perches lean towards Him.

Even more striking is this 5th C mosaic from Jerusalem showing Jesus as the Good Shepherd surrounded by birds and beasts, like Orpheus :



Fig 3 : Jesus as Orpheus, Jerusalem

Note the snake. What is even more extraordinary is to see a centaur and the god Pan with his pipes in the foreground. In spirit this combination of Pagan and Christian elements mixed with real and mythological animals is a forerunner of the spirit of Romanesque images, where all these elements are cheerfully mixed in the sculptures that decorate church and cathedral alike.



Fig 4 : Jesus as The Good Shepherd with Pan Pipes, Aquileia

The mosaic of Jesus as The Good Shepherd, complete with Pan pipes, which was found at Aquileia, near Venice, also dates from the 4th-5th century.

This Good Shepherd comes from a Roman Sarcophagus of the 2nd century AD :



Fig 5 : The Good Shepherd, Roman sarcophagus, 2nd c AD, Glyptotek, Copenhagen

The Collegiate church of Sant Feliù, Gerona houses four early Christian sarcophagi, one of which shows the Abduction of Persephone. A mixture of Pagan and Christian images can also be seen on the sarcophagus of Ste Quitterie in Aire sur Adour :



Fig 6 : Sarcophagus from Aire sur Adour

In the Museum at Agen, Lot-et-Garonne, France, is a Gallo-Roman sarcophagus with a head of Apollo which may be the iconographic source for the one at Aire, either directly or at several removes :



Fig 7: Sarcophagus from Agen

Below it is a sarcophagus from the Louvre, dated 230 AD. Ste Quitterie's tomb seems to be of a similar period so is either a re-use or is NOT really her tomb since she is alleged to have lived in the 6th or 7th century.



Fig 8 : Sarcophagus from the Louvre

Note the large heads of gods on the upper corners of both sarcophagi. Those on Ste Quitterie's tomb have small wings in their curly hair like the ones on Hermes' cap. The heads of the gods on the other sarcophagus are entwined with grapes and vine leaves, and are of Bacchus or Dionysos. Bacchic revels take place on the main panel; the upper frieze may show a hunt or a procession that includes a lion, a dancing Maenad with a tambourine and the head and shoulders of a man on a larger scale, possibly the defunct person.

NB – It has recently been brought to my attention that this sarcophagus – together with another one – was unearthed in St Médard d’Eyrans, a village near Bordeaux. See Forum for further details.

The cult of Sabazius as a possible source for some elements found in Romanesque art including the “femme au serpent” image

It was in the museum of Empurias, on the coast of Spain not far from Gerona, that I came across the Phrygian god, Sabazius. I was struck by the sketch as it contained a number of elements that are echoed in Romanesque art.



Fig 9: Plaque from Empurias, Catalonia

Sabazius wears the Phrygian bonnet worn by many of the sculptured heads we see on Romanesque capitals; the smaller skull caps of his supporters are also seen alongside the Phrygian ones.

The figure of the head and shoulders of a man appearing atop a bush or tree; the serpent and the stars are further elements in frequent use in Romanesque sculpture. Even the naked athletes will be seen again in 11th & 12th C art, though they are normally disposed in a more active fashion on Romanesque capitals. There is a ram’s head beneath Sabazius’s right foot with some smaller vessels (offerings, presumably), and again, rams’ or bulls’ heads are frequently depicted in Romanesque churches. On each side of the caduceus is a blessing hand. There is a similar one in the Abbey church of Cellefrouin (left):



Fig 10 : Roundel from Cellefrouin Fig 11 : Capital from Trizac

and another, less similar carved on this capital from Trizac, in the Auvergne. The hand, and indeed, other body parts have been represented in various media and used as votive offerings in many religions including Egyptian, Classical, Celtic and Christian, right up to modern times. Romanesque artists frequently used the hand, often with the arm, the head or the head and shoulders to make beautiful reliquaries. Some of the latter are similar to the image of the horned god in the Sabazios plaque.

The figure of the head and shoulders of a man appearing atop a bush or tree :



Fig 12 : Detail of Sabazios plaque Fig 13 : Romanesque capital from Gerona



Fig 14 : Orans or Atlantide from the Abbey church of St Benoit near Poitiers



Fig 15 : Men clinging to branches and pine cones from the Monastery of San Pere de Rodes, Catalonia.

The pine cone as well as the vine are associated with the worship of Dionysos, another form of Sabazios.

Below ground, chthonic mysteries are hinted at in two caves which may be delineated by the arched bodies of snakes, each supporting a snake-girt tree. In each cave we can see a mother goddess, the one on Sabazios's left having a child on her knee is accompanied by a bird; the other, by a lizard or salamander.

There is another Sabazios plaque in the National Museum of Copenhagen :



Fig 16, Sabazios of National Museum, Copenhagen, Roman Empire, 1st c AD

Sabazios was originally a god from Asia Minor, worshipped in Thrace and Phrygia. He had certain features in common with Dionysus, and later borrowed certain characteristics and attributes from other gods, i. a. Attis, Hermes and Mithras. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Sabazios worship spread to the other countries of the Mediterranean.

F *Bronze relief, depicting Sabazios surrounded by many symbols borrowed from other gods. 1st cent. AD.*

G *Bronze hands, representing the hand of Sabazios.*

Fig 17, Sabazios notice from the National Museum, Copenhagen

Note the heads of Sol and Luna above Sabazios, his Phrygian cap, his pine cone and thyrsos. The two horsemen are present, as in the plaque from Empurias, but here we also have Apollo driving his chariot, small but in a central position at the top. In place of the 6-pointed stars by the horsemen of Empurias we have a pair of 5-pointed stars decorating the triangular pediment just below them. Other elements visible on both panels are the serpents wound around trees and a pair of crossed rods between Luna and the pine cone in the Copenhagen Sabazios, which correspond to the crossed rods on the left-hand-side tree of Empurias. Both plaques show altars with sacred vessels – probably offerings. The Copenhagen one is more complicated, with a golden calf on it.

Comparison with the two plaques shows that the figure of Sol is present on the Empurias plaque as the head and shoulders on the tree on the left, just below the crescent moon which presumably represents Luna. Sol is on the right in the Copenhagen plaque, and there is a bird holding a victor's wreath below him, just above the serpent.



