Mawming and Mooning

Towards an understanding of medieval carvings and their carvers

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Preface

Look at the inside or outside a medieval church anywhere in Europe and you are likely to see humans and animals looking back at you. Mostly these carvings are just heads or masks. Some are naturalistic, some are more stylised, and some are downright grotesque. While some – such as heads of kings and queens – have the impassive features characteristic of royal portraits of the time, others exude vitality. Most are evidence of sculptors with an excellent command of their craft.

Such carvings typically decorate the doorways, windows, friezes and corbel tables of the exterior and the corbels, roof bosses and arch springers of the interior – although plenty are just hidden away in less likely locations. Predictably most of the ones that have survived are in stone although enough also survive in wood to show that they probably once outnumber their stony brethren. Overall, they are the most prolific examples of medieval sculpture to have come down to us, outnumbering more formal medieval art perhaps a hundred-fold.

Their abundance – and the skill of their execution together with the vitality of the depictions – make it all the more surprising that individually and collectively these carvings are all-but unknown. With the exception of a few studies published in recent decades this wealth of medieval art has been ignored by art historians.

Ignoring for the moment the smaller number of wooden carvings, the best of these carvings require a stone that can be carved fairly readily, takes good detail and – at least for those on the outside of churches – will weather well. In practice oolitic limestones prove to meet these requirements best. Such limestones are quarried in various parts of Europe and, where such quarries are reasonably near rivers, the stone has been transported to churches and cathedrals also situated within moderate distance of navigable waterways. In Britain the oolitic limestones have been quarried along the length of the so-called ‘Jurassic Spine’ which runs from Somerset in the south-west, the Cotswolds, through the northern part of Warwickshire, into Leicestershire and Rutland and thence to Lincolnshire. Such stone is also
encountered in adjoining counties, such as Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire.

In this study the examples will mostly be from Leicestershire and Rutland as these are the ones I have got to know best over the last twenty-five years or so. However most of the remarks could apply to just about any other part of western Europe where medieval carvings are encountered (although dates for specific styles are sometimes earlier on the Continent than in Britain). Someone who knew, say, the carvings of Lincolnshire could produce a version of this study with a much greater number of examples.

While a quick glance at the bibliography of this study might suggest there is a substantial literature on medieval carvings, this is not the case. There have been some excellent studies of specific aspects of such carvings – including studies of the carvings in individual cathedrals and studies of specific motifs (usually so-called ‘Green Men’ but also male and female exhibitionists). While art historians are happy to describe the outward forms of such carvings and to establish dates and provenances (although mostly only for Romanesque examples, not the more abundant Gothic ones), they rarely if ever consider the meaning and significance of the works. Frustratingly, when they do make such attempts they rather too often display a lack of awareness of relevant scholarship outside their own discipline. Attempts by a small number of authors to provide a popular overview have made little attempt to deal with the available scholarship, limited as it is, and therefore lack any depth or rigour.

The only substantial scholarly look at British medieval carvings has been the work of Alex Woodcock, especially his 2005 book, *Liminal Images*. I am, inevitably, indebted to his scholarship. However most of the ideas in this overview were established before I was (somewhat belatedly) made aware of his work.

Although this study makes no claims to be complete, there are several main aims. Part One aims to draw attention to all the published studies by scholars and popular writers known to me (and I am most happy to be informed of any omissions). The opening chapter is a long and somewhat rambling journey through what might be deemed more ‘theoretical’ and historiographical matters, interspersed with some discussions of more specific aspects which allow a more ‘generalised’ insight into medieval mentalities and worldviews. Part Two looks at the range of motifs most commonly encountered. Part Three attempts to illustrate the ways in which the meaning and significance of the carvings may have evolved over the centuries – and also why attempts to pin down such interpretations must always be considered with caution. In a separate document, *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* (Trubshaw 2013b), begins to set out the scope of further research.

Popular writing about medieval carvings – especially Green Men and female exhibitionists – is rather too often dominated by efforts to understand The Meaning of the motif. Sadly this search for a single explanation is shared by some of the academics who have looked at these motifs. As I will discuss in more detail, carvings and motifs are capable of any number of interpretations, both at the time of their creation and most certainly in subsequent centuries. Many of the motifs were chosen because they had ‘slippery’ meanings. One of the first researchers to investigate exhibitionist carvings, Anthony Weir, has in recent years bemoaned what he refers to as ‘explanationism’ (pers. comm.).

Opposite: Two splendid hood stops on the doorways of Ryhall church, Rutland.

*Please note that in the remaining captions I omit ‘Leicestershire’ and ‘Rutland’ in captions, unless confusion might otherwise arise.*
'Explanationism' can take many forms. At its most simplistic this can be an attempt to identify a didactic Christian exegesis – seeking 'stories in stone'. This has a nihilist counterpart which deems the carvings to have no meaning on the basis as few of the carvings have a discernible didactic message. More commonly, explanationisms attempt to identify apotropaic ('evil-averting') or other talismanic functions. Equally common is a tendency to identify carvings as evidence for the covert veneration of pagan deities. Other such 'nothing but' explanationisms include either dismissing the carvings as representations of entities seen in nightmares or hallucinations, or seeing the carvings as representations of imaginary demons. These explanations have two main variants – either the carvings were put there to frighten away the Devil, or depict demons exorcised by the rites of baptism. The contradictory nature of these explanations (amplified by the presence of such 'demons' inside churches as well as out side), reveals that they are more imaginary as the monsters themselves.

Contrary to modern literary culture where ideas can 'refer' specifically to other ideas, medieval sculptors lived in an oral world where everything was in a process of constant recollection and renewal. Oral societies are eternally emergent, not an accretion of texts. Think of oral societies as being like ever-flowing water in a river, while literate societies are like the ever-deepening sediments.

Far from being amenable to simplistic explanationisms, Gothic carvings were intentionally created with an excess of 'slippery' meanings. In Chapter Nine I discuss this in more detail. Suffice to say that my concern is less about understanding what the carvings mean but, instead, to understand the culture in which such meanings were created and adapted. As I will discuss in the opening chapter, this is in sharp contrast to an earlier generation of scholars who denied that these carvings had any intentional meaning.

Note that I state that Gothic carvings were created with a slippery meanings. Early Romanesque sculptures seem to be more likely to be illustrations of 'stories in stone (see Chapter Four)'. However by the late Romanesque the motifs have taken on a life of their own, independent of the initial didactic purposes.

This study concentrates on what I have termed 'figurative' carvings. The term encompasses all many of humans, animals and hybrids – indeed anything with eyes! Excluded are the great many carvings of leaves and other foliage, very often carved by the same sculptors. This is not to imply that these were ‘merely leaves’ and did not have a intentional meaning. However, in order to make some progress with the understanding of figurate carvings I have opted to leave foliate carvings for some future phase of study. (However Alex Woodcock devotes a chapter of his book about Exeter Cathedral carvings specifically to the ‘ubiquitous’ leaves, flowers,fruit and stems (Woodcock 2013: Ch. 3).)

Since first drafting this document Lionel Wall sent me a copy of his detailed investigation of the medieval carvings in Rutland and east Leicestershire. His meticulous observation has identified a ‘school’ or lodge of masons seemingly based in Oakham in the late fourteenth and very early fifteenth centuries. Within this lodge the work of three individual masons can be discerned. Lionel has kindly allowed his work to be made available online as a free-to-download PDF. He provides significant insights into some of the motifs – notably the ‘mooning men’ – and an excellent example of what can be achieved by taking a ‘regional’ view of the whole range of motifs being carved. In a number of places I have made reference to his study but make no attempt to summarise his overall approach and arguments.

I have published this as a free-to-download PDF as I regard this as a fairly provisional basis for discussion. I welcome all comments and suggestions, with a view to producing a revised edition in due course.

* www.hoap.co.uk/demon_carvers_and_mooning_men_v4.pdf
‘Project Gargoyle’

This study is published to further the aims of Project Gargoyle. The published description and objectives of Project Gargoyle are:

Leicestershire and Rutland churches are home to a wealth of surviving medieval sculpture, predominately of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. However this has hitherto not been systematically recorded or studied. Project Gargoyle was set up in Spring 2009 to photograph, document and study such carvings in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Photographs and associated descriptions will be stored electronically in the Leicestershire and Rutland Historic Environment Record (HER) maintained by Leicestershire County Council, the successor to the former Sites and Monument Records (SMR). In the future some or all of this information will be accessible online through English Heritage’s ‘Heritage Gateway’ and other web sites.

(Trubshaw 2010b: 3)

Project Gargoyle was set up in 2009 with an initial committee comprising Richard Clark, Kathy Elkin, Mike Hawkes, Peter Liddle, Alan McWhirr, Graham Walley and Helen Wells. Soon after Liz Blood was appointed as the Project Co-ordinator.

In 2009 the majority of the committee members were employed by Leicestershire County Council and the formation of Project Gargoyle was formally endorsed by the Council. Kathy Elkin and Peter Liddle have since left the County Council but remain on the committee as representatives of the Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Fieldwork Group. Jill Bourn has replaced the late Alan McWhirr as the representative of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society. Mike Hawkes has liaised with the Dioceses of Leicester and Peterborough, who both support the aims of the project. An ever-increasing number of volunteers who are steadily photographing and documenting the churches of Leicestershire and Rutland, this study would not have come about.

However the opinions expressed in this study are my own and are not necessarily shared by other members of the Project.
My interest in medieval carvings was instigated in the late 1980s in part by the writings of Guy Raglan Phillips – but in greater part by the imaginations of the medieval sculptors whose work makes visiting Leicestershire and Rutland churches so full of surprises.

Phillips’ *The Unpolluted God* is now largely forgotten. Many of his ideas were quite simply misinformed. But, back in the 1980s, there were few other books about such carvings and so his work was known to most of the people actively interested in carvings at that time. Without his book – and the substantial involvement of Ian Taylor to publish it – the wealth of medieval art which abounds would have come to my conscious attention very much later.

I am most grateful to all members of the Project Gargoyle committee for their advice and support since 2009. The enthusiasm and dedication of the volunteer photographers has already created an impressive database of photographs and supporting information. Without their work I would not have felt it necessary to prepare this overview and set the stage for later phases of Project Gargoyle which attempt to both enhance this database and use it to gain a more detailed understanding of the sculptures, their sculptors and world-view in which they lived.

Inevitably the ideas expressed in the study have been assisted and influenced by a great many people. I was privileged to have exchanged letters with Kathleen Basford in the last year or two of her life, although we never met. Tina Negus, Anthony Weir and Ruth Wylie have discussed various aspects of medieval carvings with me over the last fifteen to twenty years. Susan Kilby most kindly made available drafts of several so-far unpublished essays and also drawing my attention to various key sources I had overlooked. A large number of other researchers and authors have discussed specific aspects of these sculptures over the last two decades. As already noted in the Preface, Lionel Wall has generously shared his work on the ‘Oakham school’ of late fourteenth century carvings with me. To all of these people I can only offer a collective thank you which fails to do justice the wealth of information acquired in this manner.

My thanks also to several people for helping in more specific ways. John Billingsley lent me his copy of Ian Cooke’s book *Saint Priapus*. Ben Elliot kindly made available a copy of Mary Curtis Webb’s work on twelfth century sculpture. Stephen Pollington offered much-needed advice on Old English words such as *beam*, *treow*, *rood* and *mael*. Shaun Tyas of Paul Watkins Publishing generously supplied a number of titles at an affordable price. Peter Wheatcroft drew my attention to the church guide book for Kibworth.

Susan Kilby and Anthony Weir kindly commented on the first draft of this study. I am most grateful to them for their time and pertinent remarks. Anthony has spent far more time than me researching and writing about carvings, so I am pleasantly reassured that he broadly agrees with my approach.

Finally, thanks to the compiler of the Online Etymology Dictionary (www.etymonline.com) for providing a free resource which seems to closely match OED opinions.

The section on Stoney Stanton tympanum is expanded from an article in the *Leicestershire Historian* No.46 (2010). Descriptions of motifs are based on relevant sections of my *Good Gargoyle Guide* (Trubshaw 2004a) and other previous publications.
Architectural styles

Art historians create obscure terminologies as a necessary short-hand among themselves. However, these can be all-but meaningless to the uninitiated. In case you come across them, here is a summary of the frequently used terms used to refer to the succession of different decorative styles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Saxon</td>
<td>600–1066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanesque (Norman)</td>
<td>1066–1180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>1175–1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early English (Gothic)</td>
<td>1190–1250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geometric (Gothic)</td>
<td>1250–1290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorated (Gothic)</td>
<td>1290–1350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpendicular (Gothic)</td>
<td>1325–1530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tudor</td>
<td>1485–1603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baroque</td>
<td>C17–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Anne</td>
<td>early C18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgian (Neoclassical)</td>
<td>1714–1830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gothic Revival</td>
<td>C19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Crafts</td>
<td>1860s to early C20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do I mean by ‘medieval’?

There are two ways of using the word ‘medieval’. One, beloved of school text books, uses the word to denote the period from the Norman Conquest until sometime around the sixteenth century. The other, more generally adopted by scholars, is to refer to this as the ‘later medieval’ and to use the term ‘early medieval’ to refer to what text books would deem the Anglo-Saxon era. As Continental Europe does not have any counterpart to the Norman Conquest to mark the transition from early to later medieval this broader sense of ‘medieval’ is the only one which works once British history is seen from a less ethnocentric perspective.

I generally retain the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ although not to the exclusion of using the term ‘early medieval’. Generally if I use the word ‘medieval’ unqualified then the broader timescale should be inferred, unless the context is firmly within the later medieval era. However I use phrases such as ‘medieval mentalities’ in an intentionally vague manner, as a way of concisely referring to the wide range of ideas which would have varied as much at any one time as they inevitably did over the centuries.

One thing we can be sure: the people of the time did not think of themselves as ‘medieval’. The entire concept of a ‘Middle Ages’ (in essence, the period between the Roman empire and the Neo-Classical revival) was an invention of Renaissance thinkers who thought the Classical world inherently superior to north European culture. Indeed the stultifying effects of medieval Christian dogma held back thinking for around a thousand years and, from the perspective of world history, northern Europe was indeed a backwater (see Ansary 2009 for an easy-to-read ‘history of the world through Islamic eyes’). However this study of the sculpture of the ‘medieval era’ helps to reveal that popular ideas and worldviews in medieval times might have been considerably more interesting than the better-documented dogmas might suggest!

Opposite: Part of the extensive corbel table at Ryhall.
PART ONE

A summary of scholarly thinking about medieval carvings
Chapter One

Art history or social history?

Despite the sheer abundance of figurative carvings on churches in Britain and Europe – the total number of surviving examples must number hundreds of thousands – little more than a handful of scholarly books have been written about them. But to simply assert that medieval carvings have not been adequately studied by academics and art historians is wrong. However academic interest has mostly been focused on the Romanesque (eleventh and twelfth centuries in Britain; earlier on the Continent) rather than the Gothic (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries).

Since the late nineteenth century there have been systematic studies of Romanesque fonts, tympana and (less systematically) decorated capitals. These studies evolved into the very systematic studies of the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland (CRSBI) which describes itself thus:

The CRSBI is an evolving electronic archive of British and Irish Romanesque stone sculpture. Romanesque sculpture marks a high point of artistic production in Britain and Ireland, corresponding to the boom in high-quality building that followed the Norman Conquest in 1066, and reflecting a new set of links with mainland Europe. A good deal of this sculpture remains in parish churches and cathedrals, houses and halls, castles and museums throughout these isles.

www.crsbi.ac.uk/index.html  downloaded 5 August 2012

The scope of CRSBI is matched by the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture (CASSS) (see www.ascorpus.ac.uk). In the words of its own website:

The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture identifies, records and publishes in a consistent format, English sculpture dating from the 7th to the 11th centuries. Much of this material was previously unpublished, and is of crucial importance in helping identify the earliest settlements and artistic achievements of the Anglo-Saxon/Pre-Norman English. The Corpus documents the earliest Christian field monuments from free-standing carved crosses and innovative decorative elements and furnishings of churches, to humble grave-markers.

www.ascorpus.ac.uk  downloaded 28 January 2013

From the perspective of Project Gargoyle, the bad news is that the CRSBI’s searchable online database has yet to recognise the existence of Leicestershire and Rutland, and
the Leicestershire and Rutland volume of CASSS still awaits publication. The detailed and comprehensive nature of the information for adjoining counties simply adds to the sense of frustration!

By the nature of such early sculpture there is rarely much in the way of historical sources. These two corpuses are therefore in essence ‘archaeological’ – although dating is as likely to be based on stylistic evidence as much as on context. Intriguingly, the stones themselves often offer some of the most interesting evidence – detailed geological examination of the carvings often enables the area from which the stone was quarried to be identified with reasonable accuracy.

The ‘great and the good’

Later medieval sculpture was the subject of a thorough survey published in 1912 by E.S. Prior and A. Gardner as Medieval Sculpture in England. Along with Lawrence Stone’s 1955 study, Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages, these remain the key sources for subsequent researchers. But the emphasis is on full-length figures of the great and the good. Or, more accurately, the comparatively few examples of such full-length figures which survive. The wholesale destruction of monastic churches in the mid-sixteenth century as a consequence of Henry VIII’s Dissolution was followed by widespread iconoclasm in parish churches and cathedrals as the Reformation continued. Almost all the remaining pre-Reformation carvings were lost to the actions of seventeenth century Puritan zealots.

Before the mid-sixteenth century every church in England would have had sculptures – usually in wood – of various saints and all had a life-size depiction of Christ’s crucifixion with two attendant saints (usually Mary and John the Evangelist) above the choir screen – known popularly as the ‘rood screen’ because it supported the ‘rood’ or crucifixion. Cathedrals may have had dozens of depictions of the crucifixion. This wealth of carving was entirely destroyed – no pre-Reformation wooden ‘rood’ survives in Britain. The nearest we have is a badly deteriorated head of Christ from South Cerney, Gloucestershire, now in the British Museum. Similarly there are few pre-Reformation wooden saints – and these need not have come from roods. Stone statues of saints, never part of roods, were mostly decapitated rather than totally smashed. In many case replacement heads have been carved, usually in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In cathedrals, royal chapels and similarly high status churches there were also statues and effigies of archbishops and kings (and sometimes their queens).
relatively small number of such carvings to have survived has ensured that most have received detailed attention from art historians (see Lindley 1995; Lindley and Frangenberg 2000) However such sculptures were created for comparatively few churches, with no surviving examples in Leicestershire or Rutland.

The ‘landed classes’ emulated these effigies in their sepulchral monuments (although, pedantically, priests rather than nobility are depicted in the earliest such effigies). Such sculptures depicting the deceased are found in many churches, with Bottesford in Leicestershire and Exton in Rutland having some exceptional examples. However these have been intentionally excluded these from the scope of Project Gargoyle as they were surveyed and documented in the 1990s by Max Wade Matthews, accompanied by myself as photographer. The results were published as a CD-ROM in 2002 as *Sepulchral Effigies in Leicestershire and Rutland*. Similarly effigies incised on slabs of alabaster were surveyed by F.A. Greenhill and published in 1958.

‘Meaningless and vulgar’

For every surviving medieval sculpture in Britain of a saint or king there are several hundred effigies of landed gentry. And for each of these effigies there are at least a couple of hundred other medieval carvings. It is these ‘other’ carvings – perhaps ten thousand or more in Leicestershire and Rutland alone, and conceivably well in excess of a hundred thousand throughout England – which are the focus of this study.

Were this study to have a wider scope then it would also include the medieval stained glass and wall paintings to be found in some of the three thousand or so English parish churches. As Paul Binski recognised back in 1999, the full extent of these ‘is only beginning to be fathomed’. While surveys, such as those by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments or the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS) are extremely valuable, as Binski notes, they ‘leave open the intellectual agenda’. (Binski 1999: 2)

Why has such an immense quantity of often high quality medieval art been ignored? The nearest there has been to a close look at this material is a book-length study of Romanesque corbels in one region of France. The author of this study, Nurith Kenaan-
Kedar, notes that such sculpture ‘has been almost totally neglected, never interpreted, and usually written off as merely ‘decorative’ or ‘grotesque’.’ (Kenaan-Kedar 1995: 1)

Professor Kenaan-Kedar terms this sculpture ‘marginal’ for two reasons. Firstly, it is located around the roofs (inside or outside) where it is sometimes difficult to see. Secondly, the motifs in some ways equate to the ‘marginalia’ added to medieval manuscripts. While, for reasons I will discuss later, I consider the term ‘marginal sculpture’ less than ideal, it is the terminology consistently used by Kenaan-Kedar.

Such so-called marginal sculptures were, inevitably, present in the same church as ‘official’ carvings of saints and kings. The west facades of cathedrals such as Lincoln, Lichfield, Salisbury and Wells are home to vast arrays of saints and apostles and yet, around them and elsewhere on the buildings’ exteriors, are hosts of these ‘marginal’ sculptures. Likewise inside even a modest parish church there would have been, until the Reformation, a depiction of Christ and, normally, at least two saints above the rood screen. Other statues of saints, most typically the Virgin Mary and St George and often the church’s patronal saint, would have stood near side altars. Sharing the interior with this ‘official’ sculpture would be a mix of marginal sculpture decorating the corbels, capitals, roof bosses and other locations.

Why has this marginal sculpture been consistently ignored? Kenaan-Kedar identifies several overlapping reasons which apply just as much to British examples as to the French ones she is specifically concerned with:

I believe that these attitudes arose at the beginning of the twentieth century during the struggle to establish medieval art as an autonomous chapter of European art history: a struggle that led to a concern with ‘masterpieces’, work produced in leading artistic centres that reflected an articulate, learned culture. (Possibly these works appealed to the tastes of early twentieth-century art historians who came from a similarly elitist background.) The boldly expressive, unstylized imagery of marginal sculpture, which represented protest and transgressed the codes of official culture, whether medieval or modern, was largely ignored. The boldly expressive, unstylized imagery of marginal sculpture, which represented protest and transgressed the codes of
official culture, whether medieval or modern, was largely ignored. Whether dealing with iconography or with formal issues, art historians failed to develop methods for the interpretation of marginal sculpture, firstly because of the absence of pertinent written texts, and secondly perhaps because of their own aesthetic ideals and judgements.

