



## THE INDIAN INFLUENCE ?

### Column-swallowers,

kirttimukhas, kalas

and foliage-spewers

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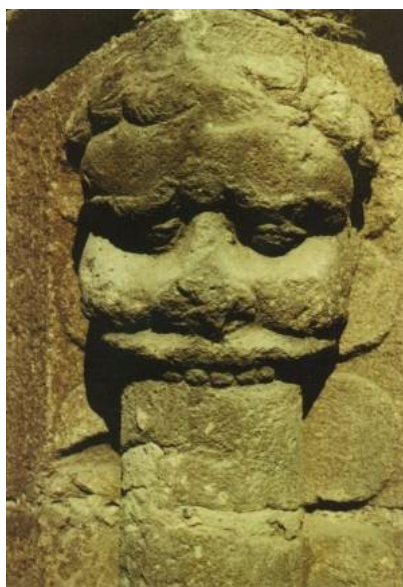
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*Door-capital, Puente la Reina (Navarra), Spain*

I had thought that the striking and puzzling but comparatively rare motif which I dubbed the **column-swallower** for lack of a better term (column-sucker, column-biter, column-spewer) might have had some connection with the [exhibitionist](#) theme - but later began to think that I was making a twentieth-century, Freudian connection which was inappropriate. It might be seen as a logical extension of the 'tongue-sticker' motif.

Some French observers have thought that column-swallowers represented Gluttony - but they are too decorative to be sinful and there are no accompanying agents of retribution such as are often associated with representations and symbols of sin.

But what could this motif mean, and where did it come from ? The most likely general explanation of the motif is that it represents the danger of the forces of evil damaging (eating away at) the structure, the fabric and the standing of the Church - which is why they feature mainly on doorways and on the tops of important columns. This does not exclude a secondary reference to auto-fellation, because Romanesque sculptors delighted in *double-ententes*.

It was only on reading Mercia MacDermott's excellent ***EXPLORE GREEN MEN*** (Heart of Albion Press, 2003) that I began to see that the image of the column-swallower was closely allied to that of the Foliage-spewer (one of the types of 'Green Man'), to which Mercia MacDermott convincingly attributes an Indian origin.

The earliest known Western Christian example of column-swallowers/spewers appear, like the [male exhibitionist](#), in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript (British Library Harley 76, f.8v, f.10).



click for a large photo



Romanesque 'cul-de-lampe' beneath the dome of the 12th century church at Civray (Vienne).

Significantly, they are upside-down on two of four columns separating Canon Tables (of New Testament concordance). They are spewing or swallowing the groins of vaults. None that I have seen in stone do this: they disgorge or engorge the columns, a more practical arrangement and more satisfying to the eye. This strongly suggests that the illuminator of the manuscript had not seen an example in stone now lost or destroyed. The earlier or contemporaneous *Book of Kells* has an arch-biting beast extending from a canon-table column, which may also be an inspiration - as of course are the beasts which bite the ends of large initial letters on manuscript pages.

The motif is unknown in Classical art - like the Foliage-spewer whose earliest manifestations in stone are early or immediately pre-Romanesque (e.g. a 10th century font at Guarbecque in the Pas-de-Calais which has two beast-heads spewing foliage on two of its corners). Foliate masks and heads are, of course common in Classical art, the head of (or crowned by) leaves being associated with deities, especially those associated with woodland and forest. Although a head on the 4th or 5th century sarcophagus of Saint Abre in Poitiers has tendrils of foliage issuing from its nostrils via a small pair of cornucopiæ, it is not really a foliage-spewer in the way that hundreds of Romanesque and post-Romanesque carvings are. Apotropaic, tongue-protruding Medusa or Gorgon heads with writhing snakes were also common in classical times. In the church of Saint-Hilaire in Poitiers is an eleventh-century snake-spewer, which might be a forerunner of the foliage-spewer and linked to the pictures of evil people spewing toads in the 9th/10th century Spanish "Beatus" commentary on the Book of Revelations.

**feedback**

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developed from this website.



The above example on a font in Lullington (Somerset) is one of a band of linked foliage-spewers, while the example below from the 12th century Winchester Bible shows a highly-decorative feline head separating two Biblical scenes - one of which (on the right) is the Harrowing of Hell or the overthrow of Satan by Christ.



