

MONSTERS and MYTHICAL BEASTS IN ROMANESQUE ART

This is the Narbonne Arch, now in the Cloisters Museum, New York, from whose site I have quoted the first picture and the explanation, below :



Fig 1 : THE NARBONNE ARCH, Cloisters Museum, New York

This intricately carved arch is said to have come from a twelfth-century church in Narbonne, southwestern France. It is composed of seven blocks of marble on which are carved eight fantastic beasts, comprising an abbreviated visual bestiary.

Moving from left to right, we see: a manticore with a man's face, a lion's body, and a scorpion's tail; a pelican, who pierces her own breast so that her blood feeds her young, symbolizing Christ's death and resurrection; a basilisk, a cross between a cock and a scorpion that can kill with its looks; a harpy luring men to their doom with her beautiful voice; a griffin, which has the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion; an amphisbaena or dragon, which can form its body into a circle; a centaur with drawn bow; and a lion, who erases his tracks with his tail to elude hunters, symbolizing

Christ's incarnation. All of these creatures, whether imaginary or realistic, were familiar to many people during the Middle Ages, and all had their specific lessons to impart.

It is an exceptionally well-preserved and encyclopedic example of monsters and fabulous beasts in Romanesque sculpture, an invaluable resource for their classification.

In the Bishops' Museum, Trier, there are two splendid arches, very different in style but similarly decorated with birds and beasts :



Fig 2 : Arch in The Bishops' Museum, Trier

The beasts here are more or less of this world, with the exception of the Griffin, just left of the highest point. However each bird or beast stands in a foliate roundel with a Green Beast spewing out rinceaux and serving as links. The Green beasts are cat or lion masks, upside down and downside

up, turn and turn about. In all, there are ten roundels, each with its bird or beast.

This arch, however, has a partner, placed at right angles, on which four more fabulous creatures are displayed :



Fig 3 : Arch in The Bishops' Museum, Trier

On the left we see : an angel, a winged lion, and a unicorn. These are followed by a fish, another quadruped and three more birds as well as a winged bull, seen more clearly on the next slide :



Fig 4 : Arch in The Bishops' Museum, Trier, viewed from the right

It seems that there were originally four of these arches, forming a kind of stage area which the curator of the museum calls a Lettner, or rood-screen.

The explanation can be translated as :

Southern half of a Rood Screen from East choir in Trier Cathedral

On the arches of the rood-screen are depictions of various beasts as symbols of Christ, the Church, Man and the Devil. The basis for understanding them is the so-called "Physiologus", the oldest and most widely-read bestiary of the Christian Middle-Ages. Frequently expanded during this period, it was interpreted as moralising in comparison with biblical texts and it was an important basis for the symbolism of animals in the plastic arts.

In Medieval cathedrals, churches, or monasteries, the rood screen was largely used as a stage for readings, singing, blessings, and for the presentation of reliquaries. During church services, the rood-screen divided

the people's area in the nave from the area for the clerics and the choir. The East half of the rood screen of Trier Cathedral was a large area with central steps and two side altars (for Saints Katherine and Agnes).