(Kenaan-Kedar 1995: 1–2)

Predictably, nineteenth century art historians looking at these carvings sought a Biblical exegesis or a Christian moralistic message. Finding neither they deemed them meaningless and vulgar so best ignored (indeed a small number would seem especially vulgar to Victorian sensibilities). This is largely the policy adopted by Nikolaus Pevsner in his Buildings of England series as some (but by no means all) Romanesque sculpture in Leicestershire and Rutland gets a mention but he rarely refers to the wealth of later Gothic carvings. Predictably the authors of the typical leaflet or booklet describing the history of the church (fairly ubiquitous about twenty or more years ago) similarly ignore the carvings. Such paper-based publications have largely given way to various web sites and, thanks to increasing awareness of carvings in the last two decades, sometimes such information includes photographs of some of the more dramatic grotesques. However, if any interpretation of these carvings is offered it is usually based on popular misunderstandings, notably the notion that some of these are evidence for ‘pagan survivals’ or are there to ‘frighten away the Devil’.

One of my favourite misunderstandings dates back to 1842 when George Lewis described one of the corbels at Kilpeck in Herefordshire as representing a fool, noting that ‘the cut in his chest, the way to his heart, denotes that it is always open and to all alike.’ (Lewis 1942, cited Andersen 1977: 10). All seemingly plausible – but take a look at the photograph of that corbel...

**The invention of a pagan past**

The idea that medieval masons were carving ‘pagan’ motifs on churches as late as the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries is widespread outside academe. The reasons for this popular misunderstanding are intriguing and offer interesting insights into the thinking of nineteenth century folklorists. I recounted the key aspects of this in *Explore Folklore* and
have included this summary as Appendix One. In brief, the misunderstanding of an early eighteenth century religious ‘rant’ led to the idea that folk customs were fossilised survivors of a pagan, pre-Christian religion.

Despite the suggestion being resolutely contested by some of leading folklorists of the time, by the end of the nineteenth century this fallacy had entered into popular awareness outside the realms of folklore studies. This mistaken myth was subsequently ‘adopted’ by such influential early twentieth century writers as D.H. Lawrence, Robert Graves and Margaret Murray. By the 1960s this myth was being accepted as ‘fact’.

Far from keeping paganism alive, Gothic carvings reveal just how thoroughly paganism had been transformed during the centuries of Christianisation. Dragons – and, just maybe (see Chapter Thirteen), female exhibitions – are the best candidates for motifs which originate before the conversion. But their presence in Gothic churches is not because of the original meanings, but because of meanings developed within a Christian worldview.

Contrary to Murray and the great many writers influenced by her, there was no dichotomy between early Christianity and a supposed ‘Old Religion’. Instead there was a complex blend of pagan practices into Christian rites, on the one hand, and Christian ‘words of power’ into magical protective and healing charms. (See also Woodcock 2005:14–16 for a more detailed dismissal of ‘pagan survivals’.)

But, just when a more sensible understanding of folklore was being promulgated by folklorists in the 1970s, a new generation of popular writers revived the myth in the 1980s. Several of these picked up on a 1939 article by Lady Raglan which, amid much muddled thinking, gave ‘Green Men’ their name. Largely as a result of a TV programme and tie-in book from 1990 Green Men are now commonly regarded as evidence for pagan gods ‘hidden’ in churches. I will return to this in Part Three but for the moment suffice to say that, far from being ‘pagan survivals’, these Green Men were most probably intended by their carvers to signify the entirely Christian concept of the Resurrection.

Across a gulf of class condescension

In the words of the historian E.P. Thompson (1924–93) in the nineteenth century British folklore was collected by ‘parsons and genteel antiquarians… across a gulf of class condescension’ (Thompson 1979: 6). This gulf is not specifically British – it is also clearly evident in the writings of the French art historian Emile Mâle (1862–1954) who haughtily thought that no medieval art could be based on vernacular (‘folk’) ideas. Instead, argued Mâle, the subject matter of such works must always have been allegorical representations of the Church’s formal teachings (which, being in Latin, were assumed to be either inaccessible or, even if translated into sermons, beyond the comprehension of mere masons). However, as these ‘marginal’ carvings made no sense whatsoever from the perspective of Latin texts then Mâle deemed them to be meaningless. This was consistent with his view that naïve and illiterate craftsmen could not have bestowed any articulate or metaphorical meaning to their work.

Mâle’s view was not unique. The renowned keeper of the manuscript department of the British Museum in the later part of the nineteenth century, Edward Augustus Bond, similarly thought that the marginalia in medieval manuscripts were little more than meaningless doodles (Camille 1992: 31). While Mâle’s view of medieval sculptors may seem remarkably contemptuous today, his views remained essentially uncontested until the 1970s. The trailblazer for a sensible approach to such works was the American-based scholar Meyer Schapiro (1904–96). He argued that both the form and location of such figurative carvings were part of a deliberate message.

Schapiro’s approach was followed by the pioneering art historian Michael Camille (1958–2002), whose 1992 study of marginalia in illuminated medieval manuscripts also considers marginal sculpture; I will discuss Camille’s important contribution at the end of this chapter. Kenaan-
Kedarnotes that two leading figures in cultural studies – Michel Foucault and Umberto Eco – also seem to have been influenced by Schapiro’s thinking. She then sets out her own approach, which I fully agree with:

I believe that marginal sculpture is an autonomous artistic language with its own vocabulary and syntax. I will try to decipher these images by investigating their specific signs and symbols on the one hand, and by studying possible historical situations in which the sculpture could have been created on the other.

(Kenaan-Kedar 1995: 3; 5–6).

 Probably the first researcher to follow Schapiro’s approach was Jørgen Andersen who published a pioneering study of female exhibitionists – such as the one at Kilpeck – under the title The Witch on the Wall in 1977. This study is focused on examples in the British Isles but, when Andersen discovered that there were also examples in northern France, he encouraged Anthony Weir and James Jerman to investigate. Based initially on the pioneering work of Henri Crozet, one of the first to look seriously at carved corbels, Weir and Jerman looked at Romanesque sculpture in northern and western France and northern Spain. Their study, Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches, was published in 1986. Weir’s subsequent research has confirmed that both male and female exhibitionists were originally part of a set of carvings depicting the Seven (or Eight – it depends who’s counting!) Deadly Sins. However such eye-catching motifs seemingly took on a life of their own. (I discuss female exhibitionists more fully in Chapter Eight.)

**More than one meaning**

While recognising that trying to understand the ‘messages’ in medieval sculpture presents numerous difficulties, Schapiro’s belief in an ‘inherent significance’ to most carvings (or at least to sets of carvings, such as the corbels in a nave or aisle, or gargoyles around a roof) is precisely what this study takes as an underlying assumption.

The challenge of understanding these ‘messages’ is not simply are the meanings attributed to carvings can – and do – readily evolve as society itself changes and adapts. What makes the identifications of meanings far from simple is that any one image could be thought to have more than one metaphorical or allegorical meaning at any one time. So, while the preacher might impose a biblical exegesis on a particular motif, the mason may have had something more bawdy in mind. And a later generation of clergy might impose a different exegesis, and a later mason – or for that matter any other person who cared to look – could perceive yet another allegorical meaning. As the scholar Kathleen Kamerick neatly puts it, writing about late medieval images generally, ‘Once painted or sculpted, an art object was open to the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual perceptions of the individual beholder.’ (Kamerick 2002: 90)

Yet, while viewers give images their own meanings, they do so within the range of meanings – orthodox or heterodox – circulating with society at any given time. Entirely maverick ‘readings’, even if conceived, are least likely to last long beyond the lifetime of their progenitor in societies where ideas are largely transmitted orally. Meanings may shift, or be ‘contrary’, but they are rarely radically innovative.

The meanings of images are inherently more ‘slippery’ than written words. So, while different denominations may differ about the wording of their creeds to express subtle distinctions about what, say, the doctrine of the Christian Trinity ‘really’ means, all those nuances merge together in, for example, a window decorated with tripartite mullions. The symbolism of the Trinity in such a window rises above the divergences of verbal distinctions. This is what visual imagery does best of all – it ‘speaks’ to the literate and
illiterate even-handedly. Indeed mystical concepts are often best expressed through symbolic imagery than in verbal concepts (in part because we often think of the mystical as something which cannot be properly understood or realised). (Taylor 2004: 10–11)

When looking at medieval carvings we should assume that the masons had at least one idea in mind. Often we can suspect that they intentionally incorporated double – and maybe even triple – meanings. The clergy would have done their best to put a biblical exegesis on the motif, while if there was a lay patron he may have taken a different approach again (or at least only acknowledged recognising the less bawdy of the mason’s double meanings). The congregation and visitors to the church who looked up at the carving may have recognised some or all of these different meanings.

But a generation or two later and the mason’s intentions will have become either forgotten or elaborated into a local ‘legend’. As such ideas would only ever be passed on orally then only what were considered the ‘best’ ideas would have remained in circulation. A later member of the clergy may have opted to base a sermon or parable on one or more of the carvings – but is most likely just to have ignored them.

**Academics have nasty-sounding words for such things**

Academics have a term for such ever-shifting multiple interpretations: ‘diachronic and synchronic variation’. These are nothing like as nasty as they sound – the origin is from the Greek word for time (khronos) not the low Latin for disease (chronicus). ‘Diachronic’ is a convenient way of referring to something that changes over time while ‘synchronic’ refers to similar instances existing at the same time.

For example, English spoken today in America is somewhat different from the English used here in England, and both are different from the varieties of English spoken in India. These are synchronic forms of English. English spoken by Londoners in 2003 is subtly different from English spoken by Londoners in 1903, and more greatly different from the way Londoners spoke in 1803. In, say, 1403 the people of London spoke an even more distinct form of English. These are diachronic forms of English.

Clearly languages (and many other aspects of culture – such as sculpture) ‘evolve’ both diachronically and synchronically; these terms are helpful in referring to predominant tendencies even if the two can rarely be totally separated. I am aware that there are more nuanced ways of thinking about the ways cultures change over time (see Fabian 1983) but for the purposes of this study the classic concepts of diachronic and synchronic variation suffice.

Having made fairly heavy weather of introducing the phrase ‘diachronic and synchronic variation’ I will now endeavour to use it as little as possible! This is because these concepts will be implicit assumptions underlying any specific discussions of motifs and images.

While we can never know for certain what people originally thought, still less appreciate the range of ideas current at any one time, as I will attempt to show in Part Three, we can bring together sufficient evidence to make some attempts to understand the minds of medieval masons and the various people who made up the ‘audience’ for their skills.

**Marginal or not?**

In the Introduction to her study of French Romanesque marginal art Kenaan-Kedar emphasises that ‘good glasses’ – in other words binoculars – are needed to see the carvings as they are in the ‘highest and most remote areas’ of the buildings and often in near-darkness. As such they were not readily seen by medieval church-goers and, in Kenaan-Kedar’s opinion, ‘remained in the private realm of their creators’.

This makes them akin to the marginalia added to illuminated manuscripts, such as the Book of Hours used by the wealthy for private devotions. However, as Alex Woodcock notes, there is an essential difference between
illuminated manuscripts – mostly created for the private use of patrons – and architectural sculpture, which was in the public gaze (Woodcock 2005: xviii).

Studying these sculptures with the aid of binoculars and photographs taken with telephoto lenses is, to Kenaan-Kedar, to intrude ‘upon a distant, unfamiliar artistic world, and probably violates its creators’ wishes thereby. It is a world brimming with undeciphered images.’ (Kenaan-Kedar 1995: 1)

I have not seen the mid-twelfth century corbels in the forty churches in Poitou and Saintonge which form the basis of Kenaan-Kedar’s study. But, based on my limited experience of Romanesque churches in the Ile-de-France and Normandy, in smaller churches the roofs are sufficiently low for these carvings to be seen clearly enough without binoculars or telephoto lenses.

In any event the high and comparatively remote location of the French Romanesque carvings is not shared by later Gothic carvings in either France or Britain as corbels are joined by heads on capitals and arch springers (which are nearer to human head height than corbels). Kenaan-Kedar’s suggestion that we are intruding upon the private realm of their creators simply does not apply – and is not valid for all Romanesque corbels either. So I cannot share her opinion that these carvings were intended to be an all-but unseen ‘private realm’ and, as such, direct counterparts to the marginia in privately-owned illuminated manuscripts.

However such sculpture is marginal in that it is located on the periphery of the internal and external architecture. It does not exist to ‘frame’ or contextualise more biblical subject matter, still less to popularise such depictions. As such it may be thought of as ‘marginal’ to sculptures of Christ, the Apostles and other saints, or to the once-prevalent wall paintings.

Yet, rather than simply being marginal to such art, its relationship is more complicated:

... in a multilayered fashion, it is the antithesis of the official art. [...] In other words, the artists present a category of sculpted imagery, bestowed with metaphorical possibilities, in a style intentionally meant to question and to test the official artistic criteria.

(Kenaan-Kedar 1995: 5)

Subsequently she described this relationship somewhat differently:

I would like to argue that marginal art creates its pictorial schemes while transgressing the official codes, but at the same time serves to a supply a source of imagery for official art. Marginal images are thus transformed and integrated into the official art to become part of its normative vocabulary in a new context and meaning.

(Kenaan-Kedar 2002b: 179)

If not ‘marginal’ then what?

While Kenaan-Kedar is happy to bestowed the term ‘marginal sculpture’ on this work, I remain uncomfortable with the term – while being unable to offer a better one! Even the notion of being located on the periphery, while seemingly true for the corbels comprising Kenaan-Kedar’s case study, becomes much more stretched for British examples and is not only sometimes true for comparable carvings from the Gothic era.

Alex Woodcock adopts the term ‘liminal carvings’, recognising that both the locations and the meanings of the carvings can be thought of a liminal (‘on the threshold’). If the term ‘liminal carvings’ were likely to be primarily recognised as a reference to the liminal (or ‘slippery’) meanings of the carvings I would be quite happy with this term. However for most people the primary association would be that the carvings are in liminal locations.
While it is true that carvings around doorways and windows fit the liminal description, those on corbels, capitals and roof bosses do not.

Woodcock defends his terminology by noting that most of these carvings appear at the ‘weak spots’ in the construction of a building. This makes them, in his perception, liminal – as well as potentially apotropaic (‘evil averting’) (Woodcock 2005: xviii–xix; 15)

For reasons made clearer in Appendix Two, where I discuss possible apotropaic aspects of the carvings then their ‘marginal’, peripheral or, most accurately, ‘liminal’ location is important. But just as not all carvings are in peripheral or liminal locations so too not we cannot consider all the carvings to have been primarily apotropaic.

There is an additional sense of liminality not discussed by Woodcock but quite central to some of Michael Camille’s thinking, and that is that once Lollardist preachers began to rail against idolatry in the mid-fourteenth century then they was considerable confusion about which images were ‘licit’ and which were ‘ illicit’ (Camille 1989 280–7). Late fourteenth century sculptors would have been well aware of being in a disputed and ‘liminal’ zone.

I fully support Kenaan-Kedar’s suggestion that this art offers a multi-layered antithesis to ‘official’ art. But that suggests something far more than just being marginal. Yet to call it ‘antithetical sculpture’ would imply a much greater mutual incompatibly than is seemingly the case – while also downplaying the multiple layers of meanings. These sculptures are indeed ‘other’ to the presumptions of a dominant clerical hegemony – but any such dualistic or dialectical interpretations reveal more about modern and postmodern perceptions of society than the nature of medieval communities.

Marginal images function simultaneously as at least two systems, each with its own codes and each recognized mainly by a certain public. When read literally as a ‘mere image’ by the ‘simplices’ or the artists themselves, marginal art expresses popular statements, tastes, and social positions. However, when read metaphorically, symbolically or allegorically, it serves the patrons as images who led to the search of Christian morals, and is able to function as didactic imagery.

(Kenaan-Kedar 2002a: vii–viii)
Here the term ‘marginal sculpture’ is distinctly unhelpful as it implies that the popular meaning is in some sense less important than the more didactic one. The popular culture of all ages often intentionally challenges and subverts the hegemonic oligarchies of the era. Surely we should regard the expression of ‘popular statements, tastes and social positions’ as the primary intention, with the option for a more moralising interpretation usually quite secondary.

However any attempt to discern a dualism between ‘popular’ artistic expression and ‘higher’ artistic endeavours runs the real risk of being contaminated with the attempts between the 1930s and 1970s to construct just such a dualism of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art in British culture (see Burke 1978; Harris 1989: 43–58; Ingram 1984: 113; 1987: 167; Chartier 1987: 3; 1988: 30; Watt 1991: 2; these writers are summarised in Trubshaw 2002: 31–2). For this reason we should be very wary of using such terms as ‘folk art’ as there are – and never have been – any ‘folk’ except as the constructed Other seen across Thompson’s ‘gulf of class condescension’ (see Trubshaw 2002: 5–7).

This rather extended discussion about whether or not the term ‘marginal sculpture’ is appropriate is intended to serve two purposes. The first is the explicit one – to express my concerns with using the term ‘marginal sculpture’ to describe medieval carvings in Leicestershire and Rutland. However this discussion also serves as a way of discussing how we risk looking at medieval society through the filters of nineteenth and twentieth century preconceptions. While we can never remove all such biases, and this study is not the place to explore such discussions in great detail, hopefully this section has at least illustrated some of the pitfalls which need to be negotiated.

Stop Press

In a recent email Susan Kilby informs me she is aware of a medieval text in which a thirteenth century villein is ridiculed for not understanding the ‘correct’ meaning of some sculpture. I look forward to seeing the details when her PhD thesis is finalised (Kilby forthcoming).

Marginal to art historians

There is another sense in which these carvings are marginal – they are as far removed from the ‘masterpieces’ produced in leading artistic centres which are the main concern of art historians. While this in part reflects the elitist tastes of art historians it is also the result of more practical considerations – sculptures embedded in the fabric of medieval churches simply do not enter the auction houses very often! Medieval sculpture in museum and private collections is more typically from reliquaries and other more ‘portable’ objects, although some capitals and corbels have entered into these collections. (See Little 2006 for a series of essays published to go with an exhibition of medieval sculptures at the...
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.)

The lack of documentary sources relating to these carvings and their sculptors indeed makes them marginal to the realms of art historians. Instead they are verging into art ‘prehistory’ – the realms where archaeologists rather than historians normally provide the dominant interpretative paradigms. However, just as the absence of historical accounts of the construction of churches until the fifteenth century does not mean we can conclude that there were almost no churches until there is documentary evidence, so too we cannot allow the absence of information about the thinking of these sculptors and the meaning of their carvings to lead us to think that these sculptors neither had thoughts nor that their work had no meanings. (See ‘Stop Press’ dropout in the margin).

The lack of documentary sources places them into the realm of folklore or, more specifically, what folklorists consider to be ‘folk art’. In contrast to America, few British folklorists have taken any interest in folk art. Where such interest has been focused has, understandably, on more recent art forms such as the ‘castles and roses’ which typically decorated working canal boats. (See Trubshaw 2002: 12 for one of the few attempts to provide an overview of British folk art.)

Thankfully one academic folklorist has looked at imagery in popular medieval art. Like Kenaan-Kedar, Malcolm Jones expresses his frustration with art historians as the opening paragraphs of the Preface to his study of bawdy pilgrim’s badges, The Secret Middle Ages, spell out:

This book deliberately sets out to present only half the picture, or half the story, of late medieval art. But it is the half that has been missing, very much the other half. It was born of my frustration with existing books on medieval art, which seemed to me only to ever present a partial picture consisting of the selfsame artworks that I had seen on all the other ‘art’ books, if arranged in a slightly different order – clearly the stock of medieval art was both very religious, and very limited. The reasons for this curious imbalance are bound up with the history of art history. At the risk of gross simplification, the history of the discipline in the history of connoisseurship, and connoisseurs were traditionally interested in ‘Old Masters’ and the Renaissance...

It would be all too possible (but too depressing) to reconstruct an art-historical hierarchy of medieval art. At the very pinnacle of the pyramid would be paintings – preferably on panel – of the Italian Renaissance – preferably Florentine – and at the bottom... the badges of lead to which I devote so much space here.

[...]

In the study of applied arts of the Middle Ages, and sad to say, in England above all, one is still too often forced to the conclusion that ancient snobberies, of the sort which have historically divorced the connoisseur’s objet d’art from the archaeologist’s artefact, and high art from folk art, are still alive and well and living in our national museums and galleries.

(Jones 2002: xvii–xviii)

Jones continues by noting that an essay entitled ‘On the state of medieval art history’ written as recently as 1988 and published in one of the leading peer-review journals devotes five scant lines (out of twenty pages) to secular art
and cites only one book and two articles (Kessler 1988). The near-absence of references to prior research reveals a key reason for such terse overviews – the secular material has simply never been studied and published by art historians. It is ‘invisible’ to such scholars – and hence why Jones adopted the title of *The Secret Middle Ages* for his pioneering study (Jones 2002: xix).

While the hitherto-ignored sculpture inside and outside churches could be considered – because of its location – as ‘religious’, in practice most of the motifs are secular. Once again their status is liminal – neither properly religious nor wholly secular. Nevertheless they are a long way removed from being an Old Master painted on panel in Florence. And Jones’ metaphor about such Old Masters being on the pinnacle of pyramid suggests, accurately, that the greatest bulk of this imaginary pyramid is made of all such ignored ‘lesser’ work.

And just how should we refer to this ‘lesser’ work? Jones resists calling it ‘popular art’ or ‘folk art’ (on the grounds it would have been known to all echelons of society) and even resists deeming it ‘secular’ (even though the subject matter of bawdy lead badges is self-evidently not religious). In the end he simply thinks of them as examples of ‘medieval art’, avoiding all potentially dualistic or judgmental terminology (Jones 2002: xix–xx). For exactly these reasons I have no qualms about following Jones’ precedent – although I will more often use the phrases ‘medieval sculpture’ or ‘medieval carvings’ rather than the wider phrase ‘medieval art’.

**What’s in a name?**

*Figmentum, fabulae and curiositates*

If ‘marginalia’ doesn’t really fit then what other terms might be used? These monsters are, in the literal sense, figments of the masons’ imaginations. The Latin word *figmentum*, meaning ‘something formed or fashioned, creation’ enters the English language in the early fifteenth century. It is related to Latin *figura*, ‘shape’, although the word ‘figure’, used as a noun to denote the ‘visible form or appearance of a person’ enters English in the early thirteenth century via Old French. ‘Figure’ became a verb in the late fourteenth century, with the sense of ‘to represent’ (as in a picture). The sense extended to mean ‘to shape into’ in the early fifteenth century. However there seems to be little evidence that medieval carvers thought of representations of people as ‘figures’ and more imaginary beasties as ‘figments’.

More sensibly, Michael Camille attempted to identify the words used in the medieval period to describe such carvings. Two Latin words – *fabula* and *curiositates* – are used fairly often. They hardly need translating as the sense transfers into the modern English words ‘fabulous’ (in the original sense of ‘mythical, legendary, incredible’, rather than the recent sense of ‘incredibly good’) and ‘curiosities’ (and the more recent contraction ‘curios’).