Fig 18 : Mounted King among foliage and rinceaux, 12th C. Musée des Augustins, Toulouse

Descriptions of the cult emphasize the importance of horses in the schema. In the Sabazios picture at Empurias, there are several weapons. These include the thunderbolts brandished by Sabazios, and his staff, the spears carried by his two supporters and a dagger. A double-headed axe, (often associated with Crete) is hefted by a stocky man or god who looks like a woodcutter and is shown very small.



Compare him to this figure :

Fig 19 :a painting of Zalmoxis, god of the Dacians. In the full picture (see below) <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Aleksandrovo-kurgan> you can see that this person is taking part in a boar hunt, with dogs.

Following my readings regarding Sabazios on the Internet, I offer the following extracts from various web sites :

from “Ancient Library”

*Sabazius. A Thracian and Phrygian deity, whom the Greeks usually identified with Dionysus [Diodorus, iv 4], and sometimes also with Zeus. His orgiastic worship was very closely connected with that of the Phrygian Mother of the Gods, Rhea-Cybele, and of Attis. Along with this it was introduced into Athens in the 5th century BC. [Aristophanes, *Vespce* 9, *Lysistr.* 388; Demosthenes, *De. Cor.* § 260]. In later times it was widely spread in Rome and Italy, especially in the latter days of paganism. Like many of the oriental deities, he represented the flourishing life of nature, which sinks in death, always to rise again. As an emblem of the yearly renovation of nature, the symbol specially appropriated to him was the snake. Accordingly, at the celebration of his mysteries, a golden snake was passed under the clothes and drawn over the bosom of the initiated.*



Fig 20 : Greek Vase

On reading this detail, I thought of the “Femme aux Serpents” sculptures, usually classified as an “Image of Lust” or in any case, to be associated with Eve and with sin. Perhaps, after all, the image reached medieval Europeans via a route that would lead us back to the kind of image that is familiar to us as the Snake Goddess of Crete :



Fig 21 : Minoan goddess

The next image, now in the National Museum of Copenhagen, comes from Rhodes, not far from Crete :



Fig 22 : Winged figure holding snakes, Rhodes, 6th c BC

The figure looks like terracotta, but is said to be of limestone :

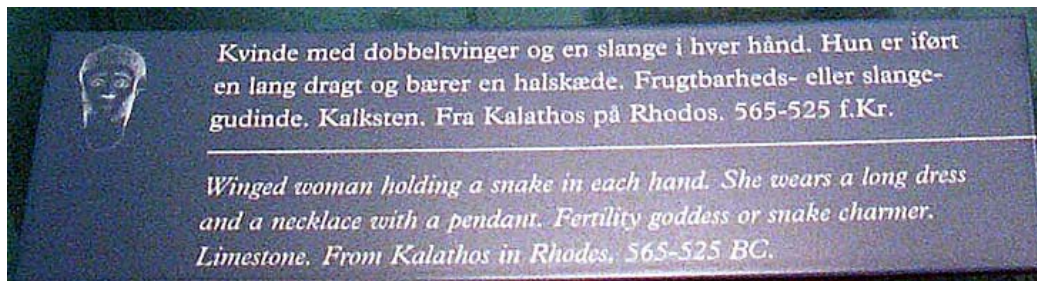


Fig 23 : Winged figure holding snakes, Rhodes, 6th c BC

She is wearing a necklace with a pendant or amulet and what may be a band round her forehead.

Nearer to the Christian era is this celebration of Ceres, bearing not only the ears of cereals with which she is associated but also a pair of snakes. Here, they are probably symbols over the triumphant re-birth of Spring after the death-like Winter hibernation.



Fig 24 : Ceres holding snakes, Roman, 1st c BC – 1st c, AD, Glyptotek, Copenhagen

There are many examples of Christian condemnation of pagan images, the vilification of mystery cults, etc.



Like this
**Fig 25 : “Femme au Serpent”
from Oo, Haut-Garonne,**



Or this one
**Fig 26 : from Beaulieu sur
Dordogne**



Fig 27 :

Women holding snakes to mouth & breasts from Gerona Museum



Fig 28 :

Calumny, one of four similar snakes, St Génis de la Fontaine, Rousillon

The Musée des Augustins has this notice about the Snake Woman of Oo :

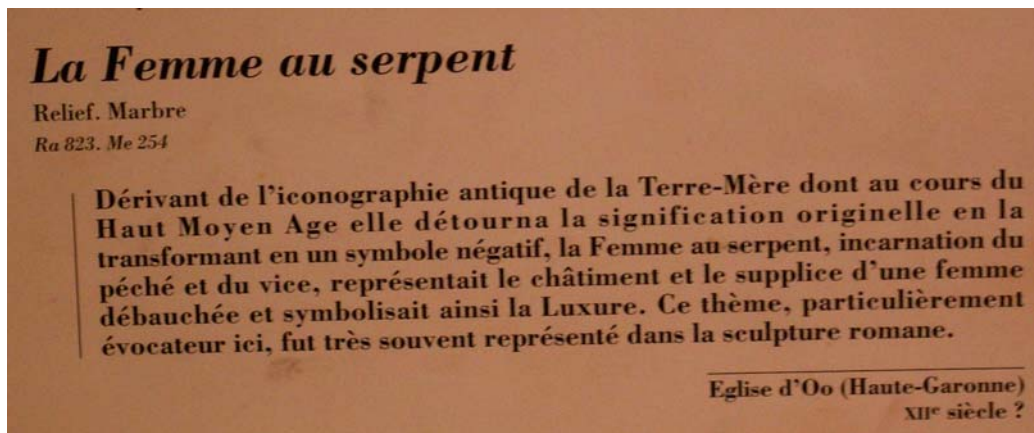


Fig 29 : La Femme au Serpent notice

Dérivant de l'iconographie antique de la Terre-Mère dont au cours du Haut Moyen Age elle détourna la signification originelle en la transformant en un symbole négatif, la Femme au serpent, incarnation du péché et du vice, représentait le chatiment et le supplice d'une femme débauchée et symbolisait ainsi la Luxure. Ce thème, particulièrement évocateur ici, fut très souvent représenté dans la sculpture romane.

Sabazios becomes identified with Mithras, the importance of bulls and rams in sculpture, associated worship of Cybele, taurobolic altars

Further details about Sabazios, again from “Ancient Library” show that his cult became closely associated with that of Mithras, while Cybele remained a constant presence behind all the mystery religion gods. This may, in part, have been because her cult was open to women, while that of Mithras was exclusively for men.