At Ballintubber Abbey in county Mayo there is a fine, late development of the motif in the form of a toothy, feline, Gorgon-like head spewing linked snakes.

Foliage-spewers occur as frequently on roof-bosses as on capitals, and the example below, also 12th century, can be seen under the entrance-archway to the chapter house at the Abbey of St George, Saint-Martin-de-Boscherville (*Seine-Maritime*). It has a humanoid head, and apart from the stylised foliage issuing from a jawless mouth, there is also the upside-down-pine-cone or bunch-of-grapes motif which Mercia MacDermott shows to have originally been the lotus bud associated with *kirtimukhas* - demons which appear in various different Hindu and Buddhist myths and legends - in India and South-east Asia.



(It is not a pineapple, which is a South American bromeliad.)

The poetic term *kirttimukha* means *Face of Glory*, and *kirttimukhas* have monstrous (often feline) faces, with bulging eyes and a wide mouth (usually jawless) swallowing foliage, flowers or ribbons of beads - an attribute they borrowed from a much earlier motif, the foliage- or lotus-spewing *makara*, a mythical sea-monster with which they often appear.



*Two jawless kirttimukha images swallowing or disgorging lotus-buds.*



The two motifs are conflated and confused: the images above came from the Web when I typed *kirttimukha* in the *Google* search-box. Both were labelled *makara*. **Explore Green Men**, however, provides a fifth-century example from Cave n° 1 at Ajanta which shows the two type of monster/demon engorging and disgorging necklaces or beads, between which is a stylised lotus-bud.



*Photograph © Benoy B. Behl*





*Foliage-spewing beast (shown upside-down) at Montmoreau (Charente)*



*Bearded seated figure flanked by two kirttimukha-like lions at Neuvy-Saint-Sépulcre (Indre)*



*A bicorporeal dragon (symbolising Hell) swallowing a damned soul at Civaux (Vienne)*

*Makaras* and *kirttimukhas* can also be found amongst a riot of sculptures on the famous 10th-11th century Khajuraho temples in Madhya Pradesh.

Outside India, demons known as *kalas* are frequent in Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia. They appear often over the doorways of entrance pavilions as Guardians with disembodied head (*compare the Boscherville roof-boss above*) and bulging eyes, a frightening row of upper teeth, and (not always) ribbons of flowers, foliage or pearls disappearing into their open mouths. The mythic *kala* devours all in his path, serving as a reminder that everything in the natural world - represented again by the foliage - is eventually consumed by time. Thus, like *kirttimukhas*, they are associated with eclipses

and referred to as (amongst other things) sun- or moon-eaters, and - intriguingly - Devourers of Time. This one (below) is a 9th century fragment from Central Java.



This one (below) at one of the many temples in the astounding complex on the Plain of Bagan in Burma has foliage (?) coming from the sides of its mouth in decorative arcs...



*photos © Jörg Lippmann*



..while the Kala above grips the tendrils snaking out of the sides of his mouth from behind amazing teeth with very human hands.





*Details of doorway, Saint-Hilaire-la-Croix (Puy-de-Dôme)*

Kalas are associated with Shiva, for one legend attributes the birth of an original Kala to Shiva's masturbation into the sea, where his semen was swallowed by a huge fish which gave birth to the sea-monster. Attempts by the gods to destroy Kala are unsuccessful until Shiva finally conquers him, as illustrated in the sculptures below at Prasat Narai in Thailand, and Bantea Srei, Cambodia.



*photo © [Asger Møllerup](#)*



An Indian kirtimukha from [esoterx.com](http://esoterx.com)



It is not difficult to see similarities between the Southern Asian demons and the [monsters](#) that decorate Romanesque churches: the mouths, the teeth, the eyes, the manes or crests. (Similar toothy monsters occur in 12th century Persian illustrations of Hell, where sinners are attacked by snakes and scorpions.) The three examples above are roughly contemporaneous with or only slightly earlier than the Romanesque period, and derive from a common Indian source, such as Ajanta.

Moreover, it is important to realise that Hindu art is as symbolic as Romanesque Christian art, though the symbolism is, necessarily, different. Motifs travel very easily from one symbolic art to another, though the interpretations may be diametrically opposed. This accounts to some extent for the pervasive ambiguities of Romanesque art.