*Babewyns*

But there is another word for ‘fabulous’ architectural decoration which appears more often from about 1400, although it has dropped out of use since. This is ‘babewyn’. The origin is with the Old French word *baboin* which gives us our word ‘baboon’ although in French this is a more generic term for apes. Prior to this, in the thirteenth century, the word *baboin* mean ‘simpleton, dimwit, fool’ and also a ‘gaping figure such as a gargoyle’. This could be either from the Old French word *baboue* (‘grimacing’) or imitative of the ape’s babbling speech-like cries. (However note that the near-homophone of *baboin*, ‘buffoon’, derives from the sixteenth century French word *bouffon* (‘jester’) derived from *buffare* (‘to puff out the cheeks’).)

Interestingly, such ‘babewyn’ carvings – and their companions in illuminated manuscripts – are sometimes referred to as ‘marmousets’, a word which became a term for a species of monkey – marmoset – and a nickname for
counsellors to Charles VI of France. Also known as les petites gens these counsellors were neither princes nor civil servants, simply close to the king and thus able to access the highest functions of the state. Presumably the origin of their nickname derived from their status being analogous to the way statues of the great or good are often supported by ornately-decorated corbels. Intriguingly, a Google search for information about marmousets led me to photographs of some of the decorated corbels on the exterior of Amiens cathedral. The title of the web page is ‘Les marmousets de la cathédrale d’Amiens’, so clearly les marmousets still retains its original medieval sense in modern French.

**Chimeras**

From the late fourteenth century another word is also used to describe these imaginative sculptures. That is ‘chimera’, either from the Old French word chimere or directly from the medieval Latin chimera, itself from the Greek khimaira. A khimaira was a fabulous monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpent’s tail which personified snow or winter. (It does make sense – the original sense of the word is ‘year-old she-goat’ from kheima ‘winter season’, also the root of our word ‘hibernation’.) The first known use in English of chimera is in John Wyclif’s ‘Prologue’ of the 1380s: ‘Beestisclepidchymeres, that hana part of ech beest, and suchebennot, no but oonlyin opynyoun.’

**Grotesques**

While the word ‘grotesque’ is, understandably, often used to describe the more bizarre carvings this word would not have been used in medieval times as it is a sixteenth century invention. The origin is with another medieval French word, crotosome, which is a corruption of the Italian grottesco – literally meaning ‘of a cave’ and also the origin of ‘grotto’. This is seemingly derived from descriptions of paintings on the walls of basements in Roman ruins which, in Italian, are called pittura grottesca.

Not only the word ‘grotesque’ but the whole concept of the grotesque was still in the future when medieval carvings were being created. By the 1560s and into the seventeenth century the word ‘grotesque’ begins to be used to describe architectural decorations which are ‘fanciful’ or ‘fantastic’ (in the original sense of ‘fantasy’). Only after the mid-eighteenth century did the word become pejorative, denoting the strange, fantastic, ugly, incongruous, unpleasant or disgusting.

There is a further problem with ‘grotesque’. By deeming something ‘grotesque’ we risk implying – not necessarily intentionally – that the carving has no other ‘meaning’ than its grotesqueness. This risks perpetuating the views of art historians such as Mâle who failed to recognise that medieval fabula did indeed have meaning – and potentially quite nuanced multiple meanings – for the people who created them.

**Gothic**

In the way that words like ‘grotesque’ shift meaning, the word ‘gothic’ was originally pejorative but has since become a neutral term. The Goths were a Germanic people living in Eastern Europe around AD 100. Like the Vandals, the Germanic tribe who changed the course of history when they sacked Rome in 455, the words ‘goth’ and ‘vandal’ entered the languages of Western Europe as widely-applied opprobrium.

Gothic was also used by seventeenth century scholars to denote ‘Germanic’ or ‘Teutonic’. As Neo-Classicism became the preferred style of architecture during the seventeenth century the word ‘Gothic’ evolved into a derogatory term for the art style that dominated northern Europe in the Middle Ages. This is why, in the early nineteenth century, the term ‘Gothic’ was used to refer to novels with medieval settings and plots which usually revolved around horror and mystery; from this usage came the ‘Goth’ music subculture of the 1983 onwards. By the time of the ‘Gothic Revival’ in the 1830s (led by the Cambridge Camden Society and architects such as A.W.N. Pugin), the term had, however, ceased to be derogatory and was now just a neutral term for the once-more fashionable style of art.
between the Romanesque and the Neo-Classical. By definition, all carvings produced in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries are Gothic – although the people who carved them would be entirely unaware of this later terminology.

**Gargoyles**

While the word ‘gargoyle’ is a term popularly used indiscriminately for any grotesque carving, more strictly it should only be used to refer to a carving designed to drain rainwater off the roof away from the walls. The word ‘gargoyle’ derives ultimately from the Latin *gurguliere* via the Old French word *gargouille*, meaning ‘throat’. The English words ‘gargle’ and ‘gurgle’ share the same origin.

‘The use of animal heads as waterspouts was not an invention of the thirteenth century but can be traced back to Antiquity,’ states Camille, before noting that ‘Part of their fascination must have been their “function” as pseudo-fountains, animated by the forces of nature.’ However, he then writes, ‘The meaning of these emetic engines has long been controversial.’ (Camille 1992: 78) A discussion of just such ‘controversies’ makes up much of the remainder of this work.

Strictly speaking, ‘Project Gargoyle’ – the name given in 2009 to the project to photograph all the medieval carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland churches – is a misnomer. Either ‘Project Gothic Carvings’ or ‘Project Medieval Carvings’ would be more accurate, while ‘Project Babewyn’, ‘Project Fabula’ or ‘Project Curiositates’ would have the added benefit of making some sense to the sculptors who carved them. But of course none of these have the all-important immediate ‘accessibility’ of ‘Project Gargoyle’.

**Medieval humour**

Self-evidently a great many of the medieval carvings which could be called *fabula* or *babewyns* or whatever reveal that the person who carved them had a sense of humour. Yet rather too often we are left wondering exactly what the joke was! And while out-and-out jokes just might ‘translate’ readily into modern thinking, there is one genre of humour – irony – which is always hard to recognise from ‘outside’ the same worldview.

Medieval humour sometimes shines through in unlikely places. A popular joke back in the fourteenth century was that the dirtiest word in the Psalter was *concucavit*, a word which...
in its entirety means ‘he/she stamped’. But those with a little Latin of the coarser kind will know that the three words con, cul and vit mean, respectively, ‘cunt’, ‘arse’ and ‘prick’. Geddit?

Almost the same joke was – presumably not unintentionally – evoked when the scribe transcribing the Biblical line Liber est a culpa found it necessary to insert a line-break in the word culpa resulting in Liber est a cul – ‘the book is to the bum’. To confirm that this is not all in the mind of the modern scholar, on the margins of the same page is a ‘mooning’ monkey...

A good proportion of the surviving Old English riddles are based around bawdy double meanings. The Anglo-Saxons would have called them hygegalan which means ‘wanton’ but also has the sense of ‘innuendo’ (Higley 2003: 41).

For example:

I am a wondrous creature: to women a thing of joyful expectation, to close-lying companions serviceable. I harm no city-dweller excepting my slayer alone. My stem is erect and tall – I stand up in bed – and whiskery somewhere down below. Sometimes a countryman’s quite comely daughter will venture, bumptious girl, to get a grip on me. She assaults my red self and seizes my head and clenches me in a cramped place. She will soon feel the effect of her encounter with me, this curl-locked woman who squeezes me. Her eye will be wet.

What else could this be referring to except an onion?

How far do these hygegalan go? Well, another seems to describe a woman holding a washleather to clean a cauldron. But the grammar can also be parsed to give the possible double-entente of a leather dildo entering the vulva. And if this is indeed a correct reading then it is all the more surprising because the description is in the first person – and it is the vulva speaking! (Higley 2003: 42–3)

Word play – although not usually so hygegalan – is endemic in Old English poetry and Scandinavian sagas. Few people or things are given there literal names but instead are referred to by metaphors, known as ‘kennings’. So, the sea is referred to by such kennings...
as ‘whale’s way’, ‘swan road’, ‘seal bath’ or ‘fish home’, while ships are ‘sea steeds’ and such like. In Aelfric’s homilies, composed around 980–1010, these kennings verge on puns (or, more pedantically, paronomasia) – so Christ is ‘Haelend’ which has the literal meanings of both ‘saviour’ and ‘healer’. The root word, haelu, (‘health’, ‘salvation’, even ‘safety’ – it becomes the modern word ‘healthy’) is used by Aelfric to suggest that Christ is both a healer and a divine defender who will save his people. He also uses a grammatical pun to conflate the Virgin Mary with the church and its congregation (Butcher 2006: 40; 54 fn 9). While at first glance we might think that Aelfric introduced such word play ‘just for the pun of it’, a more detailed look at Old English literature reveals that double-meanings and metaphorical allusions were very much part of the idiom.

In his book Image on the Edge Michael Camille revealed some of the risqué puns passing through the minds of medieval monastic scribes by ‘unravelling the text’. In his subsequent book on the Luttrell Psalter he provides evidence for early thirteenth century word play - willfully misreading Latin words as English ones – or even Lincolnshire dialect (Camille 1998: 44-5; 163; 168–71. When, as with an illustrated psalter, the illustrations are clearly linked to specific text then it may be possible to spot at least some of such witticisms. However if a sculpture was inspired by the same sort of humour then the corresponding word-play is now lost.

Bear in mind that the word ‘text’ is from the Latin textus (‘to weave’) – which is a remarkably apt metaphor for the way ideas come to make up the ‘big idea’ of a book while each ‘strand of thought’ still retains its own identity.

So, as the many postmodernist writers of the last thirty years who have been influenced by Jacques Derrida would concur, perhaps we should think of medieval carvings also as ‘texts’ of ideas woven together. And, just as it is more interesting to deconstruct entire books rather than individual paragraphs, so too sets of carvings might be more usefully ‘unravelled’ and ‘recontextualised’ than individual examples.

In Part Two I will briefly look at how we can ‘unravel’ – or even ‘read’ – the meanings of specific motifs. However rest assured that I will leave any attempts at a postmodernist deconstruction of ‘carvings as texts’ to those much better qualified than myself! But I will assume that the same propensity for word play, puns and metaphors was at work in the minds of the carvers in their workshops as it was in the thinking of their contemporaries in the scriptoria.

The ‘problem’ of English parish churches

A frequently-cited paper by Paul Binkski, published in 1999, starts by noting:

Art Historians are only beginning to rise to the challenge of the parish church. Why this should be so is not immediately apparent. It would be hard to think of a field of enquiry quite as rich, and indeed quite as

Postmodern or pre-modern?

Postmodernism offers some useful insights into medieval carvings because the worldview which created these sculptures was entirely ‘pre-modern’. To understand the medieval mind we need to remove the blinkers which, unwittingly, led to the medieval period being seen through the entirely different mindset of post-Renaissance and post-Reformation thinking (Camille 1989: xxvii; 347).

Apart from the clergy this was a society in which ideas were transmitted by spoken words and images – neither of which have the ‘fixed meanings’ attributed to written texts. I neither wish to nor am able to ‘over-theorise’ about the extent to which postmodern thinking offers useful insights into pre-modern mentalities but, suffice to say, various ‘po-mo’ concepts and terminologies do appear in this study by way of provisional attempts at a better ‘pre-mo’ understanding.
threatened, as English medieval parish churches. The third millennium is highly likely to see the undoing of the process which, at the start of the second millennium, saw the transformation of the old minster system into something very like the present parish system.

(Binski 1999: 1)

Binski called this article ‘The English parish church and its art in the later Middle Ages: A review of the problem’. What is the ‘problem’ in his eyes? As he says, ‘There is no want of literature on the parish church as a map of medieval life and consciousness… ’ Yet, he continues, ‘No one is entirely sure just how many medieval parish churches date wholly or in part from the medieval period, though a figure in excess of 9,000 seems probable.’ The problem is that only

... an extraordinarily small proportion of churches have been surveyed to the point of generating even an elementary ground plan for them; and the full extent of medieval wall painting, stained glass, and sculpture in parish churches is only beginning to be fathomed. Worse, there is a fundamental institutional and political indecision as to how resources should be directed toward the parish church as an object of study.

(Binski 1999: 1)

In the thirteen years since this paper was published there has little in the way of major developments – with the possible exception that the lack of resources is less a matter of indecision than simply a drying up of such grants. Binski bluntly criticises the ‘art historical academy’ and praises the work of social, cultural and religious historians (Binski 1999: 1–2).

Binski concludes his article with some rigorous questions:

In arguing for a form of holism in [parish church] studies, I am really suggesting that the images and installations in parish churches, their colour, technique, expressivity and – dare I say it? – style are constitutive elements in the gestalt of late-medieval art. Why, and on what grounds, did medieval parishioners find this gestalt, of which they themselves were a part, attractive and moving? Why, and in what sense, was it part of their emotional as well as cognitive life? And to what extent did it chart a transition within that life from seeing and hearing to thinking and feeling?

(Binski 1999: 19)

Sadly, so far am aware, the ‘art historical academy’ found wanting by Binski in 1999 has not responded to his ‘call to arms’ with any substantial developments. But Binski was not the first to proclaim the problems of understanding the ubiquitous medieval churches. In 1988 J.K. West had similarly outlined the problems for historians and archaeologists when investigating parish churches. And West himself began his paper by citing Martin Biddle’s remarks from way back in 1976:

We must lift up our eyes and our understanding from the particular to the general, from the single building to the society which it served and which alone gave it meaning.

(Biddle 1976: 70)
Enter the social historians

Just as Biddle, West and Binski successively argue for ‘a form of holism’ so too the approach adopted in this study combines history and archaeology – although with a good measure of folklore. And lurking behind all these is a ‘dominant paradigm’ which owes its origin to cultural studies. While somewhat hidden beneath the surface, this all-but-hidden dominant paradigm is how folklorists, historians, archaeologists – and indeed ‘lay persons’ too – construct and, above all, continually reconstruct our ideas about the past. Part of that process of (re-)construction is the recognising the processes whereby different disciplines claim their respective ‘legitimacy’ over promoting their view of the past (largely to the exclusion of earlier views or those derived from conflicting paradigms).

And this process of construction and reconstruction is, of course, a social process. Indeed looking from the other end of the telescope, it is reasonable to describe any society or culture (the two words are all-but synonymous in this context) as the sum total of the vast number of such processes of ‘social construction’ taking place at any one time.

So, while the approaches of art historians, folklorists and others all have a part to play, these need to be brought together within the broader scope of the ‘social history’ of the patrons, priests, artisans and communities who commissioned churches and their carvings. This is the medieval world which Michael Camille began to describe; sadly his death from a brain tumour at the age of 44 cut short his work just at the time it was beginning to get seriously interesting.

I briefly mentioned Camille’s *Image on the Edge* when discussing the early ‘followers’ of Schapiro. But he is much more than a ‘follower’. He acknowledges that these ‘marginal images’ in illuminated manuscripts and on corbels and the like have meaning. But that their meanings are ‘slippery’, intentionally ‘edgy’ or ‘carnivalesque’. He starts his book thus:

I could begin, like St Bernard, by asking what do they all mean, those lascivious apes, autophagic dragons, pot-bellied heads, harp-playing asses, arse-kissing priests and somersaulting jongleurs that protrude at the edges of medieval buildings, sculptures and illuminated illuminated

Opposite: lascivious apes, autophagic dragons, pot-bellied heads, harp-playing asses, arse-kissing priests and somersaulting jongleurs. It all happened in the margins of medieval manuscripts.
manuscripts? But I am more interested in how they pretend to avoid meaning, how they seem to celebrate the flux of ‘becoming rather than ‘being’…

(Camille 1992: 9)

For those not familiar with the opinions of St Bernard, here is the relevant part of his letter of 1135 to his fellow Cistercian abbot, William of St Thierry:

What is the point of ridiculous monstrosities in the cloister where there are brethren reading – I mean those extraordinary deformed beauties and beautiful deformities? What are those lascivious apes doing, those fierce lions, monstrous centaurs, half-men and spotted [leo]pards, what is the meaning of fighting soldiers and horn-blowing hunters? You can see several bodies attached to one head, or, the other way round, many heads joined to one body. Here a serpent’s tail is to be seen on a four-footed beast, there a fish with an animal’s head. There is a creature starting out as a horse, whilst the hind parts of a goat bring up the rear; here a horned beast generates the rump of a horse. Indeed there are so many things, and everywhere such an extraordinary variety of hybrid forms, that is more diverting to read in the marble than in the texts before you, ‘ut magis megerelibeatin marmoribus quam in codicibus’, and to spend the whole day gazing at such singularities in preference to mediating on God’s laws.

While St Bernard makes clear that he disapproves of such monstrosities, equally clearly he thinks that they have a meaning which can be ‘read’ just in the same way as the meaning of a written text. The meaning may – as Camille makes clearer – be tricky to pin down but clearly denotes something which should be deemed to lie outside the work of God.

From an Enlightenment perspective, these ‘hybrid forms’ might be thought to lie outside the work of reason. And perhaps, as Camille suggests, it is because ‘Gothic art has for too long been studied as “rational” architectural order… [that] the irrational, magical impulses that also helped create its illusory transcendence have been ignored.’ (Camille 1992: 93)

In other words, over-rational modern minds readily forget that the irrational also has
meaning – albeit a meaning that the Western quest for a rational universe (in the face of all the evidence to the contrary) chooses to ignore.

**The world turned upside down**

But medieval minds did not ignore the ‘irrational’. Indeed they celebrated such circumstances, at least for the duration of carnivals. At these times the world was ‘turned upside down’ with, for example, ‘boy bishops’ presiding over the ordained clergy – until normal order was restored for the rest of the year.

The origins of such curious ecclesiastical practices are in the Roman feast of Saturnalia which occurred between 16 and 23 December, a time of universal merry-making when moral and class restrictions were temporarily relaxed.

The practice of electing a boy bishop spread throughout Western Europe and was common in most cathedrals as well as colleges, grammar schools, and parish churches. The origins of the service are uncertain, but the custom of choosing a Boy Bishop is thought to date from the thirteenth century. Following his election, the chorister was dressed in full bishop’s robes, and given a mitre and crosier and would ceremonially take his place on the bishop’s throne to receive a blessing. In the medieval ceremony, the cathedral clergy would give up their seats to the choristers and take those places normally occupied by the choir. The enthronement always took place on St Nicholas’ Day (6 December) to commemorate the saint’s compassion towards children. The Boy Bishop continued to hold office until Holy Innocents Day (28 December), which was regarded as the choristers’ special day, when he was expected to give a sermon. During this period he enjoyed many of the powers and privileges of a bishop, which included officiating at all cathedral services with the exception of the Mass. The Boy Bishop would also be engaged in collecting and distributing money for charitable causes or for the enjoyment of himself and his attendants. Sometimes the celebrations could degenerate into unruly behaviour and the whole period of office could witness a good deal of boyish merriment and pranks. Their

In France such actions are part of the charivari – this posture is referred to as *l’un montrait son cul au vent*. In modern English they are ‘mooning’. The medieval sculptor probably thought of them as farting...

Photograph taken for Project Gargoyle at Titlon on the Hill, Leicestershire, by David Morley.

Art history or social history?
riotous behaviour sometimes became offensive and eventually led to Henry VIII banning their election in English churches in 1542 and their final abolition came under Elizabeth I.

(Lewis 2013: 32–3)

Michael Camille structures his entire approach to marginal illustrations and carvings on Mikhail Bakhtin’s recognition that:

The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, co-existed in their consciousness. This co-existence was strikingly reflected in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century illuminated manuscripts… Here we find on the same page strictly pious illustrations… as well as free designs not connected with the story. The free designs represent chimeras (fantastic forms combing human, animal and vegetable elements), comic devils, jugglers performing acrobatic tricks, masquerade figures, and parodical scenes – that is, purely grotesque carnivalesque themes…

(Bakhtin 1984: 96).

Had Bakhtin been as familiar with thirteenth- and fourteenth century sculpture as he was with the illuminated manuscripts of the same era then he would have recognised the same co-existence of serious and humorous aspects of peoples’ psyches.

And, as Camille is able to demonstrate, any worthwhile discussion of these co-existing aspects also requires to balance staid scholarship with awareness of the wit and mockery.

Camille debates whether we should regard scatalogical antics, cross-dressing and other ludic inversions of the normal social order as as ‘simply’ carnivalesque or whether they are examples of charivari (known colloquially in Britain as ‘rough music’) used by communities to vent their displeasure on those considered to be social miscreants (cheating merchants, adulterers and wife-beaters seem to have been the most common ‘victims’). (Camille 1992: 145) By the nineteenth century cross-dressing became a key aspect of social unrest; the leaders of Luddite gangs typically hid their identity by cross-

The ‘Rebecca Riots’ in Wales of the 1840s took their name from the pseudonym shared by their cross-dressing leaders.

The same shared anonymity can be seen in the way protestors at ‘Occupy’ commonly wear masks with the same stylised depiction of Guy Fawkes taken from the 2005 film V for Vendetta. Photographer unknown, Occupy protest Zagreb, Croatia, 2012.
dressing and the ‘Rebecca Riots’ in Wales a few decades later take their name from the pseudonym shared by their cross-dressing leaders. The ‘social inversion’ desired by these radicals was brilliantly outlined by Christopher Hill in his 1972 book *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical ideas during the English Revolution*. While nineteenth century politics is, of course, several steps removed from medieval times, the tendency for deeply-felt tensions in society to manifest as temporary inversions of the accustomed order does seem to span the centuries.

Medieval people were well aware that the ‘social order’ had its Other. As with modern Indian cities, for example, the world of beggars and prostitutes was never far away. Indeed the monastic orders were the main source of alms and medical assistance to such ‘outsiders’. While not all clergy were in monastic orders, few could have remained unaware of the ‘liminal’ status of Christian institutions – serving both the ‘great and the good’ and those living at the other end of the social spectrum.

**The dangerous periphery**

At the ends of the world as it was known in medieval times dwelt any number of strange monsters. This was not simply the premise for any number of imaginative children’s books, as in recent decades, but rather the lived reality for medieval people. On the map of the world painted in an English psalter of about 1260 the further one travels from Jerusalem (the centre of the world) the more deformed and alien things become. Outside of time and space two dragons inhabit the Underworld. Fourteen monstrous races – as described by Pliny – inhabit the borders of this map. These are not imaginative doodles – for the artist and his patron they were as real as the seas and cities of the map itself. Such monsters were described in an Old English book called *Marvels of the East* of which two copies survive. *Marvels of the East* was based on ancient Greek descriptions of mythical inhabitants of India. In these books we find depictions of men with a single large foot, men with dog’s heads, men without heads but eyes and mouths in their chests, sheep with bird’s feet and ass’s ears, ants as big as dogs, together with a variety of pygmies and giants. These ‘monstrous races’ live on in art from the whole medieval era.