Commonly described as a son of Rhea or Cybele; but in later times identified with the mystic Dionysus, who hence is sometimes called Dionysus Sabazius. (Aristoph. Av. 873 ; Hesych. s. v.) For the same reason Sabazius is called a son of Zeus by Persephone, and is said to have been reared by a nymph Nyssa. . . He was torn by the Titans into seven pieces. (Joan. Lydus, De Mens. p. 82 ; Orph. Fragm. viii. 46, p. 469, ed. Herm., Hymn. 47 ; Cic. de Nat. Deor. iii. 23.) The connection of Sabazius with the Phrygian mother of the gods accounts for the fact that he was identified, to a certain extent, with Zeus himself, who is mentioned as Zeus Sabazius, both Zeus and Dionysus having been brought up by Cybele or Rhea. (Val. Max. i. 3. § 4.) His worship and festivals (Sabazia) were also introduced into Greece ; but, at least in the time of Demosthenes, it was not thought reputable to take part in them, for they were celebrated at night by both sexes with purifications, initiations, and immoralities. (Diod. iv. 4 ; Demosth. de Coron. p. 313 ; Strab. x. p. 471 ; Aristoph. Vesp. 9, Lysistr. 389.) Serpents, which were sacred to him, acted a prominent part at the Sabazia and in the processions (Clemens Alex. Protrept. p. 6 ; Theophrast. Char. 16): the god himself was represented with horns, because, it is said, he was the first that yoked oxen to the plough for agriculture. (Diod. iv."4.] [L. S.]



Fig 30 : Verulamium mosaic

A horned god of the pagans like this one on a mosaic from Verulamium, becomes the Devil of the Christians : that is among the best-known examples of the way in which

Christianity undermined pagan religions. The vilification of serpents is another. Pagans of antiquity worshipped them as being wise and powerful. They could inflict death, could slough off their old skins and seemingly be born again; they could disappear into the earth and re-emerge, presumably with knowledge of chthonic mysteries since the earth was their element.

A pair of devils fighting over a new-born soul like a couple of midwives assisting in the birth with a primitive medical tool comes from Vézelay :



Fig 31 : Vézelay devils

One devil is clearly horned but both have spiked hair reminiscent of the flames of Hell which are seen in Romanesque sculpture all over France. Note the snake, peacefully coiled under the bed.

This extract is from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithraism>:

Sabazios is the nomadic horseman sky and father god of the [Phrygians](#). In [Indo-European](#) languages, such as Phrygian, the '-zios' element in his name goes back to [Dyeus](#), the common precursor of 'deus' (god) and [Zeus](#). Though the [Greeks](#) associated Phrygian Sabazios with [Zeus](#), representations of him, even into [Roman](#) times, show him always on horseback, as a nomadic horseman god, wielding his characteristic staff of power.

- *One of the Mother Goddess's creatures was the [Lunar Bull](#). Sabazios' relations with the goddess may be surmised in the way that his horse places a hoof on the head of the bull, in a Roman marble relief at the [Boston Museum of Fine Arts](#). Though Roman in date, the iconic image appears to be much earlier.*

The iconic image of the god or hero on horseback battling the chthonic serpent, on which his horse tramples, appears on Celtic votive columns, and with the coming of Christianity it was easily transformed into the image of Saint George and the dragon.

The reference to the Lunar Bull brings us back to Mithras and to Taurobic altars which are widely found all over Europe, especially in France.

Here are two sides of a Gallo-Roman altar from Vesunna (Périgueux), France :



Fig 32 : Ram's head from Vesunna

The two curly horns above replicated by curly snakes below



Fig 33 : Bull's head from Vesunna

The ears decorated; with dagger, wine cup and jug.

A similar altar can be seen in the Roman museum in Lyons, while a good example of a bull's head among wreaths can be seen at the Glyptotek in Copenhagen

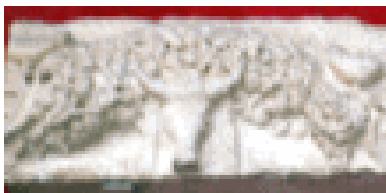


Fig 34: Bull's head among Wreaths, Roman, Glyptotek

Heads of rams or bulls like these are to be found on Romanesque sculptures in many parts of France, including these two from the church at Cercles :



Fig 35 : Ram's head from Cercles



Fig 36 : Lamb's head from Cercles

And this head of a bull from St Julien de Jonzy in Burgundy :



Fig 37 : Romanesque Bull's head from St Julien de Jonzy, Burgundy



Fig 38 : Main face of Vesunna altar, Périgueux

On the main face of the altar we see a bust surmounted by a Phrygian bonnet which may be of Cybele herself, the bonnet surmounted by her emblem, a sheaf of corn. The bust appears to be on an altar, with a bearded goat appearing from behind it. There are two mysterious objects : one is like a triangular pine tree but may be the head of a dart. The other may be a quiver to hold arrows or a wine funnel.

The cult of Mithras was very popular throughout the Roman Empire at about the time of the spread of Christianity. The place in society of this mystery religion with its secret rites and ceremonies might be compared to Freemasonry in modern times. It was particularly widespread in the second and third centuries AD among Roman soldiers and state employees. However, there was no place in it for women, unlike Christianity, and this may have been among the reasons that it ultimately failed as a religion.



Fig 39 : Mithras killing a bull, sculpture from the Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Representations of the Tauroctony (the sacrifice of the bull by Mithras) are usually in the form of steles, in bas or high relief, but this one, from the Glyptotek in Copenhagen, is a free-standing sculpture complete with snake, dog and scorpion.

Temples to Mithras have been found all over the later Roman Empire, usually as vaulted underground chambers with a central altar bearing a sculptured stele showing Mithras killing a bull. Sometimes these have become the crypt of a Christian church, deliberately placed above it, as at San Clemente in Rome. At Aubeterre in the Charente, just by the Monolithic church, is an underground chamber conforming to the design of a typical Mithraeum with stone benches along each side and holes in the roof through which new members of the cult could receive the traditional baptism of bulls' blood.