*Detail of doorway, Chadénac (Charente-Maritime)*



*Detail of doorway, Civray (Vienne)*  
[click for another photo](#)





*Detail of doorway, Périgné (Deux-Sèvres)*



Rosa G. Nieves

*External capital, Villavega de Aguilar (Palencia), Spain*







[click for a](#)

[larger photo](#)

*Nave-capitals, Cunault (Maine-et-Loire)*

The last picture (above) returns us to the original subject of this essay: the column-swallower/sucker. Tempting though it is to see it as Sin Devouring Time (as well as substance and support), it is safer to see it as an extension of the foliage-spewer/swallower - as in another page from the Winchester Bible, separating two scenes from the life of David (murdering bear and lion).



More graphic is this charming tympanum at Fritwell (Oxfordshire) illustrated in *Explore Green Men*, where foliage has been replaced with palm-trees. These two affronting beasts - which look only very slightly like *makaras* - are, however, not mere foliage-spewers, but symbols of the Grace of God triumphing over the beastly. Palm-trunks sprout from their mouths in a manner not unlike the 'column-spewers' in the Anglo-Saxon [manuscript](#), and between them is something very like a lotus bud on a column or candlestick - symbolising divinity and eternal life.



*Fritwell: photo © Ruth Wylie*

On the Fritwell tympanum is an iconographic confluence of all the themes mentioned here, and we can now see the enigmatic column-swallower in an iconographic context extending back to India in the third century BC.

The connection is more luxuriously illustrated by this repaired capital from Toulouse cathedral, now in the Musée des Augustins, and photographed for the museum by Daniel Martin.



(click [here](#) for an article on variants of foliage-spewers/swallowers)

The column-swallower (below) on a door-capital at Stanton-St-Quintin (Wiltshire) has a distinctly oriental appearance with its strange head-dress and protuberant eyes;



photo © John Harding

it and the significant examples at [Puente la Reina](#) (Navarra), [Avington](#) (Berkshire), [Elkstone](#) (Gloucestershire) and in Cormac's Chapel, Rock of Cashel (Tipperary) lack a lower jaw, just like a *kirttimukha*.





[click for a larger photo & nearby foliage-spewer](#)

While exhibitionists rarely appear on capitals, column-swallowers (for obvious reasons) never appear on corbels. But a male and megaphallic exhibitionist figure on a capital in the church of [St Peter's, Northampton](#) is being swallowed feet-first by a monster representing the jaws of Hell, suggesting a visual (if not an iconographic) connection between the motifs of column-swallower and exhibitionist.

And one fine example of a column-swallower extends a disembodied foliate arm with a hand into its ear in a gesture reminiscent of some *sheela-na-gigs*.



[click to enlarge](#)

*Door-capital, Saint-Romans-lès-Melle (Deux-Sèvres)*

Column-swallowers also occur in ornamental groups, one of the finest examples of which graces the rose window of the very French church of **Barfreston** in Kent. Another group form a roof-boss at Elkstone in Gloucestershire.



[click to see window](#)

While we might regret that we do not know quite what the column-swallower "means", it is very exciting to notice and discover the parallels and possible influences - which almost certainly were not all known to the sculptors.



*This capital at Javarzay (Deux-Sèvres) illustrates an interesting parallel.*



*A font at South Wootton (Norfolk).*



[click to enlarge](#)



*An extraordinary example in a Carinthian cloister*

Column-suckers are amongst the most bizarre and exotic of Romanesque motifs, and their Indian appearance - though not provable - is an indication of the breadth and depth of the images available to the sculptors of the time. Trade between India and Europe had been continuous at least since Alexander the Great's ill-fated expedition to India, and its products - especially pepper - were greatly prized. Indian astronomy received Greek ideas. Christian thought and practice owed as much to monastic Buddhism as to neo-Platonic philosophy and Mithraism. And as early as the 8th century, the Buddhist liturgy for the dead had absorbed features from Christianity: Titsang (Lord of The Underworld) was depicted as descending, Christ-like, into Hell to redeem the damned.



*A very Oriental variation on the theme at Echebrune (Charente-Maritime); compare with [Chadenac](#) nearby.*

*Click for a large picture of another at [Saint-Hilaire-la-Croix](#) in Auvergne.*

On the other hand, the example at Saint-Marcel (below) is almost toothless, and has very human ears.