There was also a microcosm to this macrocosmic world view. This same sense of centre and dangerous periphery was shared by every house and building. The focus of safety was
the hearth (literally, as the Latin word *focus* means ‘hearth’) while the entrances to the building – the doors, windows and chimney – where were Otherworldly entities could gain entry.

In complete contrast to the ethnocentric worldview of recent centuries which places humans at the centre of the stage, medieval people saw themselves literally ‘on the edge’. The thirteenth century world map, with Jerusalem at its centre, places Europe – and the British Isles – at the far-distant periphery. Everything about medieval life was worse than in the now-lost Golden Age and getting worse all the time (a trope which seems as perennial as time itself). Only at the Day of Judgement – long overdue and therefore due anytime soon – would everything be reset the way God intended. (Camille 1992: 53)

Boundaries are intended to make clear-cut distinctions between inside and outside, between normal and abnormal, between safe and unsafe, between secular and sacred, and any number of other dualisms. But inevitably the boundaries themselves are ambiguous, subject to dispute and change, or enforced by being given an anomalously sacrosanct status.

Physical boundaries can be enhanced with fences but these are of little use when the excluded Other is not of this physical world. Defences of a more psychological or magical nature are needed when the threat is Otherworldly. And where are so-called marginal carvings most at home? In just this dangerous periphery around doorways or windows or where the building is at its weakest – the supports and construction of the roof.

For people who thought quite literally that monsters lived just beyond the edge of the world, to look up at their churches and see just such monsters on the periphery of the building would be entirely fitting. If they also thought that these monsters were, in some manner, apotropaic – that is, warding off evil – then that would be even more fitting. Bear in mind that monstrousness is, of itself, transgressive – an affront to the perceptions of how things ‘ought to be’. Humour too is in some ways transgressive – especially when it is risqué or ‘dirty’. So, if these carvings did not take their role too seriously, but expressed their ‘otherness’ in a humorous, monstrous or otherwise transgressive manner then surely this would be most fitting of all.

But, when Lucy Freeman Sandler in her 1997 study of marginalia asks, ‘Is a single interpretation of marginal imagery possible?’ she immediately answers, ‘… manifestly not…’. This is because:
Assorted demons and monsters in their ‘natural habitat’: the pages of medieval illuminated manuscripts. Despite the assertions of art historians that these are ‘marginalia’ only some of them are confined to the margins.
Most investigations of marginal imagery have been limited in scope to one or another aspect – generic, parodic, scatalogical, monstrous – and conclusions about meaning have often been excessively categorical as a result.

(Sandler 1997: 43)

As I will discuss in Chapter Four, we must resist excessive ‘explanation-ism’ and over-interpretation in the belief that everything is more rational – or merely simplistic – than it appears to be. This is not to say that the search for ‘meaning’ is foolhardy. Rather, when looking for ‘meaning’ we must always bear in mind that there were probably other meanings too. Carvings on the periphery may have been regarded as apotropaic – but they were not only apotropaic.

The Enlightenment rationalisation which underlies Western intellectual enquiry necessarily also underpins art history and related disciplines. Yet medieval carvings all predate the Enlightenment. Little surprise then that the Enlightenment models of establishing meaning fail to recognise the extent to which the medieval world-view favoured analogy and correlation. This difference in world-views is far from superficial. On the contrary, it operates at such a deep level that it is often poorly recognised. Rephrasing this analogically, the range of meanings in pre-Enlightenment art will be largely invisible if approached wearing the blinkers of Enlightenment proclivities to rationalisation.

The ‘tool kit’ for further understanding

As I hope the discussion about the evil-averting aspects of Anglo-Saxon carvings which form Appendix Two suggest, evidence from archaeology, place-names and ethnography can be combined to ask some interesting questions (without necessarily offering cut-and-dried answers of course).

A similar metaphorical ‘tool kit’ drawn from a variety of academic paradigms will be deployed throughout the rest of this study to help gain a further understanding of the

Left and following pages: Two of the splendid corbels at Wymondham.
carvings. And, having made an explicit statement about the rough-and-ready methodology I have employed, a few words about my own biases seem an appropriate way of concluding this introductory chapter.

Michael Camille’s pioneering study called *Image on the Edge* led, fairly predictably, to the term ‘marginalia’ being used for both the images in the margins of illuminated manuscripts and the similar types of subjects depicted on carvings in the more ‘marginal’ parts of churches. Camille’s approach clearly influenced the subsequent scholars such as Nurith Kenaan-Kedar and the contributors to *Set in Stone* (Little 2006). However, while Camille was developing radically innovatory ways of seeing this art as part of the social milieu of the medieval era. He place sculpture and marginal drawings in the perspective of wider social life, as it were ‘from the inside looking out’. This is in contrast to more deep-rooted approaches by historians which are mostly concerned with descriptions, dating and typologies (Camille 1998: 13).

I fully acknowledge that such over-simplifications risk distorting the approaches of these scholars rather excessively. Indeed, it may simply be that I find Camille’s approach more ‘comfortable’ simply because his interdisciplinary approach deftly spanning social history, folklore and art history is closer to my own areas of research, whereas the more ‘focused’ approaches art historians are comparatively alien to me.

Leaving such reflexive issues about my own biases unresolved, suffice to say that in the remainder of this study I will share Camille’s perspective, which sees medieval carvings as woven into the fabric of social history rather
than as self-contained exemplars of ‘art history’. Like him, I share Bahktin’s view that the social world from which these carvings emerge is one which both the serious and the humorous co-existed. Above all, like St Bernard (but in contradiction to the overly-serious art historians of the era spanning the 1870s to 1970s whose legacy is still with us) these carvings clearly had meaning. That those meanings were intentionally ‘slippery’ and ‘liminal’ might make them more difficult to establish, but we should not assume that in the absence of clear records of their meanings that such meanings never existed.

However ‘social history’ on its own cannot shed light on this carvings. As already noted, the documentary sources are too few to be useful. So any study of medieval carvings verges on the realms of prehistory, where the paradigms of archaeologists and folklorists are at least as important as those of historians. But, above all, we need to remember that the carvings did not appear of their own accord as exemplars of some interpretative theory. They were carved by skilled and imaginative people who were part of an ever-evolving ‘tradition’. Modern obsessions with typologies, chronological sequences, ‘interpretation’ and such are necessary tools towards a greater understanding of what these people may have been thinking. But these ‘tools’ should never become an end in their own right – rather they should always facilitate the understanding of the multiple meanings that the carvings had for both their makers and the people who first viewed them.

With that caveat always in mind the next two sections explore exactly that ‘tool kit’ of typologies, sequences and – most dangerous of them all – interpretations!

Also from Wymondham, two of the angels on the capitals.
Chapter Two

Carvings and their carvers before the Gothic

The term ‘before the Gothic’ is unorthodox. But it is a convenient way of referring to the spectrum of styles of architecture and associated decoration which could be Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Scandinavian, ‘European’ Romanesque or more uniquely British Romanesque (sometimes termed ‘Anglo-Norman’). While some examples of each style fall neatly into such categories, at least as many carvings straddle such attempts at neat classification. The time-span covered by these overlapping styles is substantial – from ostensibly the sixth century (although survivals from before the eighth century are rare) to the late twelfth century.

Each style reflects wider cultural changes – self-evidently the indigenous Anglo-Saxon style (derived in part from Byzantine influences) is influenced by Scandinavian art once Viking settlement becomes commonplace in the late ninth century; indeed art historians use the term ‘Anglo-Scandinavian’ to distinguish this development. Examples of such Anglo-Scandinavian art are fairly common in Leicestershire and most other East Midlands counties (although not Rutland as this seem never to have been settled by the Vikings (Phythian-Adams 1980)).

Simultaneously the Romanesque is gaining widespread popularity in the north-western parts of continental Europe, although surviving British examples from before the Norman Conquest in 1066 are few and far between, and many of these are best be thought of as ‘transitional’ rather than fully-fledged Romanesque.

Opposite: Soon after the Conquest the Normans built an excellent chapel, now the parish church, at Essendine, Rutland. The chancel arch and excellent south doorway are probably mid-twelfth century. Above this is a tympanum depicting Christ in majesty with two angels, in a style that is more typical of France than England. The doorjams are also carved with such motifs as two men with crooks, a stag under and tree, and what may be intended to be Adam and Eve under a tree. These are very unusual in England but are akin to those at Stoke Dry.

The Normans also built a castle which was subsequently extensively ‘remodelled’, probably in the late thirteenth century. The moat survives to the north-east of the church; an Elizabethan house is known to have stood within the moat. The present church lies with a still-visible rectangular earthwork that links to the former castle site. At some time the thirteenth century parish church, which stood at the other end of the village, fell into disuse and this Norman chapel became the parish church.
In the late eleventh century there is clear evidence that sculptors trained in Normandy were working in Britain (the tympanum at Essendine on the Rutland-Lincolnshire border is a good example). However the vast amount of church building which began soon after the Conquest soon created a large number of more-than-competent indigenous masons. The chancel at Tickencote (built 1130–50) provides evidence that the masons responsible for this Rutland church were among the pioneers of vaulted construction. Some twenty years later the same masons put their experience to greater use when building the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral (completed 1165). At least one of the masons who worked at Canterbury constructed the great hall at Oakham, and the same lodge then created the arcade at Twyford, in east Leicestershire (Pevsner and Williamson et al 1984: 19; 414)

While working broadly within the Romanesque style these native masons developed several uniquely British decorative motifs. The chevron ornamentation of doorways, although first invented in Normandy, is far more characteristic of Anglo-Norman work. And similarly rows of beaked heads biting the moulding of the doorway are also far more common in the British Isles than on the Continent.

Note that academics otherwise downplay the term ‘Norman architecture’ and use the broader term ‘Romanesque’. This is because most aspects of the Romanesque style are pan-European. The style starts well before 1066 in most European countries. And, crucially, only England was subjected to a Norman Conquest so there is no comparable ‘cultural watershed’ on the Continent.
Having broadly sketched out the progression of styles before the Gothic, the remainder of this chapter will look in more detail at these styles. Bearing in mind the steady progression of styles and the inevitable overlaps I have opted to keep things simple by discussing them under two broad headings: firstly, pre-Conquest ‘Anglo-Saxon’ art (even though many of the Leicestershire and Rutland examples are Anglo-Scandinavian) and, secondly, post-Conquest ‘Romanesque’ (largely ignoring distinctions between pan-European Romanesque and more specifically Anglo-Norman motifs).

Tickencote chancel arch and vaulted roof; constructed between 1130–50.

Beaked heads on the south doorway of St Mary in Arden, Market Harborough.
Anglo-Saxon splendours

Accusing modern art historians of taking insufficient interest in the sculptors of these wonderful works of art is unfair. In their own lifetimes these figure-carvers were overlooked by their peers! Rosemary Cramp and her colleagues have looked at a number of pre-Conquest texts looking for references to craftsmen. And she concludes that stone carvers simply were not important among Anglo-Saxons (Cramp 2010: 6). While we know few names, their work is arguably much better known and valued today than at any time previously.

Contrary to popular misperceptions about the Dark Ages as being devoid of many of the trappings of ‘culture’, this was a time when highly-skilled craftsmen were creating some splendid examples of high-status art. Bear in mind that only a minuscule proportion of such works have survived the depredations of time. At the time churches – at least the larger ones – must have been wondrous places. Presumably the feasting halls of leading lords and local kings would have shared something of the same splendour, even if the more humble followers lived lives where such ‘bling’ was conspicuous only by its absence.

Although writers of the time, notably Bede, present the Augustinian conversion of England as something ‘done and dusted’ within a few generations, a more nuanced reading of the written sources and – more especially – the archaeological evidence suggest a much more complex pattern. What the likes of Bede and other ecclesiastics do not overtly state is the extent to which the ‘exotic’ beliefs and practices of the eastern Mediterranean – that is the Roman church then based in Byzantium – were greatly adapted in northern Europe and the British Isles. This process had been described in some detail by James Russell in his 1994 book, The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity.

John Blair and colleagues had recognised as long ago as 1988 that Anglo-Saxon Christianity in England varied greatly from place to place. While there was a national synod of bishops, in practice each bishop and abbot took his own approach to doing things. Indeed, bearing in mind that early bishoprics equate to the territories of local kings, then this is hardly surprising as the conversion of the different kingdoms progressed in quite different ways (Blair 1988: 48; 63 fn 30). Indeed, the best way of thinking about...
British Christianity before the twelfth century was to think of a shared faith expressed through varied local practices and traditions (Blair 1988: 10). Not surprisingly, without some very firm top-down constraints this would have been associated with considerable change and evolution over just a few generations. The same process of slowly-evolving local practices still characterises religion throughout India and Taiwan (and in mainland China before the Cultural Revolution).

Not until the 1530s did Catholicism in England and Scotland begin to replace local practices with a more standardised liturgy. This was when the Sarum Use or Sarum Rite – a variant of the Roman Rite originating in the Salisbury diocese – became widely practised. Prior to that the Uses or rites were much more local, with the dioceses of York, Lincoln, Bangor and Hereford all having well-established traditions. After the Reformation the Sarum Rite evolved into the Book of Common Prayer, first published in 1549, which is still a major influence on Church of England liturgy. However, while the Book of Common Prayer ‘standardised’ Church of England practices, local practices continued to evolve into the full spectrum of protestant faiths, albeit ‘local’ became a combination of denominational as much as geographical distinctions.

More recently the work of Martin Carver, Alex Sandmark, Sarah Semple and various colleagues published in 2010 as *Signals of Belief in Early England* (Carver et al 2010) argues that not only was religious practice before the twelfth century characterised by local practice – but also that it would be difficult to distinguish between what we now think of as Christian and what modern thinking would deem ‘pagan’. The ‘Germanization’ of Christianity – in other words, its incorporation of pre-Christian ideas and practices – was far greater than any of the monastic scribes living at the time realised.

And I think it is simply that they did not recognise the extent to which their Christian practices ‘borrowed’ – or sustained – pre-Christian practices rather than, say, a deliberate effort not to acknowledge the debt to pagan precursors. They thought of themselves as devote Christians. Just because twenty-first century scholarship is able to establish that their worldview had more in common with, say, pagans in Scandinavia than the hierarchy of the Holy Roman Empire does not mean that such profound self-awareness was available to the people themselves.
In a fairly well-known series of letters, Pope Gregory recommended to St Augustine a process of assimilation rather than radical change. But would the conversion process have been so successful if such assimilation had not taken place (whether officially-sanctioned or just *de facto*)? But there is something more curious about Gregory’s letters than his willingness to assimilate paganism. This is his insistence that Augustine is the only bishop of the English. In other words, while he is willing to meet paganism part-way, he is not willing to acknowledge the existing Christian churches in Britain. This is probably in large part because Augustine’s activities based in Kent were remote from the parts of the British Isles where Christian communities had clung on from the late Roman era. But these ‘indigenous’ Christians did eventually have to be ‘assimilated’, only sixty years after Gregory’s letters the Synod of Whitby was convened, in 664. Only then did the church of Rome arguably begin to gain the upper hand over ‘local practices’. To what extent the indigenous Christianity had assimilated local pre-Christian practices is difficult to establish, but all the evidence suggests that the sharing of world views prescribed by Gregory had already been established. Certainly these were not the topics of contention at Whitby.

There is a further process of ‘assimilation’ as late as the first half of the eleventh century. With Augustine we recognise the beginnings of Christianity in Britain as a top-down ‘state religion’ – the process which ‘inevitably unfolds’ in the pages of history books. But of course in Augustine’s lifetime such ‘inevitability’ was a long way in the future. History books tend to be written along the lines of the Augustinian mission being followed by an ‘onwards and upwards’ process of ever-more dominant Christian faith (with just a few ‘set backs’, such as the die-hard Penda, king of Mercia between about 626 and 655). But the same kind of history books also suggest that the English nation also took on an increasingly English identity until wrongfully cut short by the Norman invasion.

But this flies in the face of the evidence. Cnut (or Canute as old school history books would have it) took over the English throne in 1016 and ruled very successfully until 1035. He was already king of Denmark and also became ruler over parts of Norway and Sweden. He was as ‘Viking’ as one could be in the eleventh century. And his bodyguards were drawn from elite Scandinavian warriors. These warriors came from societies where Christian conversion was still in the future. Indeed – bearing in mind that Scandinavia had neither Roman occupation nor an Anglo-Saxon settlement – archaeologists refer to Ango-Saxon cross shaft in Rothley churchyard; originally it would have been surmounted by a large wheel cross.
Anglo-Saxon cross shaft now in Sproxton churchyard but more probably originally a boundary marker for the eponymous minster in the adjoining parish of Buckminster.

Anglo-Saxon cross shafts now inside Breedon on the Hill church

Eighth century Anglo-Saxon cross-shafts were decorated with interlace patterns. Sometimes, as with the example from Sproxton shown here, there may be one or more dragons ‘inhabiting’ the interlace. Less commonly there were depictions of biblical scenes. And sometimes, as with one of the examples at Breedon, the biblical scenes may sit alongside what seem to be depictions of pre-Christian legends.

In their different ways these different decorative schemes reveal a spectrum of ‘assimilation’ of pre-Christian and Christian ideas, from the complete absence of identifiable Christian imagery, through the ‘adoption’ of pagan legends (presumably because they could be given a Christian exegesis) to crucifixion and biblical scenes that would later become characteristic of ecclesiastical art; I discuss these cross-shafts in more detail in Appendix Two.
eleventh century Scandinavia as ‘late Iron Age’ rather than, say, ‘early medieval’. While history books use other terminology, in a sense England had a ‘late Iron Age’ king in the first half of the eleventh century.

Winchester was the ‘power base’ for Cnut. Cnut’s own far-flung provinces together with the Viking proclivity for long-distance trade made it one of the leading cities in northern Europe at the time; the wealth of the see of Winchester was exceeded only by Canterbury. The wealth and diversity of material goods must have been matched by the richness and range of less tangible cultural ideas jostling together. Christianity certainly thrived – indeed Cnut founded the New Minster at Winchester. But Cnut was a wily politician who favoured all sides seemingly equally, and was also happy to hear his name praised in pagan paeans. And the overlap of faiths was greater than might be expected as a stone bas-relief carving of Sigurd the dragon slayer was commissioned by Cnut for either the Old or New Minster (Trow 2005: 110–30; 161).

This depiction of Sigurd can be thought of as a forerunner to the many carvings of St Michael and the dragon which would be carved a century or so later, and clearly has parallels to the main plot of the Old English poem Beowulf (which, although the only surviving text of its kind, was presumably once just one example of a vastly richer orally-transmitted repertoire of heroic legends). But, once again, should we be seeing the figures of St Michael as part of a process of assimilation which ‘absorbed’ into the Church the understandably popular legends of pagan dragon-slayers? After all the midwinter pagan feast to the Mothers (which Bede says was known as the Mother’s Night) shifts emphasis only slightly from the mother to the child when it evolves into Christmas Eve. Similarly we should not be surprised that the Resurrection of Christ is celebrated at the same time of
year that pre-Christian agricultural communities would be celebrating the rebirth of local tutelary deities associated with vegetation and crops.

I will look in more detail at this seeming ‘synthesis’ of pagan and Christian in Part Three in the section which discusses the tympanum at Stoney Stanton.

After the Conquest

Although Cnut’s reign brought comparative stability to England for thirty years, sadly the trysts and battles for dynastic succession dominated the period from his death in 1035 until they were resolved in 1066. As might be expected there is little record of church building or commissioning of sculpture from the mid-eleventh century – and it is most probable that only ‘essential maintenance’ and the like was undertaken during these difficult times.

However this was entirely reversed in the post-Conquest period. After being given land, the new ruling classes used the wealth generated by their peasant farmers to build imposing houses and then, as an expression of their piety, either an equally-imposing parish church or a private chapel (and sometimes both). Presumably wood-and-thatch churches mostly predated the death of Cnut and so would have been reaching the end of their serviceable life by the end of the century. In any event they seem to have been quickly replaced by stone-built structures, while stone-built Anglo-Saxon minsters and the like were extended and more elaborately decorated.

A wealth of new sculptures were created for these buildings – some of the more prestigious projects involved masons brought over from Normandy but within a
generation or so local artisans were producing high-quality work too. After 1100 or thereabouts few foreign-born masons were working in Britain; one of the few exceptions seems to be the frieze of Lincoln cathedral which was created about 1140 and closely imitates that at Modena in Italy, so may have been carved by a Lombardy mason (Zarnecki 1953: 23–4).

Indeed the process is reversed and Anglo-Norman work begins to appear on the Continent – ribbed vaulting, chevron ornamentation, and sometimes beaked heads too. Indeed ‘Romanesque buildings in England [were] amongst the largest and most daring in Europe’ (Zarnecki 1984: 15). But, despite all the quantity and quality of this work, we know next to nothing of the craftsmen who created it.

On the Continent during the eleventh and twelfth centuries it was common for carvers to sign their work or incorporate a self-portrait. So we know Ursus created the bishop’s throne at Canosa and probably decorated the window frames and doorways at Bari; Bernard Gilduin carved an altar and capitals at Toulouse; Gislebertus put his name prominently on the tympanum at Autun; while Wiligelmo was even more forthright when he added an inscription in Latin to his work at Moderna which translates as ‘Among sculptors, your work shines forth, Wiligelmo. How greatly you are worthy of honours.’ (Zarnecki 1951: 8; 13–14; 17; 21; 1971: 9, 59).

Although many individual mason’s marks have been identified, only one British stone-carvers is known to us by name. The mid-twelfth century font at Bridekirk in Cumberland has a runic inscription which translates as:

He was Richard who me wrought
And me to grace with joy he brought.

(Lindley 2003: 60)

By the twelfth century a ‘renaissance’ of arts and culture had revitalised the hitherto rather moribund intellectual climate of Europe. In large part these ideas flowed from the Middle East. Although this was the time of the Crusades there was also extensive trade and other travel to Byzantium and the Holy Land. However, as the discussion about ‘green men’ in Part Three reveals, some of these ideas imported via the Middle Eastern ports originated
further east, from northern India and even western China, making their along what we know as the ‘Silk Road’.