In the Hautes Alpes, near the village of St Genièz, the Chapelle Notre Dame de Dromon was built on the antique site of Théopolis. The trilobed crypt was partly hewn out of the rock. It contains a sculpture of a bust wearing a Phrygian cap. A Roman inscription of 18 lines was found near by. It is tempting to think that this crypt, too, may have started as a temple of Mithras.



Fig 40 : Mithras killing a bull

Note Sol Invictus on the top left and Luna top right, and the dog, snake and scorpion who are helping to attack the bull. The crow to the left of Mithras is a standard feature of the traditional schema, as are the two torch bearers. Their names are Cautes and Cautopates and they are much the same as Castor & Pollux, the Gemini. The scene is shown as taking place below ground, in a cave, with Sun and Moon looking down from above it.

The torchbearers play a more active part in this two-sided stele, from the Louvre :



Fig 41 : Mithras stele from the Louvre

One of them is receiving what looks like a horn from Sol (or perhaps he is passing it to him) while the other seems to be using a caduceus to light a fire by the altar round which a snake is entwined. Mithras himself, presides with Sol as his equal, all four deities bearing torches. Only Luna, whose head is turned away, has no part in the action. Perhaps this is because she is female, so cannot participate in this male rite.



Fig 42: Mithras from Louvre, main face

On the reverse (the main side) of the altarpiece we have the traditional Tauroctony. Compare the images of Sun and Moon looking on with those in these primitive steles from the Visigothic (7thc) church of Santa Maria at Quintanilla de las Vinas, Burgos :



Fig 43 : Sol, held aloft by angels, Quintanilla de las Vinas, Burgos

and



Fig 44 : Luna, Quintanilla de las Vinas, Burgos

Click [here](http://jdiezarnal.iespana.es/burgosquintanilla.html) to read an article (in Spanish) about this church. The author makes a connection between the cult of Mithras and these Sol and Luna sculptures, as I do.

<http://jdiezarnal.iespana.es/burgosquintanilla.html>

There is an inscription over Sol and the angels, stating that the church was offered by Flammula.

More Crucifixion sculptures from St Mexme, in Chinon and from Usson in the Poitou



Fig 45 : St Mexme Crucifixion



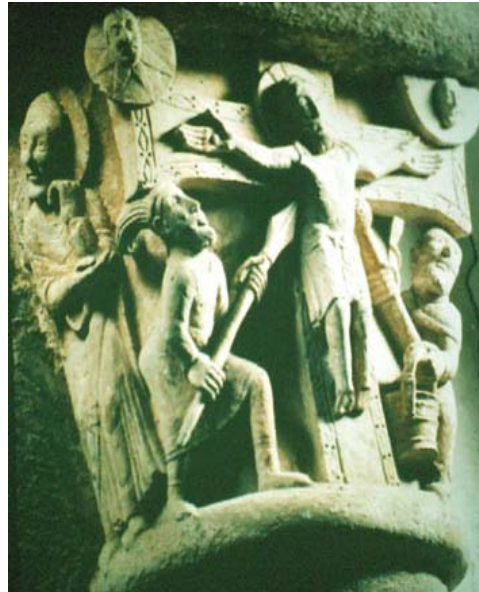
Fig 46 : Usson Crucifixion

Note the extraordinary resemblance of the St Mexme Luna to the one from Quintanilla de las Vinas.

A pair of similar scenes carved in high relief can be seen on this capital at Lubersac in the Limousin :



Fig 47 : Lubersac Crucifixion



48 : Lubersac Crucifixion 2

Sun and Moon are shown as spectators in other Romanesque sculptures, such as this capital from Charlieu in Burgundy :



Fig 49 : Charlieu Sun & Moon

However, as so often happened with Romanesque sculpture, the immediate source may be found in illuminated manuscripts like this one from a Psalter hymnal, 1030-60, by Ingelard of Saint Germain des Près, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.



Fig 50 : St Germain Crucifixion MS 1030-60, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

Sol & Luna look more “Gallo-Roman” here than on later representations such as the Helmarshausen Gospel MS more than a century later :

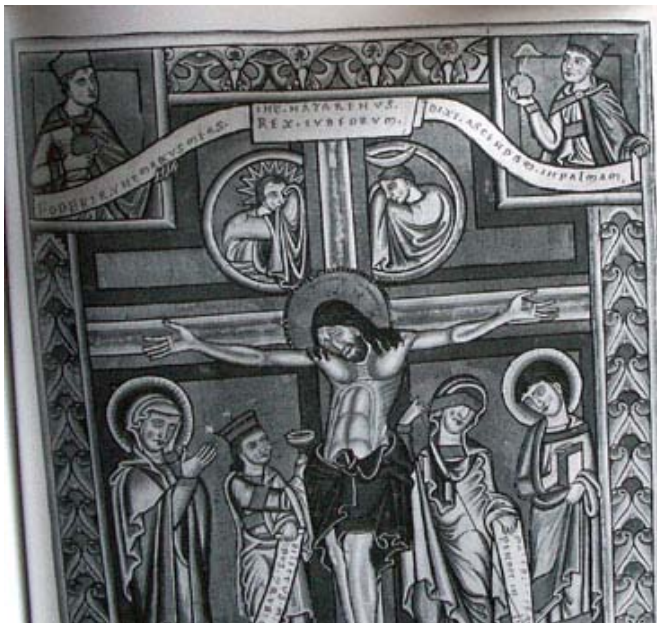


Fig 51 : Helmarshausen Crucifixion MS, 1190-1200, Trier, Dombibliothek

I would venture to suggest that the influence can be traced to pagan images such as the ones on Mithraic altars.

An intermediate stage can be seen on a 5th century ivory Apotheosis, probably of the Emperor Antonius Pius from the Vatican Library :



Fig 51a : Ivory tablet, 5th century, British Museum, London

Note the Zodiac images just below the head of Sol. This tablet, which has a chariot and horses below, and a group of elephants below that, was half of a hinged diptych, with Luna, probably, on the other half.

An Agnus Dei is superimposed on the Mithraic symbol of Sol Invictus on the wall of Sant Feliù, Gerona. On each side, a set of Pleiades, another Mithraic emblem; Mithras's twin companions are replaced by angels. Pure co-incidence or political statement? The sarcophagus is supported on twin masks and twin lion heads.

On one side of the Lindisfarne tombstone :



Fig 52 : Lindisfarne grave slab with Sun & Moon flanking Cross

we see the images not personified but reduced to simple symbols. Worshippers bow before it on each side, and above each of them appears a large blessing hand. The other side of the stone is carved with soldiers in armour and wielding battleaxes.