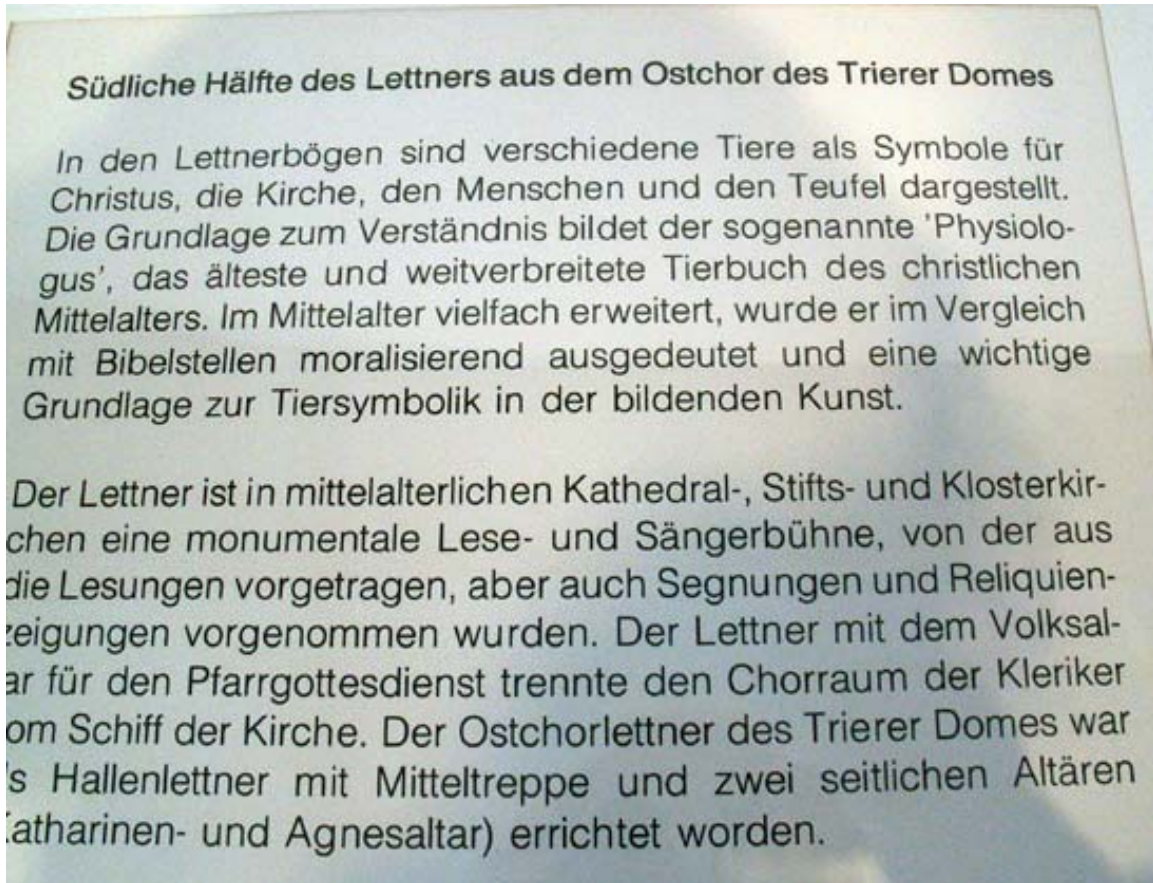


Fig 5 : The notice accompanying the Trier arches



Fig 6 : Green Man capital supporting the right side of the second arch

A small Green Man spews from his mouth two straight stems which end in leaves and curl round the capital to embrace two birds and a quadruped. On the first arch there are similar capitals with no foliate mask but naked cherubs among the greenery.

A Green Man in a similar position is seen on a tombstone dated c. 1140 by Zarnecki, from St Peter's Church, Northampton :



Fig 7 : Green Man from Northampton
Green Man from Trier arch

Fig 8 :

In fig 7 we can see that the Green Man is the source of all the vegetation which forms a central hub below his mouth and then spreads out in all directions. Fig 8 is less obviously associated with the arch above it and its decoration, but clearly stands in a key position to it as one of its two supports. Moreover, the birds and animals are part of the same register as the creatures inhabiting the spirals of foliage.



Fig 9 : Green Man on tombstone, c.1140, from St Peter's Church,
Northampton

This illustration is taken from the catalogue of the 1984 exhibition of
English Romanesque Art 1066-1200, at the Hayward Gallery, London.

The Narbonne arch is a sober production, very much focused on the allegorical aspect of the fabulous beasts depicted, with decorative foliage kept to a minimum and confined to the frieze below the animals, apart from a few foliate tails.

The Trier arch, by comparison, is a riot of foliate decoration inhabited by birds, beasts and an angel. It has, moreover, a number of Green Beast heads forming an integral part of the foliate decoration (as seen on the Shobdon arches, for example), as well as associated motifs on the capitals.

The tombstone from Northampton, classified as an Insular production by Zarnecki, could be seen as bridging the two extremes. While totally different in scale, use and designation, and from a third country and people, it is as exuberant in its foliate decoration as the Trier arches and is similarly endowed with a Green Man as source of the rinceaux.

Where should we look for the first arches endowed with birds and animals among loops of greenery? To the Byzantine triumphal arches derived from classical Rome? To the Lombard kingdom? The Abbey of Pomposa near Ferrara has an atrium or narthex with three arches that seem to hark back to the Byzantine era but may also have been an influence for arches such as we see in Trier.