Equally importantly, there was extensive travel within Europe. Norman landowners in Britain usually retained their estates in Normandy, so cross-Channel travel must have been commonplace. And the increasing importance of pilgrimages meant that people travelled both locally, nationally and internationally. They would of course rest and pray at the churches on their route – and admire the splendid carvings and other decorations. Wealthy patrons and masons would be equally likely to take part in such tours and were inspired by the churches they visited. We know, for example, that several sculptures in churches of the Welsh Marches are based on carvings in various churches along the route of a documented pilgrimage route through northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela in 1135 (Zarnecki 1971: 71).

While Romanesque churches and cathedrals share similar overall designs – after all they were built as places in which a fairly standardised liturgy was performed – and there are discernible shared influences on the manner in which they were decorated, nevertheless there are clear regional styles and ‘schools’. Yet it is also clear that sculptors worked independently and were not tied to any one ‘school’ (Zarnecki 1971: 71).

### 1144 and all that follows

In Leicestershire and Rutland, as elsewhere in the British Isles, the Anglo-Norman style of Romanesque architecture thrives throughout the twelfth century. Yet, in about 1137, the first steps were taken which would lead to an entirely different style. Abbot Suger decided to rebuild the abbey church of Saint-Denis, now in a suburb of northern Paris. The chancel was to be suffused with light – something difficult with the round-headed Romanesque windows set in thick walls. Completed in 1144, this was the first building with pointed arches (or ‘lancets’). And, to allow a higher row of clerestory windows, flying buttresses were used on the outside to stabilise the walls. Not only did Suger get all the light he desired, but the whole emphasis of the structure was now upwards, to the realms of Heaven.

The key elements of the ‘French Style’ (as it was known at the time) had been born, and were steadily emulated elsewhere in France and subsequently the rest of northern Europe. The Plantagenet kings (Henry II to Richard III), descended from the Angevin Counts of Anjou and retaining close contacts with that region, ensured that what was fashionable in France was also adopted in England.

While Durham cathedral (constructed between 1099 and 1128) pioneers some aspects of the Gothic (such as rib-vaulting) it does not have lancet windows. The first ‘fully-fledged’ example of the French Style in England was the choir of Canterbury cathedral, rebuilt under the direction of William of Sens (who seems to have worked for Suger at Saint-Denis) and completed in 1175. By the time Henry III began rebuilding Westminster Abbey in 1245 this style was de rigueur.

We of course know this French Style as ‘Gothic’.
Chapter Three

Carvings and their carvers during the Gothic

In a series of essays and books the British scholar Phillip Lindley has shed the most light on Gothic and Renaissance sculpture.

The opening of his 1995 book is apposite:

What do we really know about the identity, working practices or careers of English medieval sculptors? The answer is, remarkably little, for it surprisingly hard to find any contemporary information about the origins, development or craft of the early figure-sculptors.

(Lindley 1995: 1)

The lack of contemporary chronicles and records is largely down to Henry VIII. When not distracted by organising the murder of his wives, he was arranging the near-total destruction of the chronicles and records of the medieval churches. John Leland’s catalogues confirm that English monastic libraries were in every way comparable to their Continental counterparts. By the time Leland had died Henry VIII’s agents had consigned these volumes to bonfires.

Yet, although the flames consumed almost all the monastic records and nearly every example of Anglo-Saxon literature, they did not devour the biographies of sculptors. Such biographies never existed – the only biographical writings in Britain in medieval times were those of saints.

Opposite: Art historians would be nowhere without styles and typologies. When it comes to the Gothic the St Mary’s church at Melton Mowbray has them all – Early English (otherwise known as Transitional), Decorated and Perpendicular. These will be familiar to anyone who has read Pevsner’s guide books as ‘EE’, ‘Dec’ and ‘Perp’ – see the prelims of this book for a guide to the relevant dates.
Lindley has been able to establish that, while sculptors were closely linked to the clergy, they were typically ‘lay brethren’. In other words, they had not taken holy orders. Some were based at specific monasteries, abbeys and cathedrals while others were peripatetic (Lindley 1995: 1; 5–6; 7–8; 21). This is equally true of stonemasons who repair church buildings today – some major cathedrals have their own workshops while parish churches award contracts for restoration to independent teams of masons.

Sculptors worked for master masons. The masons created the niches and other architectural ‘contexts’ for the full-length figures of saints, decorative roof bosses and corbels, and such like which the sculptors were commissioned to create. Most of this work was ecclesiastical. Only sepulchral effigies stand at the borders of the secular – although such monuments were always intended to take a prominent position within church buildings.

Sometimes figures were carved after the blocks of stone had been built into the structure, while in other cases they were carved at the quarry and installed already completed. Full-length figures were most often carved in a workshop – but whether that was on site or elsewhere can rarely be determined. Why one method of working was used in one place and the other method elsewhere is not clear (Lindley 2003: 64–6). And, if such fairly important matters as who worked where seem to us to be rather ad hoc, then from this a more general deduction can be made: we should expect similarly ‘capricious’ variations in the less crucial matters of decoration and the like.

‘As good as or even better’

Traditionally the creation of church buildings and their decoration is attributed to the patron rather than the artisan. And we should not ignore the role that the patrons had in the creative process as surviving records, mostly from northern Europe, reveal that patrons sometimes made very specific requests – one contract for a complex multi-scene altar piece included long lists of the details of who was to be depicted and their poses (Lindley 2003: 60). Mostly though the contracts specified that the work was to be ‘as good as’ another piece of work; quite often the wording was ‘as good as or even better’. The surviving examples from Britain are all for roods and require the carver to produce work ‘as good as’ an already-existing and named rood (Lindley 1995: 33).
Scholarly investigation has revealed examples of carvings based on woodcuts. But the main assumption is that masons and sculptors had ‘sketch books’, although this is supposition as only one example has come down to us. This is the famous drawing book of Villard de Honnecourt, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which survives as thirty-three sheets of parchment containing about 250 drawings dating from the 1220s to 1240s. Among the variety of subjects are religious and secular figures together with architectural plans, elevations and details. Animals and other human figures also appear. It is not clear if Villard was an architect or mason himself, or ‘taking notes’ on behalf of an ecclesiastical patron, or simply doing all this ‘for his own amusement’.

Art historians refer to such books of sketches as ‘pattern books’, with the implication that they contained a range of motifs which a patron could select from. However there is only one recorded example of such practices and that is from the early sixteenth century when a painter, Jehan Briaix, shows some ‘cartoons’ to his patrons at Troyes for them to commission several sculptures. However this one-off reference does not necessarily imply such a method of working was rare – it could equally imply it was so commonplace that it never got mentioned in records (which tend to emphasise the ‘exceptions’ rather than ‘the norm’).

If these drawing skills were indeed ubiquitous then they could be used to sketch examples of other masons’ work. Whether these were works which the craftsman was contractually required to be ‘as good as’, or whether they were inspiration for doing something ‘even better’ is a moot point – and perhaps the real answer would be along the lines of ‘a bit of both’.

When, in Part Two, we look at motifs which were exceptionally popular for corbels and roof bosses in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries – such as face-pullers and green men – then I cannot help but think that the professional pride which all these master craftsmen must have shared would have led to a certain amount of rivalry. Seeing the work of one of their ‘competitors’ might bring forth some grudging acknowledgement of their skill – but almost certainly followed by the thought ‘But I can do one better than that!’

What better to get a contract to carve, say, a set of corbels ‘as good as or even better’ than sketches you had made of some other masons’ work. Of course yours would be ‘even better’!
Imaginators

When we first encounter the word ‘sculptor’ in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries it seems to be describing a workman ‘who could cut stone with precision for building work’, and the term ‘sculpting’ could refer to working in all types of materials – including the engraving of metal – and not just three-dimensional carving. The modern distinction between ‘mason’ and ‘sculptor’ does not seem to apply then (Lindley 2003: 62).

Indeed, by this time there were strong ideological reasons for people who carved religious statues not to think of themselves as ‘sculptors’. In the Vulgate Bible the Second Commandment reads *ne facies tibi sculptile* (‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image’). As discussed later in this chapter, there was a strong movement by some of the clergy to implement this Commandment and eliminate what they considered idolatrous worship of statues of the saints. The Vulgate *sculptile* made ‘sculptor’ a risqué word – little surprise that other terms were used!

In the early thirteenth century any records relating to sculpture are, of course, in Latin not English. In the records of the construction of the Eleanor Crosses, commissioned by Edward I after Queen Eleanor’s death in 1290, two people are referred to as ‘imaginators’. One is William of Ireland, who supplied the statues for the Eleanor Cross at Hardingstone near Northampton – he was paid £3 6s. 8d. for each figure. The other is Alexander of Abingdon, who similarly supplied statues for the Eleanor Cross at Waltham (his original statues are now in the V&A and were replaced by replicas in the 1950s). Sad to say the only other person named as an imaginator – Thomas the Imaginator – is known only from the London court records for 1226 as the defendant in a trial for rape.

This word ‘imaginator’ seems to denote craftsmen who specialised in the creation of human figures. The examples which have survived are those in stone, but Alexander seems also to have worked in wax – which was then sent to a metalworker, William of Suffolk, to be cast in bronze (Lindley 1995: 7; 11–12; 2003: 63).

Interestingly, all these workshops were based in London, even though the sculptures were installed elsewhere, implying that there were sufficient commissions to keep multiple workshops in business. Or were there? While Henry III was rebuilding Westminster Abbey...
business must have been booming, but by Edward I’s reign work capacity and demand may have been less well-matched. At the risk of projecting twentieth century political expediency onto the medieval world, perhaps the Eleanor Crosses were not simply a grandiose commemoration of a beloved spouse but also something of a ‘job creations scheme’ to aid an ailing craft.

Just such a workshop, led by ‘Master Hugo’ worked at Bury St Edmunds sometime around 1230–40. Master Hugo was seemingly a multi-talented craftsman who made the bronze doors for the abbey, carved a wooden crucifix with attendant figures of St Mary and St John, and illuminated a bible. He probably also painted murals and carved relief sculptures in stone (Zarnecki 1984: 23–4). Although George Zarnecki seems to have believed that Master Hugo personally created all these works, it seems far more probable that he was the master of a team of specialist craftsmen, working under his close supervision – although no doubt he was a master of at least one of those crafts (most probably sculpture).

We get a glimpse of just such a school – in this case working in wood rather than stone – two hundred years later, at the start of the sixteenth century. Back in the 1930s J.S. Purvis wrote about a workshop in Ripon he termed the ‘Ripon School’. These craftsmen created choirstalls for Bridlington and ‘a St George and the dragon with a wooden loft’ for Ripon. There seem to have been about six men in the workshop although we know only the name

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**Portraits of masons and sculptors**

Janetta Rebold Benton has identified numerous medieval portraits of sculptors, artists and patrons in various medieval churches and cathedrals in France and Germany (Benton 2004: 90–4).

Alex Woodcock considers that a head carved underneath the feet of an early fourteenth century depiction of St Catherine in Exeter Cathedral is a portrait of the mason and sculptor William of Montacute, one of three early masons at Exeter who are known by name (Woodcock 2013: 15–19).
of their leader, William Brownfleet. He must have had some standing in the town as he became mayor of Ripon in 1511. We can see a similar prominence of woodcarvers within the Carpenters’ guild at York as Thomas Drawsword was both an eminent woodcarver and mayor of York in 1515 and 1523 (Lindley 1995: 28–9, citing Purvis 1936).

The hiatus between 1348 and the 1370s

During the two hundred years between William of Ireland and William Brownfleet the quantity and quality of sculpture steadily increased. At least until 1348. The arrival of the Black Death presumably killed many of the skilled craftsmen and made it difficult or impossible for the apprentices to fully develop their skills. The social disruption and loss of income for landowners would mean that money would only be available for essential purposes. While the high death rate implies that masons would be commissioned to create sepulchral monuments, in practice there seem to be relatively few such effigies from the second half of the fourteenth century. However, so far as I am aware, no one has published a detailed ‘time line’ of such effigies which would confirm this apparent dearth of monuments at a time when so many were dying.

After the hiatus

As a consequence of the Black Death few, if any, church building or restoration projects seem to have taken place in the 1360s. By the 1370s sculptures are being created again, and Lionel Wall has shown that many of the corbel tables of east Leicestershire and Rutland seem to date from this era (Wall 2013). Skilled workers were scarce and could command much better wages than before the Black Death. This wealth flowed back into the revamping of churches – if you like, ‘advance payments’ so the benefactors’ souls would have a happy afterlife. In my previous publications I have erroneously assumed that the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth centuries produced comparatively little figurative carving. However Lionel Wall’s more careful research reveals that a great many carvings seem to be from this era, including many of the more imaginative examples. More work is needed to identify examples which can be confidently dated to the period from 1370 onwards.
Over the next hundred years the quantity of work commissioned steady increases although, by the end of the fifteenth century, the highest quality work in England was being done by craftsmen from the Low Countries. This trend had started as early as 1306 when a surviving letter reveals that ‘Tidemann of Germany’ got into deep water for carving a crucifixion for the church of St Mildred’s in the Poultry, Aldgate, in the German style – that is with the arms of Christ in a ‘Y’ shape. The bishop deemed this ‘quite contrary to the true form of the Cross’ (that is, with the arms horizontal) and sent it back to Tidemann for a full refund of his fee of £23. (Lindley 1995: 22, 29–30, 73; 2003: 68; Ormrod and Lindley 1996: 145–6)

Comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to carvings from the later medieval period (circa 1350 to circa 1540). Lawrence Stone in his authoritative study first published in 1955 states that the quantity of work produced after about 1350 declines. But Phillip Lindley states that this is untrue and, rather, simply too little attention has been devoted to (mostly now fragmentary) work the later medieval era (Lindley 1995: 80).

However, while fifteenth century ‘beasties’ are well-executed and have a strong presence, they are close cousins to the animals – real or imaginary – which surmount heraldic arms. Such heraldic beasts of course continue to manifest, especially the lion and unicorn of the once-ubiquitous royal coats of arms.

**The wealth of fifteenth century roof bosses**

Numerous good examples of one particular type of carving can be found in several Leicestershire churches. These are roof-bosses from the mid-fifteenth century. The examples from Claybrooke Parva have been tree-ring dated to 1425–50. I will discuss this wonderful collection of late medieval carving in more detail in Part Three.

The sheer number of roofs and bosses from the mid-fifteenth century which have survived in Leicestershire was not apparent to me – nor to any other researcher so far as I am aware. Only as the photographs taken by Project Gargoyle volunteers began to accumulate in the last two years was I made aware of the existence – and the quality – of these carvings. This is a wealth of medieval art which has been entirely overlooked, by myself as well as others.
Some of Leicestershire’s fifteenth century roof bosses.
Top left: Claybrooke.
Bottom left: Queniborough.
Left: Sileby.

Silby roof bosses photographed for Project Gargoyle by Steve Harris.
Lodges, guilds and ‘assemblies’

Looking for a moment at the masons rather than their carvings, the fifteenth century is when there was an interesting shift in the way their lodges evolved. Throughout England the various craft guilds also took on responsibility for funding shrines to their patron saints and typically performed pageants on the relevant feast day. As a result there was a blurring of their role as secular crafts guilds and religious fraternities.

We know that in the first half of the fifteenth century at least some of these craft guilds were subject to severe legislative pressures which restricted both their wages and rights of assembly. The evidence suggests that stonemasons and saddle-makers (and perhaps other guilds too) were holding meetings to agitate for better rates of pay (Prescott 2009: 106–7; 113). Quite whether this discontent was the result of an imbalance between the number of skilled craftsmen and demands for their work, or as a result of ever-increasing costs of living or (most probably) a combination of all these factors requires further investigation. However these references to ‘assemblies’ by stonemasons are the first documentary evidence for ‘masonic lodges’.

Not bare stone

By the late fourteenth century records were beginning to be written in Middle English rather than Latin and Norman French. The words ‘imaginator’ and ‘imager’ had dropped out of use and these men thought of themselves as ‘carvers’. However the modern distinction between an ‘artist’ and a ‘craftsperson’ is entirely anachronistic. So too the concepts of ‘fine art’ and ‘applied art’ are anachronisms when thinking about medieval work. (Lindley 2003: 1)

But there is something about how we see medieval carvings – literally – which is entirely anachronistic. We are accustomed to seeing these carvings as bare stone or wood. They would never have been seen this way in medieval times. Records, such as they are, reveal that as much was spent painting and gilding a carving as more than that paid to the sculptor (although the cost of the gold for gilding was clearly an important factor).
Clearly gilding and paint deteriorates over the decades and, although in some cases would have been renewed, mostly the carvings would have acquired layers of soot and grime from the incense and candle-smoke. They reappeared as bare stone and wood during nineteenth century restorations – when any surviving paint was usually removed at the same time (Brandwood 1990).

One of the more idiosyncratic aspects of the Cambridge Camden Society (the early proponents of the Gothic Revival) and their attempts to return the interiors of churches to something akin to their original medieval appearance was the insistence that interior walls of churches were stripped of plaster so the bare stone was revealed. Hence to this day many parish churches have unprepossessing bare rubble walls. The builders of these walls never intended their work to be seen naked in this manner! They expected the walls to be plastered and, typically, lime-washed. Best of all, the plaster would be decorated with wall paintings. Biblical scenes or the martyrdom of saints were typical for aisles, while a fear-inspiring depiction of the Day of Judgement – otherwise known as a Doom painting – would fill the space above the chancel arch (and therefore behind the rood on its rood loft or chancel screen).
Because many more sepulchral effigies have survived than statues of saints and the like, and because the paint on the effigies is more likely to be original, we can establish that by the end of the thirteenth century the preference was for quite opulent and complex polychromatic painting which may depict textures (such as fur trimming on clothes) quite accurately (Lindley 1995: 11; 83–4). We can only assume that ecclesiastical sculptures were, at least sometimes, equally opulent.

We do know that specialist gilders were used, and they worked on a statue before the painters. Legal disputes on the Continent in the fifteenth century suggest that, while there were clear demarcations between the crafts of carvers and painters, these boundaries were sometimes not respected (Lindley 2003: 57–8).

Ydolatrie and forbiddin ymagerie

The preachings of John Wycliffe (c.1320–84) started a schism in English Christianity known as Lollardry. One of their main tenets was that the first of the Ten Commandments forbade the worship of images. Indeed, as Kathleen Kamerick demonstrates in her book, Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image worship and idolatry in England 1350–1500 (Kamerick 2002), there were plenty of people – both clergy and laity – who seemingly worshipped statues of saints as if they were the saints themselves – deemed to be all-but-pagan idolatry. So, when the Margery Baxter was tried for heresy at Norwich during 1429 she reputedly said:

... people honor devils who fell with Lucifer from heaven, certain of which devils, when falling to earth, entered into the images standing in churches, and lived in these continuously and still reside there lurking, so that the people adoring the same [images] thus commit idolatry.

(cited Kamerick 2002: 14)

During the second half of the fourteenth century and through most of the fifteenth century there was a spectrum of beliefs and opinions which formed the basis of heated debates between Lollardist ‘iconophobes’ and traditional ‘iconophiles’. But as the Reformation got underway overt iconoclasm began to remove ‘suspect’ images – ‘forbidden images’ – from the churches and thereby eliminate ‘ydolatrie’.

The oldest Neo-Classical sepulchral effigy in Leicestershire and Rutland is this monument in Exton church depicting James Noel who died at the age of eighteen in 1681. It was sculpted by William Stanton (1639–1705).
The Lollards and their successors had no interest in removing the carvings of demons and other grotesques – but neither was there any interest in creating further examples of such sculptures. Decorative carvings inside and outside churches became all-but-indistinguishable from the animals used as heraldic emblems. And, presumably, the same carvers who from time-to-time provided some new decoration for churches were employed on a much more regular basis carving coats of arms and such like for both long-established noble families and for the ‘new money’ of the late medieval era who had made it all the way to the all-important status of having the right to bear heraldic arms.

See Micheal Camille’s *The Gothic Idol* for detailed discussions of medieval idolatry and Lollardy (Camille 1989).

**The death of the Gothic**

Inevitably fashions change – and not only in matters of belief and piety. As the Renaissance gathered pace it brought an increased awareness of the architectural splendours of the Greek and Roman empires. What had once been the *nouveau French Style*’ was now ubiquitous and given the derogatory nickname ‘Gothic’ by the Italian Renaissance painter, architect and writer Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) as a term of contempt for the style associated with northern Europe: He wrote ‘Then arose new architects who
after the manner of their barbarous nations erected buildings in that style which we call Gothic.’

The new fashion was to become known as Neo-Classicism. Copies of tastefully draped antique figures were ‘in’, grotesques and their ilk were most certainly ‘out’. And even the antique figures were restricted to sepulchral effigies – the more liturgical parts of the church were largely bereft of ornamentation. This Protestant disdain for ornament was, arguably, to reach its apogee in the secularised post-war era with the austerity of Modernist architecture and its close kin, Minimalist art.

Above: Wistow, Leicestershire. A Gothic church converted in the eighteenth century into what was known at the time as a ‘Protestant box’.
More relevantly, as the Renaissance ideas gained ground people began to think about the monstrous in different ways. The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) bring monsters in from the margins and place them, so to speak, centre-stage. They are no longer marginal to the page but have become integral with the main composition. Indeed, these monsters have become something that medieval marginalia never could have been – they have become ‘high art’ (Grössinger 2009: 181–2). More accurately, they synthesised folkloric monsters with Neo-Platonic principles (Milne 2007: Ch.1).

The mid-seventeenth century civil wars resulted in little church building in England – the chapel at Staunton Harold with the splendid painted ceilings is one of the few exceptions. With the Restoration came the restoration of the church buildings – but once-Gothic buildings were transformed as much as possible to conform with Neo-Classical preferences. The small church at Wistow is an example of just such a restoration. With their plastered ceilings the naves are much more ‘domestic’ than the draughty medieval churches. Their detractors nicknamed them ‘Protestant boxes’. But the churches at Teigh and Stapleford (straddling the Leicestershire-Rutland border), both designed by the architect George Richardson in the 1780s, have a quiet charm. And the more splendid Neo-Classical ‘wedding cake’ at Kings Norton was designed by the local architect John Wing (1728–94). But, true to style, none of these have any figurative carvings. The Gothic has ended.

**The Gothic never dies**

However there is one city in England where the Gothic never died. The chancellors of the Oxford colleges maintained a conservative outlook. The college buildings were repaired and extended almost entirely in the Gothic style. This means there has been an unbroken tradition of carving humorous and grotesque corbels, a tradition maintained by the current generation of masons. In 1986 John Blackwood wrote and published an accessible but informative account of Oxford’s gargoyles and grotesques.

Oxford is not simply the ‘city of dreaming spires’, but a place where – as the Oxford-based author Philip Pullman memorably described in the opening to *Northern Lights*, the first

*Two of Oxford’s famous inhabitants.*
book in his trilogy called ‘His Dark Materials’ – these legions of monsters in masonry could so easily be leading a nocturnal existence of which mere mortals know nothing.