Fig 53 : Gerona Solar Agnus Dei

It would be nice to be able to read the inscription. Have another look at that 7thc Sol from near Burgos :



Fig 54 : Sol, held aloft by angels, Quintanilla de las Vinas, Burgos (again)

Perhaps the motif with angels holding a circular shield owes its inspiration to an ancient sarcophagus like this one:



Fig 55 : Sarcophagus from the Glyptotek, Roman, 3rd c AD

Compare the Apollo heads on the upper corners to those on the sarcophagus from the Louvre, Fig. 8. Between them is carved a frieze of a hunting scene, echoed eight or

nine centuries later in many a Romanesque church such as this one at Marignac, near Saintes :



Fig 56 : Hunting scenes, 12thc, Marignac, Saintonge

Mithraic religion associated with the signs of the Zodiac, Zodiac images used in Romanesque sculpture



Fig 57 : London Mithras & Zodiac

Here, Mithras the Bull-slayer is surrounded by the signs of the Zodiac within a circular frame. The image comes from the London Mithraeum and can be seen in the Museum of London. The Zodiac has been represented from Egyptian times and before, but it may be an image like this one that led to the use of signs of the Zodiac in Romanesque iconography. These examples of Pisces, Aquarius and Ares are from the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse.



Fig 58 : Toulouse Pisces



Fig 59 : Toulouse Aquarius



Fig 60 : Toulouse Ares

Similar series of Zodiac sculptures can also be seen at Vézelay (which combines the Zodiac with the Labours of the Months), at Chartres and at Autun as well as many smaller churches such as the Monolithic church of St Emilion.

I append some lengthy extracts from the Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1911, explaining the essence of Mithraism :

MITHRAS, was originally a Persian god of light whose cult goes back to a period before the separation of the Persians from the Hindus, as is shown by references in the literatures of both stocks, the Avesta and the Vedas. . . he was the god of vegetation and increase; he sent prosperity to the good, and annihilated the bad; he was the god of armies and the champion of heroes; as the enemy of darkness and of all evil spirits, he protected souls, accompanying them on the way to paradise, and was thus a redeemer. Animals and birds were sacrificed and libations poured to him, and prayers were addressed to him by devotees. . . His worship spread with the empire of the Persians throughout Asia Minor, and Babylon was an important centre.

. . . the Greeks of Asia Minor identified Mithras with Helios, and contributed to the success of his cult by equipping it for the first time with artistic representations . . . Mithraism was first transmitted to the Roman world during the 1st century B.C. by the Cilician pirates captured by Pompey. It seems at first to have had relations with the cult of Cybele, the Great Mother of the Gods at Rome, whose influence served to protect it and facilitate its growth.

Towards the close of the 2nd century the cult had begun to spread rapidly through the army, the mercantile class, slaves and actual propagandists, all of which classes were largely composed of Asiatics. It thrived especially among military posts, and in the track of trade, where its monuments have been discovered in greatest abundance. The German frontiers afford most evidence of its prosperity. Rome itself was a favorite seat of the religion. From the end of the 2nd century the emperors encouraged Mithraism, because of the support which it afforded to the divine right of monarchs. Mithras, identified with Sol Invictus at Rome, thus became the giver of authority and victory to the imperial house. From the time of Commodus, who participated in its mysteries, its supporters were to be found in all classes. Its importance at Rome may be judged from the abundance of monumental remains. . . in all parts of the city and suburbs.

The beginning of the downfall of Mithraism dates from A.D. 275, when Dacia was lost to the empire. . . The aggression of Christianity also was now more effective. The emperors, however, favoured the cult, which was the army's favourite until Constantine destroyed its hopes. It still survived in certain cantons of the Alps in the 5th century, and clung to life with more tenacity in its Eastern home. Its legitimate successor was Manichaeism, which afforded a refuge to those mystics who had been shaken in faith, but not converted, by the polemics of the Church against their religion.

The Mithraic temples of Roman times were artificial grottoes (spelaea) wholly or partially underground, in imitation of the original secluded mountain caverns of Asia. The main room of the ordinary temple was rectangular, with an elevated apsidal arrangement, like a choir, containing the sacred relief on its wall, at the end opposite the entrance, and with continuous benches (podia) of masonry, about 5 ft. wide and inclining slightly towards the floor, built against the wall on its long sides. The ceiling was made to symbolize the firmament. There were arrangements for the brilliant illumination of the choir and its relief, which was sometimes sculptured on both sides and reversible, while the podia were intentionally more obscure. The choir and the long space between the podia were for ministrants, the podia themselves for kneeling worshippers. Two altars, to the Sun and the Moon, stood before the former, and cult statues along the latter. . . The average grotto held from fifty to a hundred persons.

The typical bas relief, which is found in great abundance in the museums of Europe, invariably represents Mithras, under the form of a youth with conical cap and flying drapery, slaying the sacred bull, the scorpion attacking the genitals of the animal, the serpent drinking its blood, the dog springing towards the wound in its side, and frequently, in addition, the Sun-god, his messenger the raven, a fig-tree, a lion, a ewer, and torch-bearers. The relief is in some instances enclosed in a frame of figures and scenes in relief. The best example is the monument of Osterburken :



Fig 61 : Osterburken Mithras stele

With this monument as a basis, Franz Cumont has arranged the small Mithraic reliefs into two groups, one illustrating the legend of the origin of the gods, and the other the legend of Mithras. . . The Mithras legend has been lost, and can be reconstructed only from the scenes on the above described relief. Mithras was born of a rock, the marvel being seen only by certain shepherds, who brought gifts and adored him. Chilled by the wind, the new-born god went to a fig-tree, partook of its fruit, and clothed himself in its leaves. He then undertook to vanquish the beings already in the world, and rendered subject to him first the Sun, with whom he concluded a treaty of friendship. The most wonderful of his adventures, however, was that with the sacred bull which had been created by Ormazd. The hero seized it by the horns and was borne headlong in the flight of the animal, which he finally subdued and dragged into a cavern.