[click for more](#)

*One of several column-swallowers on the high windows of the [apse](#) at Saint-Marcel (Indre)*

At Saint-Mary-Redcliffe in Bristol there are three or more column-suckers without teeth, one of them feline but the others humanoid. This should be considered a natural development of the motif and a hint that perhaps a specific sin is illustrated.



[click for more](#)

But should anyone doubt the influence of India on Romanesque sculpture, via the Muslim caliphates, they should consider the doorway of the 12th century church at Sant Joan de les Abadesses in Spain. Here, quite apart from very Indian looking masks and foliage, the **elephants** are depicted with amazing accuracy. . As late as the 18th century, few people in Europe knew what an elephant looked like, as witness Dr Johnson's entry in his famous Dictionary.



[click to enlarge](#)

*Sant Joan de les Abadesses (Girona)*

In 1960 the American scholar Millard B. Rogers published a study of Indian influence on the Romanesque sculpture of the [Pilgrim Roads](#) between Poitiers and Santiago de Compostela. The curious and enquiring travelled the ancient routes over the centuries along with the merchants, monks and missionaries. And we should not forget that Ireland, which had a brief but decisive cultural influence in Western Europe way beyond its size and sophistication, was more remote and inhospitable to the subjects of the Byzantine Empire than was India.



*Three of the six magnificent triple transept-capitals, Colombers (Vienne)*





*Saint-Savinien (Charente)*



*Izon (Gironde)*





*Wells (Somerset)*



*Mathieu (Calvados) repainted in the 19th century*

[Click to see column-swallowers](#)  
and the whole encrusted front of a Romanesque church in Saintonge ►  
(Western France).





Another late adaptation of the motif.  
Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 134, f. 98r ('Lucifer accompanied by lesser devils').  
Livre de la Vigne nostre Seigneur. France, circa. 1450-1470



**Below are links to three articles about connections between Anglo-Saxon England and Southern India.**

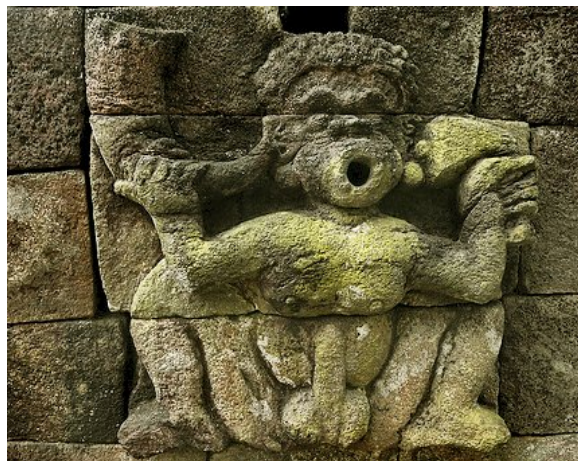
**King Alfred sent a delegation to the sub-continent in the 9th century.**

<https://www.caitlingreen.org/.../04/king-alfred-and-india.html>

<http://scribbled.wikidot.com/sighelm>

[http://www.peppertrail.com/inner.php?menu\\_id=3&sm1\\_id=30&index\\_id=1](http://www.peppertrail.com/inner.php?menu_id=3&sm1_id=30&index_id=1)

*This page is greatly expanded on the [CD-ROM](#) developed from this website.*



*What are we to make of this 15th century carving at Candi Sukuh in Java which, apart from the typical Hindu hair-style, could have come from a 12th century church in France ?*

[Click to download:](#)

ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHITECTURE

by E.P.Evans

an excellent and comprehensive book

from



**Click [here](#)**

*to read a PDF document from the same site about the 'Green Man' motif in West Africa and a claim that Kirttimukhas went from Europe to Asia rather than the other way round.*



*Crowland Abbey, Lincolnshire, photographed by Tina Negus.*

**More photographs of column-swallowers  
all © and by courtesy of Tina Negus:**

- [Pons \(Charente\)](#), Passage Saint-Jacques
- [Pouzauges-le-Vieux \(Vendée\)](#), painted interior capital
- [Eastleach Turville \(Gloucestershire\)](#)
- [Ledbury \(Herefordshire\)](#), North Door

**updated December 2020**

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