**The Gothic reborn**

The Protestant preaching the eighteenth century which went with the taste for Neo-Classicism required interiors of churches dominated with pulpits, box pews and west galleries. Often the pulpit was erected in the middle of the chancel arch, leaving the chancel all-but unused. In most parish churches Mass was rarely performed more than once a year. By the end of the eighteenth century many rural churches were in a poor state of repair – the illustrations in John Nichol’s *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* were prepared in the 1780s and 90s and suggest that about one-quarter of the county’s churches had serious problems (e.g. nave or chancel roofless; major cracks in walls, etc.) (Brandwood 2002).

This was the era of ever-more divisive non-conformist sects and denominations. Money was scraped together to build new chapels but the parish churches were mostly merely patched up. The widespread dissatisfaction with the preaching-dominated Church of England services led in the 1830s to a group of ‘High Church’ clergy to form the Oxford Movement (otherwise known as the Tractarians, after its series of publications, published between 1833 and 1841). ‘High Church’ was a polite term for the restoration of something much closer to the pre-Reformation liturgy (although retaining the post-Reformation creed and faith of the Church of England); by the end of the nineteenth century they were openly

*A now-typical parish church interior. Except when St Mary's in Wymeswold was restored in the 1830s by A.W.N. Pugin this was quite innovatory and radical…*  
*This photograph, taken by Phillip Brown at the end of the nineteenth century shows scriptural texts painted on the wall above the chancel arch. These were designed by Pugin but lost in a 1950s restoration.*
referred to as ‘Anglo-Catholics’, although in the 1830s to call someone a Catholic was akin to calling someone a Communist in McCarthy-era America.

The Oxford Movement’s attempts to re-introduce the Mass and other ‘medieval’ liturgical practices was met with support from Cambridge where a group of architecturally-minded undergraduates formed the Cambridge Camden Society in 1839 (which renamed itself the Ecclesiological Society in 1845). They actively promoted a revival of the medieval style of architecture – known subsequently as the ‘Gothic Revival’.

Sir Charles Barry won the competition to rebuild the Houses of Parliament after the fire of 1834 with a design which is still considered to be one of the best examples of the Gothic Revival style. Much of the detailing was done by the prolific proponent of the Revival, A.W.N. Pugin. Compressing a complex story into a small nutshell, the mood of the times was along the lines of ‘If the Gothic Revival is good enough for the Houses of Parliament, then it’s good enough for our parish church too.’

Geoffrey Brandwood has documented in detail the rapid progress of the Gothic Revival in Leicestershire and Rutland (Brandwood 2002). By the 1850s and 60s at least a dozen churches in the counties were being restored or rebuilt in the Gothic style in any one year. Indeed, only twenty years after setting out with its radical agenda, the Ecclesiological Society wound itself up. There was no further need to proselytise the Gothic revival – every architect involved with public buildings and churches was following this fashion. The ‘typical’ parish church interior had taken over, with the neat rows of pine pews, a pulpit at the side of the chancel arch, choir stalls, an altar (usually with rails and an elaborate reredos) at the eastern end of the chancel, and a pipe organ (usually in the side of the chancel). There were few ‘churches which the Victorians forgot’ (to borrow the title of Mark Chatfield’s well-researched book published in 1989); one of the few is Brooke in Rutland.

As already noted the main oddity with the Gothic Revival was the insistence on bare stone. So, although medieval carvings inside churches were retained and – where necessary – restored, they were usually stripped of any remaining paint.

On the exterior of churches original medieval carvings were, of course, likely to be damaged by weathering. Victorian stonemasons sometimes re-cut the originals to
‘redefine’ features, and sometimes partially replaced damaged portions. More often they replaced with new. Small carvings – especially hood stops around doorways and windows – were usually carved afresh.

As a result many Leicestershire and Rutland churches have a mixture of original medieval carvings with other carvings that span the spectrum of restoration and replacement. Often it is difficult to clearly establish which is which. However with a little bit of experience then stylistic differences start to become apparent. While nineteenth century masons were technically very competent their monsters and grotesques lack some of the wild imagination of their medieval predecessors. And, so far as I am aware, they entirely avoid the more risqué subject matter! ‘Polite’ is the word that comes to mind. Victorian hoodstops are most likely to be pairs of ‘kings’ and ‘queens’ depicted with medieval-style crowns of headdresses but without any real distinguishing features. In other words they are generalised kings and queens, not portraits of specific monarchs.

However, despite this generalised disparaging of revival carvings, the best of the examples are outstanding. Among my favourites are the intimidatingly big dragons on the roof of the chancel at Little Dalby (rebuilt from the ground up in 1851–2).

Partly because it is impossible to easily distinguish between medieval originals and nineteenth century ‘imitations’, and in part because the best of these ‘imitations’ are splendid sculptures in their own right, the volunteer photographs recording churches for Project Gargoyle have been asked to photograph all figurative carving inside and outside Leicestershire and Rutland churches. In a later phase of the Project I hope a further group of volunteers will help to improve the dating (and otherwise add more information).
Chapter Four

Introduction to motifs

People with little interest in medieval carvings generally will usually have encountered versions of the so-called ‘green man’. Others may have encountered photographs of female exhibitionists (popularly referred to as ‘sheela na gigs’). And even the least studious look at the carvings in any one church cannot help but recognise that there are common motifs (such as ‘portraits’ of kings and queens, or more grotesque tongue pokers and face-pullers) and others with other motifs which seem to be one-offs.

The natural inclination (at least for Western minds) to create typologies has meant that many books about medieval carvings either focus on specific motifs – most commonly green men, although studies of exhibitionists appear regularly. One of the first popular books about medieval carvings – Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross’s, Grotesques and Gargoyles, published in 1975 – is structured as a series of short sections devoted to different motifs such as foliate faces, severed heads, tongue pokers, mermaids, centaurs and ‘polycephali’ (multi-headed animals).

There are clear problems with this fixation on specific motifs. For example, we will not understand any one motif – least of all green men – by looking at them in isolation. As Anthony Weir and James Jerman established back in 1986, any tentative understanding of exhibitionists comes from seeing them in context (as already noted, their suggestion is that exhibitionists were originally part of depictions of the Seven or Eight Deadly Sins).

So while an excess of ‘pigeon holing’ is not helpful, nevertheless the sheer diversity of motifs means that some attempt at categorisation is needed, if only to make searching a
database feasible! So, rather against my more fundamental inclinations, I will now devote a series of chapters to some of the more distinctive subject matter. Although not intended simply as a ‘history of ideas’ I will endeavour to summarise most of the previous writing about each motif. More detailed thoughts about how we should – and, more importantly, should not – interpret some of the motifs follow in Part Three.

Although I use the phrase ‘history of ideas’ it would perhaps be more accurate to use the phrase ‘archaeology of ideas’. In other words, our current understanding (and misunderstandings) are ‘peeled away’ to reveal their origins and, usually, a different understanding (almost always deemed a misunderstanding). This process can be continued recursively, just as archaeologists keep digging back ‘into time’ until they reach layers untouched by human activity. Whether the outcome of this ‘exploration’ should be written up in such a reverse chronology or, as with archaeological excavation reports, follow the conventional historical idiom with the oldest first is, I think, a decision which should be left open.

L’archéologie du savoir (‘archaeology of knowledge’) was the title of a book by Michel Foucault published in 1969, although he had first used the methodology of recursively ‘peeling away’ layers of meaning in his 1961 book The History of Madness. However Foucault’s methodology does not necessarily take one to the brink of the postmodernist abyss! Indeed this technique is entirely relevant to the study of medieval carvings, as Mercia Macdermott demonstrated most effectively in Explore Green Men (first published in 2003). (As publisher of this book I consider that Anthony Weir should also be acknowledged as, when I asked him to comment on the first draft of Mercia’s work – written in the conventional oldest-first idiom – he suggested that the book would read much better if it was written along the lines of a ‘quest’ for the origins of the motif. Mercia agreed to this suggestion and, more importantly, rose to the challenges this unusual approach presented.) Mercia’s innovative insights into these origins of green men – the final chapters of her book – are summarised in Chapter Six.

*The ‘green man’ roof boss in the nave of Lutterworth church.*
In every respect the chapters making up Parts Two and Three of this study are provisional and tentative. My hope is that in the next few years either academic researchers or volunteers assisting with future phrases of Project Gargoyle will approach the subject matter of medieval carvings in a much more rigorous manner than has usually been the case so far. I for one would welcome the time when the chapters comprising the following parts of the study can be dismissed as woefully out of date!

**Before we begin**

My last paragraph has the implicit ‘sub-text’ that the harder we look, the more chance we have of finding ‘order’ and a rationale to the subject matter of medieval carvings. But that implicit thought needs questioning in the light of what we do know about the choice of motifs for restorations.

The brief guide to the carvings of Gloucester Cathedral provides two contrasting examples. One the one hand – clearly pleading for the defence of the rationalist interpretations – the wolf playing bagpipes on the south aisle roof is not merely a one-off grotesque but should be regarded as part of a set, as all twelve gargoyles on this aisle roof are based on Psalm 148. However, the counsel for capricious choices would counter this by noting that, when the exterior of the lavatorium in the Cathedral Garth was restored between 1999 and 2004, each pinnacle was carved by a different mason ‘and all were encouraged to come up with their own ideas. There are bats, monkeys and the faces of several Cathedral characters including clerks of works and architects. (Hamilton 2006)

More typically, as an uncredited online BBC News story from 23 January 2012, declares in its headline ‘Lichfield Cathedral unveils “grotesque” fundraising idea’

*Fundraisers hoping to pay for repairs to Lichfield Cathedral have unveiled a ‘grotesque’ way of raising cash. Instead of sponsoring a friend or an animal, schools in Staffordshire and Shropshire can adopt a gargoyle. The project aims to raise around £40,000 for the cathedral’s East End Appeal. It has undergone a major programme of essential repairs to its stonework and conservation of its 16th Century painted glass.*
The Dean of Lichfield, the Very Reverend Adrian Dorber, said: ‘We’ve got a wonderful new set of 21st Century gargoyle carved in a medieval manner.

‘As many children like to be both engaged and terrified, we thought this would be really good bit of history and heritage for them to understand.’

(www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-16679799)

As already noted in Chapter One, a similar method of fundraising resulted in a pinnacle on Washington Cathedral being decorated with the mask of Darth Vader.

To my knowledge the first competition to design carvings in British cathedrals was back in 1986 when the children’s television programme Blue Peter invited suggestions from viewers. The aim was to select designs for six roof bosses to replace those lost when a fire badly damaged York Minster in 1984. One of the winning designs was of the Mary Rose (which had been raised in 1982 and in 1986 was well-known thanks to a major publicity campaign to raise funds for its conservation). This boss was designed by the then-sixteen-year old Joanna Biggs; a moving recollection of her involvement with this competition, seemingly written in 2005, is online (Biggs 2005).

Eschew ‘explanationism’

While it is certain that medieval masons were not influenced by competitions on children’s television, we cannot be sure that there were not parallels. The men who worked on medieval churches and cathedrals were human – and how many proud fathers can really resist a young child who says, ‘Daddy, why don’t you carve a big frightening dragon like the one in the bedtime story that Grandma told me last night…’?

As I have already stated in the Preface, we must resist excessive ‘explanationism’ and over-interpretation in the belief that everything is more rational than it appears to be. Seeking to understand the subject matter may shed more light on specific motifs or on how they ‘fit together’. But such attempts at interpretation should not become the main aim, simply remaining part of the ‘tool kit’ which might reveal underlying themes. Above all, there is

‘Daddy, why don’t you carve a big frightening dragon…?’

Probably not why Bottesford church acquired this magnificent example in the nave.
no benefit in trying to base interpretations on overly-generalised biblical passages. Michael Camille uses the example of Psalm 22:13

They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and roaring lion.
I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint.

which was interpreted by nineteenth century historians as either the oldest written description of a fossilised dinosaur, a description of planetary constellations, or a portrait of heretics. Oh, and as an ‘explanation’ of gargoyles… (Camille 1992: 78–9)

But for every set of carvings which can, as at Gloucester, be seen to be matched to a Psalm, there must be many where the inspiration was far more arbitrary.

**Supersessionism**

Used sensibly, how can interpretation be used successfully as a tool? One example is the work of Henry Claman, who identified a number of Romanesque capitals in the Burgundy region of France as illustrations of ‘supersessionism’. This is the belief that events in the life of Christ fulfilled prophecies made in the Old Testament. More specifically, the term ‘supersessionism’ denotes that Christianity replaced – superseded – Judaism as God’s chosen revelation. The role of Judaism was reduced to a ‘necessary prelude’ to Christianity (Claman 2000: 11, 198).

In a nutshell, passages in the writings of six of the most important Old Testament prophets – Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Zechariah and David – were interpreted by early Church Fathers as predictions of the legitimacy of Jesus as the Messiah. Indeed, the same interpretations are still current among almost all the Protestant denominations – presumably numerous sermons based on this polemic are preached every week. To Jews and other non-Christians this is a blatant attempt at ‘rewriting history’ to fit a later ideology. However, it maintains a long tradition as within the Old Testament there are examples of interpreting previous scriptural prophecies (for example, Daniel interprets the prophecies of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2, 24)) (Claman 2000: 67, 165)).
Supersessionism originates in the third to fifth centuries but was not fully developed in art until around the twelfth century. One of the most common motifs is the Tree of Jesse (corresponding to the supersessionist reading of Isaiah 11:1). Claman devotes his entire book to his exploration of supersessionist images in Romanesque art. It is not possible to summarise the subtleties of his observations and arguments. However, he does summarise his own work with a list of ‘rules’ for medieval imagery. Some of these rules are predictable – figures which are larger are more important than those which are smaller; and figures higher up are holier than those lower down. Other rules are fairly logical – placement to the left of the dominant figure (usually Christ) denotes good while placement to the right of the dominant figure denotes bad. But he also argues that placement of such images within the church was also of great importance. So, when images are placed in sequence along the walls of the nave, the viewer travels – as it were – ‘through the Old Testament’ (Claman 2000: 133–4).

Although at first glance Claman seems to be heading towards an excess of ‘explanation-ism’, in practice his work provides a useful example of how interpretation can be used as a ‘tool’, without going too far. He is mindful that Jews, while generally despised, can also appear among the ‘good’ on the right side of Christ – he uses the example of Enoch and Elijah as depicted on the Last Judgement carved on the tympanum of the Cathedral of St Lazarus at Autun, also in Burgundy.

Sally Mittuch has also argued that the splendid fifteenth century roof bosses in the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral can also be read as a sequence describing the journey of the soul in the afterlife (Mittuch 2007) – you might want to
think of them as an East Anglian counterpart to Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs or the Tibetan Bardo Thodol, often referred to inaccurately as the ‘Book of the Dead’.

**De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei and other essential reading**

While not part of the supersessionist doctrine, equally complex meanings are associated with medieval images of St Mary Magdalene, regarded as both a sinner and a saint. Above all the symbolism associated with images is rarely literal – more often it is condensed, abbreviated or metonymic.

The intended meaning of such abbreviated or metaphorical images might be recognised by people familiar with modern Christian doctrines and parables – at least if the doctrine or exegesis has remained recognisable since the Middle Ages. But there are plenty of ideas once common in preaching which are much less familiar now.

Carmen Acevedo Butcher’s study of Aelfric’s sermons and theology (Butcher 2006) includes a discussion of vineyard metaphors. Multitudes of sermons have been preached on the verses of the Fourth Gospel where Christ says ‘I am the true vine’ (*John* 15:1–8). But Aelfric’s sermon for the second week of Lent takes as its subject what Aelfric calls the ‘very dark parable’ of *Matthew* 21:3–46, seeing it as a fulfilment of *Isaiah* 5:4–7, which, in Aelfric’s own translation, states that ‘Obviously, the vineyard of God is the house of Israel’ (Butcher 2006: 49–50).

Elsewhere Aelfric preaches on the verse in the Gospels where Christ advises ‘Be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves’ (*Matthew* 10:16; *Luke* 10:16) and provides a complex – and rather ‘visual’ – exegesis of casting off sin (as a snake sloughs its skin) and guarding ourselves (just as snakes coil around themselves to protect their heads) (Butcher 2006: 143). Without the survival of Aelfric’s sermon none of this complex ‘imagery’ would be known to us.

Similarly Mary Curtis Webb’s detailed knowledge of twelfth century ideas enabled her to consider the imagery on the font from Hampstead Norreys, Berkshire (now in the church at Stone, Berkshire) as a ‘Summa’ of the ‘Two Works of God’ (viz. creation and salvation) as expounded by the twelfth century Master Hugh of St Victor in his *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*. She also argued that the geometrical designs also on the font are much
more than ‘mere decoration’ – instead they should be read as illustrations of the cosmology in Plato’s *Timaeus* and the theory of number in Boethius’s *Arithmetic*. Other imagery is, according to Webb, based on the Ransom Theory in *Moria in Job*, Gregory the Great’s long-winded commentary on the Book of Job.

I will return to Webb’s work in Part Three. For the moment I am simply ‘name dropping’ Master Hugh, Plato, Boethius and Gregory the Great as a note of caution. While their books (with the arguable exception of *Timeaus*) are hardly well-known today, that was not the case in the twelfth century. Not only were they understood by the patron of the Hampstead Norreys font but seemingly they were expertly interpreted by its carver. More importantly, the patron must have expected a significant number of people to saw the font to at least have a broad familiarity with the ideas depicted.

For those of us, such as myself, who do not share Webb’s erudition and familiarity with this medieval literature, we simply cannot see – still less ‘read’ – this sculpture in the manner intended. And how many other medieval carvings require a similar depth of knowledge before they can be fully understood? At this stage that remains an open question as too few people with Webb’s specialist knowledge have focused their attention on carvings.

**Motif-by-motif**

The remaining chapters in Part Two look at some of the motifs depicted in medieval carvings such as corbels and gargoyles. However I have made no attempt to discuss all the possible motifs.

To my knowledge there have only been two attempts at more-or-less comprehensive lists of imagery to be encountered in churches. One of these, Malcolm Jones’ *The Secret Middle Ages* (Jones 2002), has a wider scope than ecclesiastical carvings but nevertheless includes a number of examples from misericords and other church ornamentation. Most of the Jones’ examples are comical or downright bawdy.

In contrast, Richard Taylor’s *How to Read a Church: An illustrated guide to images, symbols and meanings in churches and cathedrals* concentrates on symbols with a meaning more in keeping with Christian doctrines. He provides a list, organised
thematically by ‘animals’ and ‘plants’, with each category listed alphabetically from ‘Ape’ to ‘Whale’ and ‘Acacia’ to ‘Wheat’ (Taylor 2004: 208–43). Most relevant to this study are his entries for dragon, Leviathan, phoenix and unicorn. If nothing else Taylor’s compendium is a reminder that, while the grotesque and the monstrous may gain our attention, they are accompanied by a great many mundane and commonplace depictions.

In *What Can a Gargoyle Tell us?* (Trubshaw 2013b) I offer some suggestions how a more complete ‘taxonomy’ of the multitude of monsters and naturalistic subjects might evolve. For the moment a much less complete ‘sampling’ of motifs must suffice.

**Human, animal or monster?**

At the broadest level of categorisation figurative medieval carvings can be thought of as representing either humans, animals or monsters. Where the carvings decorate corbels, hood stops, arch springers and roof bosses then usually only the head is depicted; with gargoyles then more of the body may be included.

Humans can be fairly naturalistic or more stylised. Animals are rarely naturalistic. Monsters, ironically, are often more ‘naturalistic’ than real-life animals. However any attempt to make clear-cut distinction between humans, animals and monsters are defeated by the imaginations of the masons. Ass-like ears appear often on otherwise naturalistic human heads. Other human heads may have cat-like ears. Alex Woodcock has observed that cat-like ears are typical of twelfth century carvings, while ass-like ears are typical of the thirteenth century onwards; Woodcock 2005: 85. Michael Camille suggested that cat-ears were a deliberate punning reference to Cathars (Camille 1989: 66–7) although I am not aware of any other scholars picking up on this suggestion.

Occasionally male heads are depicted with horns – a clear symbol of cuckoldry. Clearly we are in the realms of caricature and mockery, although the identity of the victims and their antagonists have long been forgotten.

As ever, the motifs on carvings are wont to slip into the cracks between tidy definitions. In part this is because the meanings were intended to be ‘slippery’. But, in large part, this is simply because the modern dualism between animal and human was simply not part of medieval culture (Woodcock 2005: 5).
Faces, heads or masks?

For the purposes of this chapter I will refer to all face-only carvings as ‘heads’. A more pedantic typology would distinguish between ‘heads’ and ‘masks’. In other words, between fairly three-dimensional carvings (even if the back if the head is merged into the supporting stone) and comparatively shallow carvings only intended to be seen from the front.

My assumption – but one which needs to be tested at a later stage in Project Gargoyle – is that carvings which would only ever be seen from one direction (roof bosses are an excellent example) tend to have faces carved in a mask-like manner while corbels and
such like tend to be more three-dimensional. This would mean that most (although not necessarily all) masks are in wood while most heads are in stone. But this does not suggest a fundamental difference in how the carvers in the different materials approached their subject matter – simply that more wooden carvings are fixed in ‘remote’ parts of the building (such as roofs) while stone carvings tend to be seen from several directions.

Nevertheless there remains the possibility that some architectural wood carvings were sculpted by men familiar with masks used in pageants and popular customs. However, despite fairly frequent references to ‘masked revellers’ in medieval records, the handful of contemporary illustrations from Britain and the Continent suggest that these were likely to be kitted out in a manner we think of as a ‘hobby horse’ with a three-dimensional head (held on a stick) rather than a full-face mask as the word ‘mask’ now more narrowly denotes.

While it is appropriate to describe specific carvings as either a ‘head’ or a ‘mask’, there is no reason to suppose that the difference denotes any distinction in the meaning or significance of the imagery.

**Hint heads**

Human perception tends to see faces in unlikely situations – gnarled tree trunks or stone outcrops are likely to seemingly have eyes and mouths.

This metamorphic ‘sleight of mind’ is universal – and was clearly known to medieval masons, as in a number of churches there are corbels carved with a geometric motif which at first glance suggest a stylised human face. A second look reveals that the mason has carved a T-shape in a manner that casts the shadows created by human brows and noses. Given that some carvings which are intended to heads sometimes have much less depth or detail, then this initial misperception is understandable.