The bull escaped, but was overtaken, and by order of the Sun, who sent his messenger the raven, was reluctantly sacrificed by Mithras. From the dying animal sprang the life of the earth, although Ahriman sent his emissaries to prevent it. The soul of the bull rose to the celestial spheres and became the guardian of herds and flocks under the name of **Silvanus**. Mithras was through his deed the creator of life. Meanwhile Ahriman sent a terrible drought upon the land. Mithras defeated his purpose by discharging an arrow against ~ rock and miraculously drawing the water from it. Next Ahriman sent a deluge, from which one man escaped in a boat with his cattle. Finally a fire desolated the earth, and only the creatures of Ormazd escaped. Mithras, his work accomplished, banqueted with the Sun for the last time, and was taken by him in his chariot to the habitation of the immortals, whence he continued to protect the faithful.

The symbolism employed by Mithraism finds its best illustration in the large central relief, which represents Mithras in the act of slaying the bull as a sacrifice - to bring about terrestrial life, and thus portrays the concluding scenes in the legend of the sacred animal. The scorpion, attacking the genitals of the bull, is sent by Ahriman

from the lower world to defeat the purpose of the sacrifice; the dog, springing towards the wound in the bulls side, was venerated by the Persians as the companion of Mithras; the serpent is the symbol of the earth being made fertile by drinking the blood of the sacrificial bull; the raven, towards which Mithras turns his face as if for direction, is the herald of the Sun-god, whose bust is near by, and who has ordered the sacrifice; various plants near the bull, and heads of wheat springing from his tail, symbolize the result of the sacrifice; the cypress is perhaps the tree of immortality. There was also an astrological symbolism, but it was superficial, and of secondary importance. The torch-bearers sometimes seen on the relief represent one being in three aspects the morning, noon and evening sun, or the vernal, summer and autumn sun.

A sacred communion of bread, water and possibly wine, compared by the Christian apologists to the Eucharist, was administered to the mystic who was entering upon one of the advanced degrees, perhaps Leo. The ceremony was probably commemorative of the banquet of Mithras and Helios before the formers ascension, and its effect strength of body, wisdom, prosperity, power to resist evil, and participation in the immortality enjoyed by the god himself.

The most interesting aspect of Mithraism is its antagonism to Christianity. Both religions were of Oriental origin; they were propagated about the same time, and spread with equal rapidity. . . At the end of the 2nd century each had advanced to the farthest limits of the empire, though the one possessed greatest strength on the frontiers of the Teutonic countries, along the Danube and the Rhine, while the other thrived especially in Asia and Africa. The points of collision were especially at Rome, in Africa, and in the Rhone Valley, and the struggle was the more obstinate because of the resemblances between the two religions, which were so numerous and so close as to be the subject of remark as early as the 2nd century, and the cause of mutual recrimination. The fraternal and democratic spirit of the first communities, and their humble origin; the identification of the object of adoration with light and the Sun; the legends of the shepherds with their gifts and adoration, the flood, and the ark; the representation in art of the fiery chariot, the drawing of water from the rock; the use of bell and candle, holy water and the communion; the sanctification of Sunday and of the 25th of December; the insistence on moral conduct, the emphasis placed upon abstinence and self-control; the doctrine of heaven and hell, of primitive revelation, of the mediation of the Logos emanating from the divine, the atoning sacrifice, the constant warfare between good and evil and the final triumph of the former, the immortality of the soul, the last judgment, the resurrection of the flesh and the fiery destruction of the universe are some of the resemblances which, whether real or only apparent, enabled Mithraism to prolong its resistance to Christianity. At their root lay a common Eastern origin rather than any borrowing.

On the other hand, there were important contrasts between the two. Mithraism courted the favor of Roman paganism and combined monotheism with polytheism, while Christianity was uncompromising. The former as a consequence won large numbers of supporters who were drawn by the possibility it afforded of adopting an attractive faith which did not involve a rupture with the religion of Roman society, and consequently with the state. In the middle of the 3rd century Mithraism seemed on the verge of becoming the universal religion. . . having only a mythical character, instead of a personality, as an object of adoration, and in excluding women from its privileges, it fell rapidly before the assaults of Christianity. Manichaeism, which combined the adoration of Zoroaster and Christ, became the refuge of those supporters of Mithraism who were inclined to compromise, while many found the

transition to orthodox Christianity easy because of its very resemblance to their old faith.

See Philip Harland for more details about the cosmological or astronomical significance of the cult, and details of the Grades of Initiates :

<http://www.philipharland.com/mithras.html>

and <http://www.well.com/user/davidu/mithras.html>

by David Ulansey (whose book, “The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries” is published by the Oxford University Press), for a technical but convincing argument indicating that (contrary to the opinion of Encyclopaedia Britannica) Astronomy was central to the cult of Mithras.



Fig 62 : Brass Zodiac mirror from Davids Samling, Copenhagen, 1262

This brass Zodiac mirror was made in Anatolia in 631 H or 666 H. (13th century AD) for the Artuqid prince, Urtuq Shah. The inscription mentions his ancestors. For a full bibliography see: “An Exhibition of Medieval, Renaissance and Islamic Works of Art” Newhouse Galleries, New York, 1995 pp. 8-11. It has been in European collections since the 18th century and has been published many times. This information was kindly supplied by Kjeld von Folsach, Director of the Davids Samling, Copenhagen. A spread eagle in high relief is in the centre, with six busts around it, and then the 12 signs of the Zodiac. This artefact cuts across religions and provides an interesting link between Christian and Muslim art of the 13th Century.

Mythological creatures such as centaurs and mermaids, hybrid monsters and grotesque people, blowers of horns and trumpets, hunting scenes



Fig 63 : Mermaid capital from the cloister, Ripoll

Like women holding serpents, mermaids (or sirens as they are known in France) were associated in Medieval times with “Luxure” – Lust – a deadly sin. From Homer’s account of their temptation of Ulysses, they were seen as Woman the Temptress, sex being associated with Sin.



Fig 64 : Mermaids capital from Chadenac, near Saintes

Twin mermaids, smiling as they grasp a fish in each hand. The mermaids are crowned with a triple leaf each while birds peck at the fish. One could read an extremely confused message into this capital. The mermaids seem to be crowned with a symbol of Trinity and are certainly happy; fish often represent Christians or even Christ; pecking birds can be read as bringing spiritual wisdom from on high.

In fact, all the emblems of Classical mythology were suspect to the Romanesque Church, so Centaurs, Satyrs and all hybrid creatures were necessarily damned. Nevertheless, as Sagittarius the Archer, Centaurs were frequently depicted.