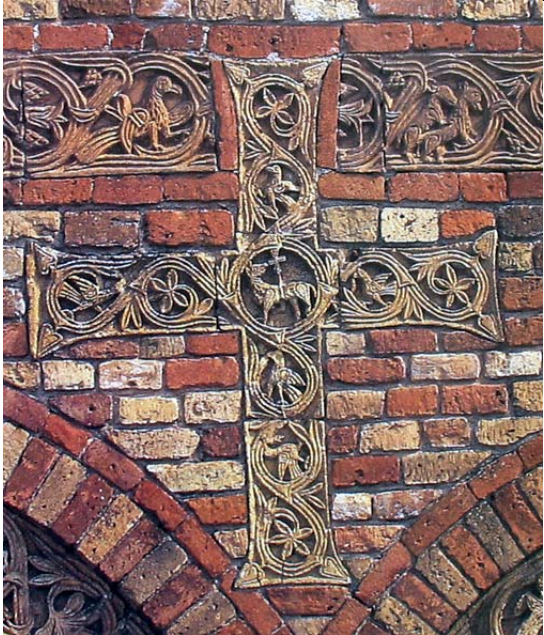


because it includes a designation in which we recognize with him as it. His extensive body of work and numerous imitations even influencing artists such as Pisano and Arnolfo di Cambio.

All sculptors worked on the standing baptismal font designed in Lucca, among them the Master Roberto, whose work is passed down to us in the form of the bowl. In the center of the bowl is the figure of the richly carved font.

Stone Lucca, 11th century
Baptismal font - 115

Pisa, San Matteo, detail of the facade, showing the arches in the second story.



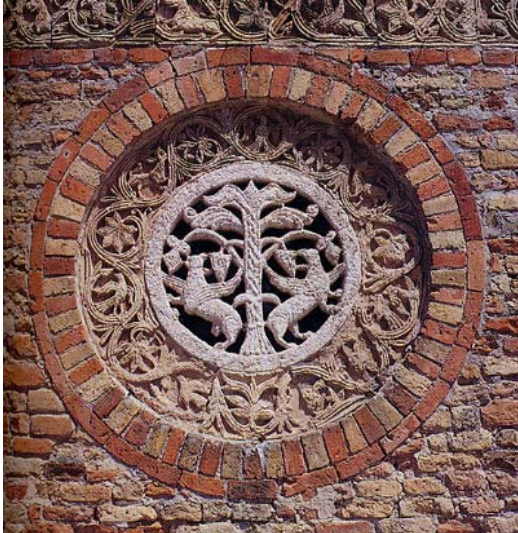


Fig 10 : a series of pictures of Pomposa Abbey, second quarter of the 11th c., taken from “Romanesque” by Rolf Toman

Toman calls Pomposa "a truly lovely example of Lombard architecture". "The triumphal arch motif on the narthex" (and the campanile) he says, "are reminiscent of Old St Peter's in Rome". The workers he presumed to come from Ravenna, the master having signed his name, Mazulo. There is a Manticore on the central arch and a centaur on the right arch - otherwise the creatures in the spirals of foliage are less fabulous than natural. I am somewhat reminded of certain sculptures from San Pedro de la Nave, Zamora, such as the friezes above the Sacrifice of Isaac and Daniel capitals :



Fig 11 : Sacrifice of Isaac, capital from San Pedro del la Nave, Zamora, VII c.
c. Fig 12 : Daniel, capital from San Pedro del la Nave, Zamora, VII c.

The following quotation is from the Pomposa Abbey web site :

At Pomposa, the façade bas-reliefs have one idea in common : man in his temporal and eternal dimension, and the fight between good and evil.

The union between eagle, lion and peacock symbolizes man in his earthly existence, composed of body (the lion) and soul (the eagle). The peacock, with its gem-packed feathers and its meat, considered incorruptible, represents the yearning for heavenly beatitude.

The sun and the moon represent the passing of time that revolves around the blessing hand of the Eternal Father. In the cross on the right-hand side is the lamb of God, the restorer of the heavenly kingdom. In opposition to the crosses is the dragon, the symbol of evil, and an animal that looks like a panther, the first beast of the Apocalypse.

Whether we agree with this interpretation or not, it is nevertheless clear that the Pomposa sculptures are part of the genre of animal allegory and moral lessons derived from the Bestiary.

(To be continued)