Given that many of the more monstrous carvings and foliate faces represent the human face in some fairly extreme ways, these T-shaped decorations go one step further into the liminal space where representation and geometrical ornamentation merge.
J. Tindall Wildridge, in his article on ‘The grotesque in church art’ published in 1899 seems to have been the first to draw attention to these minimalist but sophisticated motifs. He called them ‘notch heads’ although I have always preferred the more self-explanatory term ‘hint heads’.

Non-figurative carvings with meanings

While this study focuses almost entirely on ‘figurative’ carving (a term here extended to include animals as well as humans) they are, of course, not the only decorative motifs encountered in churches. So, Romanesque art characteristically includes stylised acanthus leaves (often referred to by art historians as ‘stiff leaf’) and purely geometrical patterns, such as chevrons. Gothic art retains an interest in vegetation, although usually the depictions are much more life-like, so that the species of tree or plant can be readily recognised. And all sorts of stars and geometrical forms associated with heraldry also appear alongside carvings depicting by more animate subjects.

Despite the emphasis of this study, it would be entirely wrong to assume that only figurative carvings had meaning. However, as with the interpretation of figurative imagery, caution is needed. Simply assuming that all vegetation is a reference to Jesus’s proclamation ‘I am the true vine’ or even to the self-evidence associations between the re-growth of vegetation in springtime and Christ’s resurrection at Easter would, I think, be oversimplified. And yet people viewing such carvings would have been aware of such ‘parables in stone’.

Presumably the many Romanesque fonts decorated with stylised arcades were intended to symbolise the Church as
an institution. So the rite of baptism performed in the font all-but-literally allowed the person to ‘enter’ the Church.

Similarly the chevrons, so common on the main doorway into a Romanesque church, seem to depict stylised water. Is it possible that there was a subtle psychology to this motif, to the effect that anyone walking through the doorway would be reminded of their vows of baptism? However perhaps here I am guilty of seeking meaning where none was intended. As Anthony Weir recognises, expense was a crucial concern where church-decoration was concerned and chevrons were a cheap form of decoration, only one step up from blank voussoirs (Weir, pers. comm. 7 February 2013).

More curious are the tympana decorated with geometric wheel-and-petal motifs. In pre-Christian times the wheel was associated with the thunder god Taranis. Clearly by the time of these carvings the symbol had been appropriated by the Church to denote what many art historians deem ‘the wheel of eternity’. But, unlike many major cultures, Christianity has a linear temporal cosmology; only the liturgical year is cyclical.

Art historians often refer to the motif as a ‘marigold’, with the assumption that it symbolises the flower of the Gospels. However I have not attempted to track down the origin of this interpretation (which is seemingly spurious).

In more recent centuries this simply-drawn motif is known to have been used in ‘folk art’ as one of a number of apotropaic motifs drawn in chalk on doorsteps or inscribed into wet plaster (e.g. Pennick 1995; 2002). But whether this means that the motif had an unbroken ‘magical power’ from the time of Taranis or whether it was borrowed from Christian contexts as a powerful ‘holy’ motif is an open question. It is almost certainly a question which the people inscribing this motif never asked – as a ‘symbol of power’ it had become self-sufficient, rather than an emblem of the power of a deity. While more work is needed to fully understand what this motif meant in the twelfth century, such research is well outside the scope of this study.

For present purposes I simply want to acknowledge that it is not only figurative carvings which were intended to convey meaning and significance but so too were the foliate designs and geometrical patterns which often kept them company.
Chapter Five

Human images

Predictably enough, medieval sculptors were commissioned most often to depict their fellow human beings – or at least the more saintly and godly. As already noted in Part One, much of their work of an *imaginator* involved carving crucifixions and statues of the apostles and other saints. There would have been little scope for variations from the conventional depictions.

But such ‘good behaviour’ was also matched by a certain amount of ‘time off’. As Nurith Kenaan-Kedar’s description poignantly conveys, once these sculptors were allowed to break free from the conventions then their lively imaginations came to the fore:

The depiction of human images is a major theme in twelfth-century marginal sculpture. Several stereotypical images are portrayed with specific identifying attributes, while others are of very general character. Craftsmen and figures from the nobility and clergy are not frequently depicted, and when they are they are located next to various images of marginal people and fantastic animals. Marginals, jongleurs (itinerant minstrels, acrobats and so on), prostitutes, drunkards and beggars, as well as images of men and women with specific expressions, constitute the major theme of the series.

The most provocative expressions seem to depict subversive traits. These are expressed through human heads with distorted, exaggerated facial features and through coarse and bold gestures. A man is depicted holding his mouth open with both hands, for instance, or
exhibiting enormous teeth with a corresponding tooth missing in the upper and lower jaws. Grimaces of laughter and mockery are frequent, such as a laughing mouth situated on the cheek of a frontally modelled face, as on the corbels of St Nicolas in Civray and St Etienne in Cahors.

(Kenaan-Kedar 1995: 14)

The subject matter is exceedingly varied. But the range of emotions is surprisingly restricted. While we might expect happiness, sadness, fear or anger the carvings seem only to express a generalised ‘fierceness’. I have, semi-seriously, noted that the job description for a green man is to have foliage sprouting from your mouth, nose, ears or eyes while looking thoroughly miserable. There are, indeed, few happy-looking green men carvings.

**No one mentioned cheese**

The faces of Christ, whether on crucifixes or depictions of the Last Judgement share the same solemn but otherwise in unpassionate expression. Indeed ‘holy faces show no expression because passion was regarded as evil, and as a sin.’ (Sauerländer 2006: 3). As Sarah Dunant also observed:

The most reproduced woman of Western art, Mary, mother of Jesus, never really opens her mouth at all, even when a miracle is happening.

In Renaissance art, the annunciation – a moment where some joy might seem in order – is actually a study of a
woman’s complex emotional, spiritual journey: fear, incomprehension, wonder and quiet acceptance. To crack a big smile would be – well – too forward.

In portraits of ordinary men and women, smiles are equally rare. Being recorded for posterity was a serious business.

[...]

Then there is that most dangerous of all women in mythology, Medusa. So horribly lovely – wild writhing snakes for hair – that she can only be safely viewed – and slaughtered – by reflection. Images of Medusa’s decapitated head – from classical Greek through the great masters are unmissable: gaping mouth, teeth bared in violent fury.

Think Vampires – always most alluring in the body of lovely young women eager to test their canines on a male neck. Or the even more potent myth of vagina dentata – I trust you can manage that translation – the ultimate male nightmare which so continues to fascinate and appal that only few years ago it surfaced again in a rather splendid independent American movie – half comedy, half horror.

And finally imagine, if you will, those images of Monica Lewinsky that sped around the world: the young eager intern, flowing dark locks and wide generous mouth rising up from the crowd to greet the President of America, a man she would be happy to serve in whatever way she could.

Whether we are discussing the past or the present, the open smiling female mouth, carries with it definite psychosexual power.

(Dunant 2012)

And if vagina dentata and allusions to blow jobs seem a little out of place in a study of medieval carvings then you’ve not already skipped ahead and read the chapter on female exhibitionists...
But returning our thoughts to smiles, they are a twentieth century invention. At least so far as portraits for posterity go, if not in real life. Think of any of the family photographs of Victorians. No one is ever smiling. Partly this was because the occasion which brought everyone together was as likely to have been a funeral as a wedding or christening. And partly because people had to keep motionless for up to a minute. But mostly because it was not the done thing to be recorded looking frivolous. There was a real self-consciousness that this might be the only (or at least the last) photograph of you. To ‘say cheese’ become part of popular culture only with the era of Kodak Brownie cameras and the emergence of a much less serious attitude to being photographed.

The corollary of this is that medieval artists and sculptors depicted saints and ‘normal’ people with the mouth’s closed and all-but expressionless. So the many grotesques with gaping mouths – and often fearsome teeth – were always an expression of some sort of terrifying demeanour. And, it has to said, such biting and gaping faces are almost inevitably highly animated.

**Selected motifs**

In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss, fairly briefly, several themes and motifs which are fairly commonly depicted. The following three chapters will deal in more detail with themes which have been studied previously in more detail: firstly green men, then mooners, and finally male and female exhibitionists. The final chapter in Part Two looks at monsters, which may be either anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or theriomorphic (in plain English, ‘man-animals’).

**Portraits and caricatures**

It is perhaps ironic that the most prevalent medieval carvings of humans are the ones least studied! Corbels and hoodstops decorated with crowned male heads and women wearing square-top headdresses (or other styles popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) are commonplace. Even if we successfully identify all the more generic nineteenth century versions of this motif we are still left with an immense number of such ‘portraits’.

But are they portraits? The art historians’ rule-of-thumb is that there are no portraits ‘in the modern sense’ before the late thirteenth century. There are a plethora of faces – on
paintings, sculptures, coins, seals – but they are deemed ‘schematic’ (Sauerländer 2006: 3). Yet this rule of thumb needs testing, as some of the ‘schematic’ kings and queens encountered on corbels do seem to individual enough to be intended to depict the ruling monarch and his queen. Others presumably perpetuate the appearance of a leading member of the gentry. In the rare instances when we know enough about the patronage of church building, especially who funded the construction of north and south aisles, we might even begin to put names to some of the faces. And, almost inevitably, among these ‘mug shots in masonry’ there must be a goodly number of parish priests and local bishops. Perhaps a costume historian can confirm that such carvings are all later than the thirteenth-fourteenth century ‘watershed’ for portraiture.

Rare among such portraits are depictions of artisans or even fellow masons. On the cover of this study is a carving from Ryhall which, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, maybe a self-portrait of a master mason. But this is only a supposition.

Curiously, as Willibald Sauerländer has noted, the nearest we get to individual portraits before the thirteenth century are the sculptures depicting fools. ‘Looking at these haunting, but also amusing faces,’ Sauerländer writes, seemingly echoing the ideas of Michael Camille:

... one is never sure if they are hellish or carnivalesque, because the boundary between devilry and buffoonery is uncertain. What is certain is that these “mugs” or masks, be they sinners or jesters, are the most original physiogonomic inventions in the art of the Middle Ages.
(Sauerländer 2006: 5)

We find it hard to think of fun as being spiritually dangerous, indeed potentially heretical. But up-tight celibate monks were perhaps entitled to regard anything tending toward the Dionysian as anti-Christian. The blurred boundary which Sauerländer identifies was a highly contested mental space for medieval clergy.

Perhaps inevitably formal portraits blend into less formal ones which in turn blend into what must have been caricatures. I suspect that fellow masons – and a good number of clergy – were the inspirations for these more character-full portrayals.
But my initial response is that, even if we did have sufficient historical information to name those who could be named, there would still be a large number of regal or noble looking heads which were simply ‘generic’. The Gothic Revival increased the number of these fairly lifeless generic heads repetitiously. They invoke ‘Ye Olde Merrie England’ without actually bringing it back to life.

Once Project Gargoyle has brought together a more-or-less complete set of images for Leicestershire and Rutland carvings I hope someone with expertise in medieval clothing (especially headgear) will come forward to offer suggestions of dates. Another expert in the way royalty were depicted at the time may be able to identify portraits of the monarchs and their spouses. Those who know the documentary history of the church (where such records have survived since the Middle Ages) may be able to suggest a ‘short list’ of patrons who might have been monumentalised.

I suspect that there are further questions which could be ‘asked’ of these heads; in What can a Gargoyle Tell Us? (Trubshaw 2013b) I will explore further how such questions can best be identified.

**Triple heads**

For once this is a motif which art historians have discussed. he concept of the Trintiy was established by the Council of Nicaea in 325, although depictions in art did not generally appear until the late medieval period, becoming fairly common between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries (Mills 2003: 39–43). Indeed anyone wishing to understand this motif should read Robert Mill’s essay (and should approach with some caution much less well-informed discussions of triple-heads (Keenan-Kedar 1995: 29; Verzar and Little 2006: 166–7)).

The bug-eyed tricephalic roof boss at Queniborough, carved in the mid-fifteenth century, broadly corresponds to other late medieval depictions of the Trinity. However, there is still something ‘slippery’ about this motif. Firstly, in medieval popular culture there are occasional references to ‘three-headed Beelzebub’ – a multi-headed Devil, presumably derived from a description of a multi-headed demonic beast in Revelation. And, as the overall scope of Mills’ essay – ‘Jesus as monster’ – suggests, there was something ‘monstrous’ about the images of the three-headed Trinity.
But maybe the intended meanings of this carvings were almost certainly multiple (and I would like to think that *triple* rather than merely double meaning would be most appropriate... ). Furthermore, as will be revealed in the chapter on exhibitionists, to understand this boss we need to understand the even more remarkable boss on the adjacent truss which has made the eyes on this trio of faces bulge for over five centuries...

**Fonts with four heads**

While leper’s heads and triple heads seem to raise more questions than art historians have yet begun to answer, when it comes to four heads then there does seem to be at least one satisfactory rationale. Or at least when the four heads are on the same Romanesque font.

The tradition of including four heads in the corners of a font goes back to Anglo-Saxon times, as the splendid example for Luppitt in Devon confirms. But this form of decoration reaches its zenith in the twelfth century. Ignore for a moment the heads on the font at Greetham and look instead at the crisp ‘pleated’ decoration which makes a transition from the round base to the square section of the upper font. Every ‘pleat’ is carved with incredible precision, even though each one follows its own complex geometrical profile. Whoever carved this was a stonemason with consummate skills – and who was seemingly prepared to ‘risk all’ taking on this project where there was little or no scope to correct any mistakes. Words like ‘showing off’ don’t even begin to do justice to the audacity and craftsmanship.

Few modern masons could produce such skilled work – and I suspect the same was true among the contemporaries of this particular virtuoso artisan. The heads too are more than merely competent. Three are human while the fourth is more bestial – and note the particularly exaggerated proportions of the tongue-poker.

A plausible suggestion is that the four faces represent the four directions. Mary Curtis Webb, based on the work of Professor Harry Bober, has suggested that the four heads on the font from Hampstead Norreys, Berkshire (now in the church at Stone, Buckinghamshire; see photograph on page 78) depict the four elements of air, fire, water and earth (Curtis Webb 2010: 95; 101; 132, 152–3; 173). 132, 152–3). However the heads on the Hampstead Norreys font are not in the four corners but instead form a four-
fold ‘knot pattern’ which does indeed emulate a diagram in a twelfth century manuscript clearly labelled, in Latin, as earth, air, fire and water.

These four elements are interwoven with the four ‘humours’ or ‘temperaments’ of Hippocratic medicine. These are commonly known as ‘black bile’ or melancholy (from Greek *melan chole*), ‘yellow bile’ or choleric (from Greek *chole*), ‘phlegm’ or phlegmatic (from Greek *phlegma*) and ‘blood’ or sanguine (from Latin *sanguis*). However there seems no obvious reason why the four humours should appear on a font. Neither does Webb offer any suggestions of how the faces on fonts symbolised the different elements or humours.

But where the heads are in the ‘four corners’ (if a round bowl can be thought of as having ‘corners’), as at Greetham, then for once we do have a fairly reliable idea of what they were intended to denote. They were the four rivers of Paradise. On the face of things this seems as arbitrary as the four humours or the four cardinal directions. But the rite of purification for the water to be used for baptism is based on *Genesis* 2:10 which refers to the four rivers of Paradise (viz. Phison, Gehon, Tigris and Euphrates). More specifically, it refers to the sources of these rivers – their headwaters. And, in the Vulgate Latin of twelfth century bibles, the word for the headwaters of a river is *capita*. Think of the modern word ‘decapitated’, from the Latin *caput* and the word-play (or perhaps simple misunderstanding) becomes obvious (Benton 2006: 104; Webb 2010: 95, 101, 173).

Once aware of the Vulgate Latin this ‘pun’ seems reasonably obvious. Yet, without that insight into the biblical passage quoted in the relevant liturgy, it would be anything but obvious! Just how many more carvings are derived from comparable ‘puns’ based on what has become arcane knowledge? And how many from puns where the reference was so arcane it has now been lost? I hope this one instance serves to show, firstly, that sometimes it is possible to identify a plausible interpretation – or at least ‘inspiration’ – and, secondly, that such interpretations may not be in the least obvious without a specialist understanding.

It would be easy to ‘explain’ the heads on fonts as devils being cast out by the rite of baptism. Indeed, baptism is to all intents and purposes a rite of exorcism, and several medieval illustrations show devils emerging from the mouths of those being baptised. But,
clearly, not all the heads on fonts are ‘devilish’ – most look benign, at least in a stern sort of manner.

As discussed in Appendix Two, there seems to be an overlapping tradition between pre-Christian apotropaic figures – such as weohs – and early Christian carvings from the eighth to twelfth centuries. Undoubtedly this tradition meant that belief in the evil-averting powers also straddled the doctrinal divide (although such a divide may only have been clearly discernible in the minds of the clergy). This underlying belief needs to be focused so that we ask why specific carvings were apotropaic, and how was this ability conveyed. I simply don’t think the faces on fonts answer either of these questions convincingly and so we need to look beyond a ‘generic’ apotropaic assumption. And, in this instance, I consider that Mary Webb’s identification with the four rivers of Paradise hits the matter on the head.

**Tongue poking**

In the polite wording of academic discourse, Neil Price informs us that protruding tongues ‘share’ information (Price 2002: 326–7). Indeed. In an analogous manner one could postulate that this facial gesture retains its polysemic attributes of defiance and insubordination in pan-cultural contexts. Cue audible raspberry at all such highfalutin’ gobbledygook – stick your tongue out at just about anyone the world over and they know darned well it’s not an act of friendship. And some of the international rugby teams who have faced up to the All Blacks’ infamous Maori *haka* have responded accordingly – including the Italian team in September 2007 who deliberately snubbed them (and then lost 76-14!).
At the risk of excessive pedantry, I should note that the one country where you can – indeed should – stick your tongue out in friendship is Tibet. This is because a ninth century Tibetan king known for his cruelty had a black tongue. Tibetans believe in reincarnation, and they feared that this mean king would be reincarnated. Ever since have Tibetans greeted one another by sticking out their tongues to show they are not incarnations of the malevolent ruler.

Anyone who starts to take a closer interest in gargoyles and corbels will quickly lose count of the number of tongue-pokers among the faces. This gesture of defiance was clearly alive and well in medieval Europe. For once we need not look for multiple layers of meanings – they are ‘speaking’ to us without any pomposity or digression.

**Face-pullers**

Sometimes, although by no means always, the mouth from which the tongue protrudes is held wide open by the fingers of both hands. More rarely just one hand is used. Where a church has a surviving set of gargoyles then, not surprisingly, at least one of them will be mouth-pulling. The same posture is also to be found on corbels and other contexts. And, while this chapter is principally about human carvings, there are probably nearly as many face-pulling monsters and animals.

Among aficionados of carvings such mouth-pullers became to be known as ‘girning’ or ‘gurning’ faces. I too adopted this terminology in my early publications. But word girning or gurning – the difference is only in the spelling – derives from a Cumbrian custom. In the village of Egremont as part of the annual Crab Fair each September contestants line up to put their heads through a horse collar and distort their

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*Another twelfth century font in Leicestershire with heads in the four corners at Hallaton.*
faces. It helps to take your false teeth out first as this makes it easier to get your bottom lip over your nose....

But one thing is against the rules – using your hands. So medieval face-pullers are, by definition, not gurning. We could happily dub them ‘mouth-pullers’. But in Leicestershire at least it seems they might once have been referred to as ‘mawming’.

In 1881 Sebastian Evans published an augmented edition of his father’s collection of Leicestershire words, phrases and proverbs (Evans and Evans 1881). Among the long lists of now-obsolete farming terminology is this entry:

**Mawms** ‘to make mawms’ = to ‘make faces’ in derision.

(Evans and Evans 1881: 192)

Although many East Midlands children have been instructed to ‘Stop mawming about!’ when their counterparts elsewhere would have been inveigled to ‘Stop lazing around!’, sadly it seems from my research that the sense of mawming recorded by the Evans seems to have been lost. Nevertheless I have adopted the word mawming to describe the Leicestershire examples.

However as this is a dialect word then ‘mouth-puller’ is the better term when not referring solely to Leicestershire examples. Indeed, ‘mawming’ was probably never used in Rutland as the dialect there owes more to idioms associated with Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire than to those spoken in the Soar valley (Trubshaw 2004b).

Malcolm Jones has written about mouth-pullers and the similar gesture of a finger-in-the-mouth as denoting fools (Jones 2002: 114–15). And, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter Seven, the fool is indeed a prominent figure in medieval sculpture, we must be careful not to generalise from Jones’ examples (which do indeed seem to denote fools) and make the much more tendentious assumption that all carvings of mouth-pullers depict fools. Indeed, the sheer number of non-human monsters with their paws in their jaws – who are self-evidently not to be counted as fools – argues that this gesture is simply rude. Quite how rude I will suggest in Chapter Eight!
Long before Johnny Depp gave the image of pirates a makeover, the skull and crossbones motif was widely known. Along with the hourglass, throughout seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe it signified death. For this reason the motif was hijacked by pirates – by flying the so-called ‘Jolly Roger’ they hoped victims would be intimidated into surrendering without a fight. A good story, although probably fictional as historical sources suggest most pirate vessels deployed a plain black or, less often, plain red ensign.

Before the Age of Enlightenment the skull and crossbones denoted a life in heaven after the final day of judgement. Without getting too hung up on the niceties, pre-Reformation beliefs about the afterlife were to the effect that, at the time of death, the soul went to Limbo, thought to be the ‘edge of Hell’. Come Domesday and the body – the bones – would rise from the grave and be reunited with its soul (at least for those who had been baptised). Any number of Doom paintings – only a small proportion of which survive – would show this with as much macabre detail as possible.

Except that there was a problem. Many medieval churchyards were, how shall we put it, ‘over-subscribed’. Often less than thirty years after interment your bones would be disturbed by the next generation of burials. In principle, the bones of one individual would be placed in the bottom of the grave before the next body was interred. But, in practice, clearly knowing who-was-who was getting to be more than a little difficult. For reasons that seem to
have been lost in the proverbial mists, it was decreed that the skull and two long bones – usually but not always the thigh bones – were sufficient for the person to the known to God at the End of Days. Crypts and specially-built charnel houses were used to retain skulls and femurs, although only two examples survive in England – Rothwell in Northamptonshire and Hythe in Kent.

Even after the Reformation changed people’s ideas about the afterlife, the ‘skull and crossbones’ was one of a range of motifs used as *memento mori* on gravestones and monuments from the seventeenth century. But, as a corbel from Cottesmore suggests, the underlying idea seems to have been well-established in medieval times.