Fig 65 : Twin Centaurs capital from the Royal Convent of Nieul sur Autise, Vendée

There is a wonderful embroidered hanging dating from about 1100 and known as “The Creation Tapestry” in the Treasury of the Cathedral of Gerona. In some ways it can be compared to the Bayeux Tapestry (known in France as the “Tapisserie de la Reine Mathilde”) which is also embroidered, not woven. Mythological images abound among the traditional Christian ones.

It may be seen as a slide show on this excellent official site :

<http://www.lacatedraldegirona.com/intro/introflash.html>

A youthful Jesus in a Byzantine tunic is encircled in the centre. Below him Eve is born from Adam’s rib on his right, Adam names the animals (including the unicorn) on his left and all manner of birds and weird beasts are depicted below. On the upper half, Sol and Luna have their place among angels



Fig 66 : Gerona Tapestry – Sol and Luna

and the Holy Spirit as a dove, but the Sun God is there too, in his chariot. This larger circle of images is surrounded by a quotation from Genesis. The circle is then squared with the representation of the four cardinal Winds in each corner. Each one has wings and winged ankles, sits on a wind bag and blows on a pair of green trumpets.



Fig 67 : Gerona Tapestry – South Wind

Finally, 21 small squares, 7 on each of 3 sides illustrate the months and their labours but also the Sun God in his chariot drawn by two horses (repeated on the opposite side) while the damaged lower border depicts the finding of the True Cross.

A similar wind – but just his head with two shorter trumpets held in his mouth – is depicted on a beautiful mosaic of the 12th century in the Episcopal Chapel of Die, Drome.

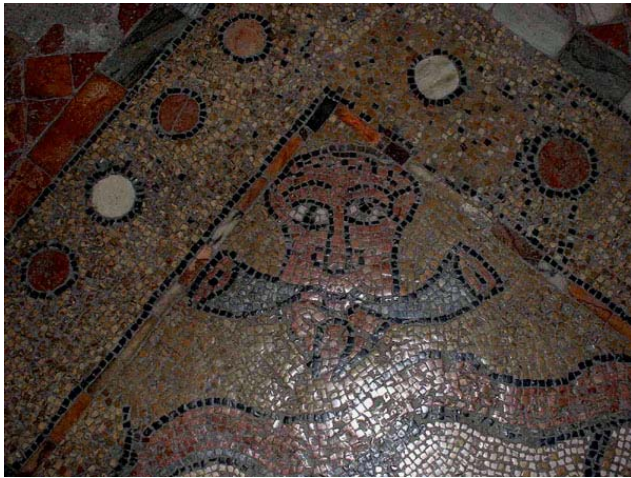


Fig 68 : Mosaic from the Chapel of St Nicolas, Die – a Wind

Designed as a sort of carpet – as mosaics usually were – this one shows the four rivers of Eden : Tigris, Euphrates, Geon (or Gehon) and Fison (or Phison), personified :

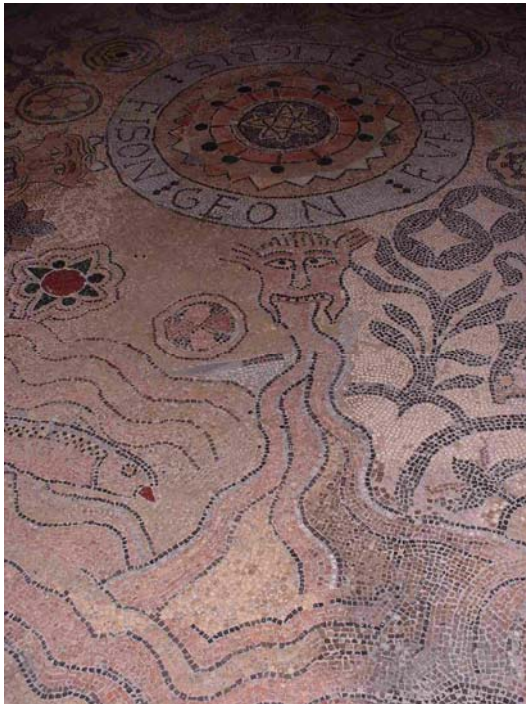


Fig 69 : Mosaic from the Chapel of St Nicolas, Die – a River

Geon (or Gehon) is identified with the Nile, and Fison (or Phison) with the Ganges. [Click here](#) to read an interesting article on the subject by Henry Maguire describing a VIthc mosaic on a similar subject in Jordan..

<http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/mad/articles/MaquireNile.html>

It is likely that these cherub masks blowing life into the dry bones (but without the aid of horns) are based on pre-Christian models.

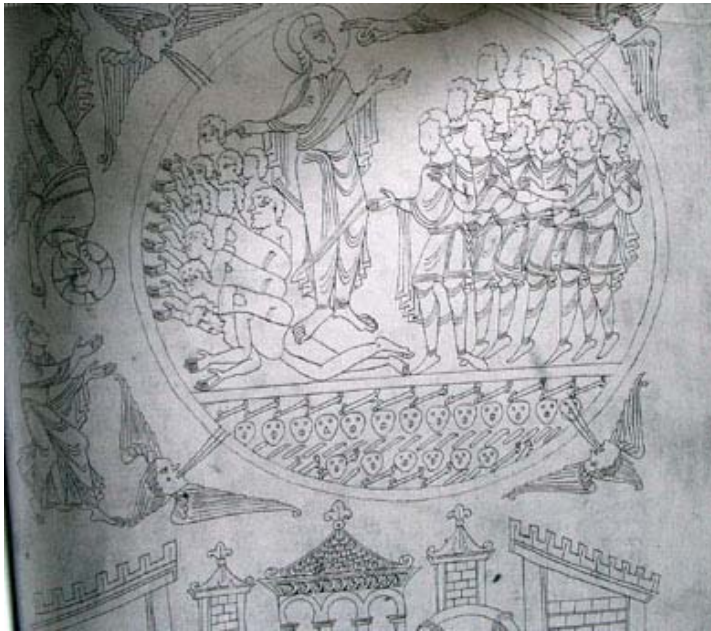


Fig 70 :Ripoll Bible, Valley of Dry Bones, second quarter of 11thc. Now in the Vatican Library.

At some level, I think that all these masks - whether puffing air, spewing water or leaves - are linked by a common thread which leads back in time to the masks of Antiquity.



Fig 71 : Le Souffleur, Toulouse

Possibly from the Cloister of St Etienne, Toulouse, and now in the Musée des Augustins. This curious little fellow with three faces and bells on the end of his tresses, blowing into a pair of tusks, struck me as being rather Indian in appearance,

especially in posture. The Museum suggests that the iconography is derived from an antique sculpture of Mars and that he represents March winds.

Here is a Romanesque trumpet blower from Beaulieu sur Dordogne, similar to the angel of Autun :



Fig 72 : The Angel of the Last Judgement, Beaulieu sur Dordogne



Fig 73 : Roman sculpture of a horn blower blowing on his Oliphant or Elephant tusk.



and this

Fig 74 : Hunter from the 12th C mosaic on the floor of Lescaur Cathedral in Aquitaine :

may be compared with the 4th C hunting scene from Bulgaria, referred to above :



Fig 75 : Hunting scene with Zalmoxis

On the other side of the Lescar hunter, but upside down, is a goat attacked by a lion :



Fig 76 : Lescar lion & goat mosaic

The source for these medieval mosaic floors is surely to be found among the Gallo-Roman villas which abound in Aquitaine, even though some (like those at Seviac) are entirely non-figurative.

Foliage masks, masks spewing vegetation, heads surrounded by foliage

Passing reference, at least, must be made to an image that is very frequently found in Romanesque art, that of the foliate mask, known as the Green Man.

This mosaic was found at Empurias and dates from a century before or after the birth of Christ. Described as being the head of Silenus, it clearly represents a deity who is concerned with vegetation, especially wine.



Fig 77 : Silenus from Empurias mosaic

Images abound in books and on the Internet showing the evolution of this popular decorative image, possibly from an Indian origin several centuries BC, to its heyday during the Gothic period.

Mike Harding's site : <http://www.mikeharding.co.uk/greenman/greenintro.html> has an excellent series of photographs showing a sequence of variations on the image of the foliate mask.

The image in Romanesque art has certainly been disseminated via manuscript books, especially those from the scriptorium of St Martial de Limoges.



Fig 78 : Bible of La Sauve Majeure, Gironde

This letter A is from the Bible of La Sauve Majeure, Gironde. It combines several of the images already referred to such as the twin companions of the suffering Saviour, here seen blowing a fanfare as he emerges triumphant. The four beasts, whether gobbling fruit or just looking on are linked by entrelacs of the kind usually considered to be Celtic in origin. There is a tradition that the last of the Druids became Christian

monks, like St Patrick, and that some of them came over from Ireland to work in the scriptoria of Gaul. The Saviour himself is emerging from his tomb in a cave (the tomb being delineated by ghostly pearls), and is stepping through a fringe of vegetation.

Animal heads, especially feline, and spitting monsters are even more frequent than human heads. They are found particularly frequently in Romanesque churches of South-West France, Catalonia and Northern Spain as well as in England, leading one to suppose that it was in Limoges that the image became fully fledged and from Limoges took flight.



Fig 79 : Monkey spewing vegetation from the cloister, Ripoll

Heads or masks, often surrounded by foliage become an increasingly frequent decoration in Romanesque sculpture from the 11th century. A Varagnac, in “L’art Gaulois”, (figs. 21-23 and note on p. 281), compares the Gallo-Roman “Bete de Tarasque de Noves”



Fig 80 Gallo-Roman “Bete de Tarasque de Noves”

with a capital from Anzy le Duc in Saone et Loire.



Fig 81 : Anzy-le-Duc, Burgundy, capital

Pairs of lions place a paw each on the heads of masks with closed eyes which appear above a stand of foliage. One beast and two heads or two beasts and one head, either way we are confronted here with Man overcome by malignant forces.



Fig 82 :Mask among entrelacs and foliage from St Benoit near Poitiers

This mask among entrelacs that become foliate above and below is typical of the transitional stage before the mask takes on the form of Dinyos, as in these slides from Rioux and Retaud in the Saintonge.



Fig 83 : Rioux double Green men

The Janus-like twins are wearing laurel



Fig 84 : Retaud Green Man

The little chap from Retaud is crowned with and chewing on ivy leaves. Such figures may hark back to classical sculptures of Dionysos, like this Roman copy of a Greek work from the Glyptotek, Copenhagen :



Fig 85 : Dionysos, Glyptotek, Copenhagen

(Note the snake emerging from the god's hair), or they may come to us via images such as this one from an urn for ashes from Chiusi :



Fig 86 : Female funeral urn from Chiusi, 1st – 2nd c BC, Glyptotek, Copenhagen

And another example from Cercles, in the Perigord :



Fig 87 : Classic GM, Cercles

Many marginal Romanesque images of the type known as “obscène” in past generations may be echoes of apotropaic art : talismans to ward off evil, such as can be found in all places and times. See Anthony Weir’s site, for further examples :

<http://www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/lust.htm>

Or this head from Retaud, near Saintes :



Fig 88 : Apotropaic head from Retaud

The style takes us back to memories of Gorgons’ heads from archaic Greek sculpture.

Objects such as money bags or wine barrels, so frequently seen decorating medieval churches in South-West France are usually associated with sinners : misers or drunkards. Their origin, however, may be traceable to attributes of pagan deities. The purse is part of Mercury’s paraphernalia, the tun belongs to Dionysos or, in Gaul, to Sucellus. Meanwhile, Dionysos’ thyrsus – his staff topped with a pine cone – might be the origin of any of the thousands of depictions of cones in Romanesque sculpture, as might his vines and wreathed tendrils.

More prosaic objects which enrich our understanding of everyday life in Roman and Romanesque times are depicted on Roman monuments and Romanesque churches. When comparing images from the two cultures it is tempting to see the influence of the former on the latter :



Fig 89 :Reims, Gallo-Roman cobbler



Fig 90 :Sens, Gallo-Roman fuller treading cloth



Fig 91 :Vézelay, Meeting between Saints



Fig 92 :Vézelay, The Mystic Mill

In conclusion, I have tried to combine some of the best-known and most recognized transformations of Pagan to Christian images with other, less obvious suggestions drawn from the iconography surrounding the cults of Mithras, Dionysos and Sabazios. Such inferences can only be tentative, but I hope they may throw some light on a few of the more obscure and puzzling elements to be found in Romanesque imagery.

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