When Colin Hyde sent me a photograph of the corbel at Cottesmore my initial thoughts were that this was a pair of leeks, denoting the person depicted as a Welshman. As William Shakespeare’s Henry V tells Fluellen, he is wearing a leek ‘for I am Welsh, you know, good countryman.’ The leek is one of the national emblems of Wales, worn along with the daffodil on St David’s Day; in Welsh, the daffodil is known as ‘Peter’s leek’, *Cenhinen Bedr*.

But an email from Lionel Wall, forwarded to me by Tina Negus, reveals that the Cottesmore carving is only one instance of the motif which he has also found at Whissendine, Langham and Hungarton. (The exact number in Leicestershire and Rutland should be ascertained as Project Gargoyle unfolds.) And, while the Cottesmore example is open to misunderstanding, the others are not. They are thigh bones.

Above right: The ‘bone shaker’ corbel at Cottesmore. Photograph by Colin Hyde.

Right: One of the roof bosses at Church Langton depicts a human head with thigh bones. Photograph by Mike Walter for Project Gargoyle.
Yet clearly the face is not a skull. So this is not a medieval precursor to the later *memento mori*. So what is he doing? Well, as Tina Negus suggested, if it’s your thigh bones he’s waving around you’re not going to be partying with the great and the good in the final ever-after...

**Left:** Part of the ‘crypt’ under Hythe church.

**Right:** Keep track of your skull and thigh bones and all will be well on the Day of Judgement.
Chapter Six

Green men and foliate faces

Of all the motifs and designs on carvings most attention in recent decades has been focused on just one type – the so-called ‘green men’. Numerous books – some academic and some popular – have been published about them, which have inspired various people to seek out as many examples as they can find. Most such folk are happy to be referred to as ‘green maniacs’. They happily photograph and catalogue the locations in churches.

Most of these green men are sprouting vegetation from their faces – typically their mouths but sometimes their nostrils, ears or eyes. Most are male, a few are female – and some are not human but are ‘green animals’. Some manage to combine sprouting foliage with poking their tongues. Almost all – and the exceptions are very rare – look unhappy. They are solemn to the point of appearing stern or miserable.

And, while we call them ‘green’, the available evidence – at least from Leicestershire – suggests this may be a misnomer! As already noted in Chapter One, traces of ‘original’ paint usually vanished in the Victorian era. Two green men roof bosses in Leicestershire have been restored – the one in Lutterworth in the early 1980s and the one at Sileby in the

*Not all ‘green men’ are green.*

Top: Lutterworth.

Bottom: Sileby. Photographed for Project Gargoyle by Steve Harris.
The making of a modern myth

Most churches with more than a handful of Gothic carvings usually have a green man or two among the motifs. In all they probably come in as about the third-most-popular motif after tongue-pokers and face-pullers. But why were these green men carved in such great numbers? All the suggestions about their meaning and significance are twentieth century inventions. Even the name ‘green man’ was unknown before 1939 when Lady Raglan brought together a rag-bag of ideas which were published in the Folklore Society journal (Raglan 1939). She erroneously conflated the church carvings with other ‘green men’, such as the Jack-in-the-Green disguises of traditional Maytime customs (a tradition which goes back only to the late eighteenth century (Judge 1979)). She also gave credence to the already-discredited idea that these were pagan survivals (see Chapter One and Appendix One for how this idea came to be in circulation among late nineteenth and early twentieth century folklorists).

Thankfully in 1978 a sumptuously illustrated large-format book by Kathleen Basford appeared which was devoted to these green men carvings. She retained Lady Raglan’s useful designation but did not even bother to discuss the nonsense of pagan survivals. Apart from a brief section in Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross’s book, Grotesques and Gargoyles, published in 1975 this was almost all the information about green men as could be found in print, with the exception of some obscure works about the carvings in specific cathedrals, notably Lincoln.

Not all ‘green men’ were human.

Top: A corbel at Long Clawson.

And some ‘green men’ are better described as ‘foliate faces.

Bottom: One of a splendid set of green men roof bosses in the nave at Warmington, Northamptonshire.
But these pioneering publications created an ever-increasing number of enthusiasts. Sadly when these people wrote about the carvings in articles, booklets and, more rarely, books most of them followed Sheridan and Ross in resurrecting the supposed ‘pagan origins’. A typical example is Guy Raglan Philips’s Phillips, Guy Raglan, 1987, The Unpolluted God, (Phillips 1987).

Predictably enough this idea of a ‘hidden pagan past’ caught the attention of television producers who, maintaining an ongoing tradition of never letting the facts get in the way of a good script, worked with William Anderson to put together a programme which, while showing some excellent examples of these carvings, presented as unequivocal fact the idea that these were carved as surreptitious ‘survivals’ of an Old Faith – without of course any supporting evidence for their being any such pre-Christian beliefs in any other aspects of medieval culture or history.

More imaginatively, Anderson seems to be among the first to establish a new significance for the green men – ‘adopting’ them as the most appropriate emblem for the emergent Green politics and James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis (which had first been published as a book in 1979). The subtitle of the book which went with the television programme says it all: The Green Man: The archetype of our oneness with the Earth (Anderson 1990).

Yes, into this muddy puddle of ideas he also managed to bring in another raft of ideas which never had any academic credibility – the ‘archetypes’ of Carl Jung (see Trubshaw 2003a: 10–14 for my previously-published thoughts about Jung).
Predictably enough the television programme and tie-in book generated widespread interest in green men, but perpetuated the now-indelible myth of their being ‘pagan survivals’. And as an example of just how pervasive this error has become, I have lost count of the number of churchwardens around the country who have been proud to show me around their churches and provide a generally sound account of the history of the building. Once my interest in carvings had emerged they would show me one or more green men and say they were ‘pagan gods’ or such like.

Fran and Geoff Doel made a valiant attempt to argue for this thesis in an book written largely in an academic idiom (Doel and Doel 2001). However their reasoning has failed to win over informed critics (e.g. Harte 2001, Bradtke 2003, Hayman 2011). I am aware that Anglo-Saxon literature refers pagan ‘idols’ called *tre mathr* (‘tree man’) (North 1997: 93–6). We have no idea what such idols looked like – they may simply have been anthropomorphic branches, perhaps dressed with proper clothes or with ‘improvised’ clothing akin to modern scarecrows. Indeed, in the back of my mind is the thought that scarecrows represent an unbroken tradition with such pre-Christian idols. Despite the seductive similarities in names, I would need a lot of convincing that *tre mathr* and green men anything else in common.

Most surprising is that even academics who should know better continue to uncritically reiterate unsubstantiated modern myths about the supposed links with Jack-in-the-Green (Professor Christine Verzar in Little 2006: 117). Thankfully two popular introductions (Harding 1998; Harte 2001) are better-informed and do not make these long-since outdated suggestions about either Jack-in-the-Green or ‘pagan survivals’.

*A tre mathr on the boundary of ‘God’s Acre’ in the twenty-first century. Blatant evidence that the Old Religion is still followed in Wymeswold – at least by the standards of evidence used to argue that Gothic green men were intended to represent pagan deities!*
Out of India

In 2003, a book appeared which offered a much more interesting origin than as some sort of vague continuation of pagan precursors. Mercia MacDermot developed an observation by one the pioneering art historians of the Romanesque, Meyer Schapiro (1904–96). Schapiro’s career was largely devoted to modern art so many of his innovatory ideas about the Romanesque from earlier in his life were either never fully developed or only appeared in print posthumously (Linda Seidel’s introduction to Schapiro 2006).

When green men – and, very significantly ‘green animals’ – first appear in Romanesque sculpture then they look exactly like similar foliate-sprouting faces in Indian art. Right down to the fine detail of a row of ‘dots’ down the centre of the stems of the foliage (regarded as pearls in Indian art – though there is an intentional double-meaning as the word for pearl is mukta, which also means the ‘illusion of reality’). Exactly this motif is to be found in Indian metalwork and other art forms right through to this day.

The oldest surviving example in the British Isles is one the right-hand capital of the south doorway at Kilpeck in Herefordshire; older examples are known on the Continent. Rutland has two slightly younger examples – one of the faces in the row-upon-row of heads decorating the chancel arch at Tickencote is a foliage-sprouting human face, while a
‘green animal’ lurks among the complexity of motifs on the columns of the chancel arch at Stoke Dry. Significantly both these have only one sprout of vegetation – very much in keeping with Indian precedents but rare for later examples.

MacDermot’s suggestion is straightforward – examples of Indian art on metalwork, carved ivory or bone, decorated textiles or manuscripts came long what we call the Silk Road into Byzantium where they were sold either to Christian traders from the Mediterranean countries or to the Scandinavian traders we generically refer to as ‘Vikings’ but included the Rus of the tributaries of the Rhine and Danube. As the map clearly shows, there were multiple trade routes along which such portable art could travel and make its way from India to not only the Mediterranean but also northern Europe and Scandinavia.

Soon after the first edition of MacDermott’s book was published an entirely independent group of scholars drew attention to the way in which a distinctive ‘three rabbits’ or ‘three hares’ motif was found in a Buddhist cave in western China dated to the late sixth or early seventh centuries AD, on Middle Eastern metalwork, and decorating roof bosses and stained glass in medieval England. (MacDermott 2006: 186) Indeed this motif is so common in churches in the former tin-mining areas of Devon that it has been nicknamed the ‘tiners’ rabbits’ (Harte 1991). The motif is also known in heraldry as ‘coney trijunc’ (‘coney’, pronounced to rhyme with ‘honey’, is the old word for rabbits but went out of use in polite conversation for the same reason that sometimes it is preferable to refer to a ‘kitten’ rather than a ‘pussy’…).

The revised edition of MacDermott’s book includes a

Above: ‘Tinner’s rabbits’ from (left) Sampford Courtnay (right) South Tawton.

Below: Viking trade routes and the routes of the Silk Road. Map by Anne Tarver from MacDermott 2006.
summary of the ‘three rabbits’ research as this provides further evidence of actual ideas being conveyed along such long distances; historians such as Tamim Ansary have provided a much more detailed account of how ideas travelled from southern and western China, through north India and into the Middle East, and thence into the cultural backwaters of medieval Europe (Ansary 2009). Think of instruments such as lutes and violins which, along with many others, entered Continental culture at the time of the Crusades. Think too of alcohol, alchemy, algebra – the names themselves speak of the origins in Arabic culture – and much of medieval understanding of astronomy and astrology. More hidden is the early Renaissance interest in Classical Greek and Roman culture which was largely only possible because of manuscripts which had survived in Middle Eastern universities, or because the more readily accessible surviving copies were translations into Arabic. I digress. But there really should be little or no surprise about ideas and decorative motifs from Asia appearing in medieval Europe. Indeed, the real surprise is that it has taken Western art historians so long to recognise the abundant examples.

Although MacDermott’s book has been cited by numerous subsequent writers I am not aware of any attempts to offer an alternative explanation for how the green man motif appears in Romanesque sculpture. What is needed, of course, are more examples of Asian influences on north European art of this era – the ‘three rabbits’ are a good start but I suspect there could be more.

**From ideas to actualities**

So far this chapter has been more a ‘history of ideas’ than a history of the carvings themselves. Among the various works devoted to green men, MacDermott’s study continues to provide the clearest and most detailed overview from the perspective of art history. From its European origins in the Romanesque these faces flourish throughout the Gothic, and are renewed in the Gothic Revival, appearing above the doorways of shop and other commercial buildings in the later part of the nineteenth century. They appear on high-status furniture of the Baroque era as well as in more architectural contexts.

Frankly to offer a concise summary of MacDermott’s book – itself a succinct account of what could be said – risks being concise to the point of being pointless. Anyone who needs to understand the history of green men should simply obtain a copy of her easy-to-
read book; for completeness also read Kathleen Basford’s pioneering study as this still has a timeless quality.

And, if they are not ‘pagan survivals’, what was the meaning and significance of these faces? I simply have no clear idea how they were construed in the Romanesque. But by the time of their heyday in the Gothic it is likely they were regarded as emblematic of the Resurrection of Christ – it is not coincidental that the Christian festival of Easter coincides with the time of year when trees and other vegetation are ‘resurrecting’. Kathleen Basford first made the observation that green men could be read as symbols of either human or divine life (Basford 1978: 20–1) and Thurlie Grundy has written more extensively about this idea (Grundy 2000; 2001). But, so far, there is no documentary or other direct evidence of this supposition.

All we can say with confidence is that this decorative motif inspired just about every sculptor of the Gothic period. It was just the sort of image which would allow the craftsman’s skill and imagination to be fully deployed. And, unless I’m a very poor judge of human nature, it was a chance to try to do something better than rival carvers.

**Points of pedantry**

I would like to conclude this section with two questions which need to be resolved when describing green men (as, for example, in the entries for a database such as the one evolving for Project Gargoyle).

Firstly, many green men carvings are best thought of as ‘masks’ rather than ‘heads’ (see page 63 Is this distinction useful? Or does it merely reflect an inherent difference between, say, roof bosses (usually masks) and corbels (more often heads)?

Secondly, should we use the term ‘green man’ for masks/heads sprouting foliate and the term ‘foliate face’ for masks/heads which are not sprouting but instead made up leaves? To me the distinction is useful but art historians have tended to use the term ‘foliate faces/heads’ to describe the whole spectrum.
Chapter Seven

Mooning fools

As anyone who has spent any time in city centres in the wee hours at a weekend is all-too aware, an excess of alcohol is a good excuse for transgressive behaviour – such as ‘mooning’. I suspect there are good proportion of under-forties who, in their student days at least, helped to keep this modern-day ‘folk custom’ alive.

Similarly people in medieval times would have been familiar with the posture. Not because the performers were necessarily drunk, and certainly not because they were students. It was an insult. The late sixth century Life of St Paternus of Avaranches describes a shameless woman who ‘showed her posteriors’ to the saint – and was punished with hideous ulcers. Reporting events of about 1080, the Gesat Herewardi Saxonis describes how the Fenland witch ‘at the end of her chatterings and incantations thrice bared her arse’ to Hereward the Wake and his men. According to the chronicler Pierre de Langtoft, during the Anglo-Scottish wars of the 1290s the English army derided their opponents in this manner (Jones 2002: 282–3).

The other social context when mooning might be expected was carnivalesque feasts. They were, literally, performers – skilled fools, jugglers, contortionists, musicians and conjurers with presumably a whole mix of what we now collectively call ‘circus skills’. But, because in medieval times the modern concept of a circus had yet to come to town, these performers were known generically as ‘acrobats’, ‘fools’, ‘jugglers’ and ‘jongleurs’. To those who disapproved of them they were histriones, gesticulatores and gyrovagi (‘gyrators’).
Jongleur derives from Old French jogleor, which in turn is from Latin iocultor (‘jester’) and ioculr (‘to jest’). It is a close cousin to ‘juggle’ and ‘jocular’, though less closely related to ‘joke’ (which is from Latin iocari).

At the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries a ‘iugulere’ was both a jester or buffon and a wizard or sorcerer. So far as we can ascertain this ‘wizardry’ would be what we would term conjuring – a ‘stage magician’. Self-evidently juggling, conjouring and buffoning all require considerable physical skills of dexterity. This dexterity also extended to performing music: ‘A jongleur was required to know how to play at least nine instruments’ (Dronke 1968: 20; cited in Kenaan-Kedar 2002b: 162). And either they or their travelling companions would have been animal trainers; a small number of corbels depicting bridled bears are further evidence of the carnivalesque inspiring sculptors.

As already noted in Chapter One, the importance of carnivalesque themes in ‘marginal’ sculpture was at the heart of Philip Camille’s book Image on the Edge. The travesty, disorder, ambivalence and inversion of the social order when the carnival took over the town square was, as he put it, all part of what made the carnivalesque ‘edgy’. There was, predictably, plenty of scope for clerical disapproval. In a passage which reveals much about both sides of the divide, in his Apologia of 1125 the Cistercian abbot St Bernard of Clairvaux draws a contrasting parable between the ideals of monks who should be ‘fixed and upright in their commitment to God’ and the contorted bodies of the acrobats:

I say it is a good sort of playing in which we become an object of reproach to the rich and of ridicule to the proud. In fact what else do seculars think we are doing but playing when what they desire most on earth, we fly from; and what they fly from we desire? Like acrobats and jugglers [ioculatorum et saltatorum] who with their heads down and feet up, stand or walk on their hands, and thus draw all eyes unto themselves. But this is not a game for children or the theatre where lust is excited by the effeminate and indecent contortions of the actors, it is a joyous, decent, grave and admirable [iucundus, honestus, gravis] delighting the gaze of heavenly onlookers’

(cited Camille 1996: 58–9)
Despite St Bernard’s admonishments, among the laity jongleurs were respected for their wide-range of skills. Nurith Kenaan-Kedar devoted several pages of her essay on the twelfth-century doorway at Foussais in the Loire valley to a detailed discussion of the jongleurs included in the decoration there and elsewhere in France (Kenaan-Kedar 2002b: 161–4). These are clothed but acrobatic. She considers that they have been depicted in a way which denotes both sarcasm and also compassion; qualities which can also be found all-but-simultaneously in the lives and writings of all-but contemporary troubadours.

Although the term ‘jongleur’ is the one adopted by academics for such performers in both England and France, they use the word in a broader sense of both a ‘wandering minstrel or poet’ as well as an ‘entertainer’. By conflating jongleurs with their regular travelling companions, troubadours, these scholars may have intended to give them a more positive image, but have instead conflated two more-or-less distinct ‘trades’ (distinct, at least, because troubadours had a higher social status than jongleurs – and troubadours were literate while jongleurs seem not to have been).

**The number of fools is infinite**

In Anglo-Saxon England there were scops who recited stories such as *Beowulf* and almost could sing as well. A scop seems to be distinct from a *hleaftorsmiþ* – literally ‘laughter-maker’ but clearly with sense of comic or fool. I suspect their contemporaries in later medieval England referred to such laughter-makers as ‘jugglers’, in the broader sense denoting a wide range of dexterity. But to call them ‘jugglers’ today risks understandable confusion, while the academic notion of jongleur is, in my mind at least, contaminated with the niceties of overly-polite medieval music favoured by many period instrument ensembles. (However some groups, such as Joglaresa and The Daughters of Elvin, have more ‘attitude’ and the all-important virtuosity so often lacking. And Carl Orff’s popular pastiche *Carmina Burana* suggests just how far from overly-polite modern notions some medieval songs actually were.)

So, if neither ‘juggler’ or ‘jongleur’ seem accurate then the third option is ‘fools’. I will assume that most readers have been ‘bonked’ on the head by an inflated pig’s bladder brandished by the Fool while watching a typical English Morris dance team, so will have had first hand acquaintance with at least a watered-down Merry England sense of ‘ye olde foole’. However, unless you have more than a passing knowledge of Morris sides you may...
not be aware that the role of Fool is a great honour, awarded to one of the more experienced and dextrous of the team, sometimes when increasing years means dancing as a full member of the team is no longer possible. (For those readers, presumably not living in England, for whom the last few sentences are a tad opaque, I suggest Googling for “Morris fools” where a whole new education awaits you…) 

As most medieval carvings have been deemed ‘marginal’ or ‘liminal’ then the fool rightly belongs among them. He is the most paradoxical manifestation of medieval culture, who combines puerile buffonry with profound challenges to the social order. William Shakespeare has, in *King Lear*, given us the image of a court jester who is also the ruler’s most astute advisor. He is more than simply a trickster, unlike Loki in Scandinavian sagas, the all-but-forgotten Robin Goodfellow of British folklore, or the now frequently-invoked Coyote, Brer Rabbit, Road Runner, Iktomi or Anasasi characters from African, Afro-American, Native American and colonial American cultures.

The presence of fools on churches has biblical authority as *Ecclesiastes* 1:15 states that ‘the number of fools is infinite’. These are actually a company of Vices sailing over the ocean to perdition. But I suspect that such an exact knowledge of the facts was unlikely to deter
a mason from conveying a good ‘story in stone’ which would be more recognisable to his contemporaries.

However there may have been a more contemporary ‘social commentary’ associated with these images as the maligned Edward II (ruled 1307–27) was known to be especially fond of jugglers and dancers (Camille 1998: 115) and was reputedly murdered by a rod hot poker inserted in the place most conspicuous on these ‘mooning’ carvings. If any of the contortionists can be reliably dated to (a) pre-1307; (b) 1307–27; or (c) soon after 1327, then this will shed further light on this possible association. However Lionel Wall’s research (Wall 2013) suggests that the examples from east Leicestershire and Rutland were carved between c.1380 and c.1410, so there would be no obvious associations with Edward II.

Malcolm Jones has written a detailed yet accessible study of medieval fools and includes a number of examples of wooden carvings (Jones 2002: Ch.6). Anyone investigating carvings which can considered as depictions of fools should begin by reading his chapter.

The fart in art

Fools (a.k.a. jugglers or jongleurs) in medieval times presumably had a great many skills. But they have mostly been monumentalised in sculpture for only one ability – contortionism. Before about 1350 medieval fools characteristically performed naked or wearing exceptionally short tunics. This means that these contortionist carvings are, at least to modern minds, ‘mooning’.

While most of these ‘acrobats’ portrayed by medieval carvers are male, there are two female tumblers among the roof bosses of the west cloister at Wells Cathedral, and corbels with the same motif at Studland (Dorset) and Romsey Abbey (Hampshire). (Woodcock 2005: 109–10). Alex Woodcock considers that the motif may be related to two-tailed mermaids. However, Woodcock is the only researcher so far to consider that these specifically ‘tumbling’ females are distinct from the more characteristic exhibitionists (see next chapter).

The skills of fools included playing musical instruments. Did this musicality sometimes include unusual control over their anal sphincter? Certainly ‘professional farters’ were

This illustration in The Image of Irelande by John Derrick (published 1581) shows the chief of the Mac Sweynes seated at dinner and being entertained by a bard, a harper and two braigetóirí.
known in the late sixteenth century as the illustration from John Derrick’s *The Image of Irelande* confirms; such ‘fartists’ were known in Irish as *braigetóirí*. Presumably they performed in the manner of Joseph Pujol (1857–1945), whose stage name was ‘Le Pétomane’ (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Pétomane) or modern day flatulists, such as the erroneously named ‘Mr Methane’ (the stage name of Paul Oldfield, who performed extensively between 1991 and 2006). Whether mooning while ‘serenading’ the audience was ever part of a medieval fool’s repertoire is unprovable, but clearly both activities are well-attested.

Then and now the ‘mooning’ gesture was one of disapproval – an implied, if not actual, ‘fart in the face’. Geoffrey Chaucer describes such an insult in ‘The Miller’s Tale’. Absolon has just been tricked into kissing the buttocks of a man called Nicholas when:

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Nicholas anon leet fle a fart,
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent.
(The Canterbury Tales lines 3806–7)
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By the way, just in case it ever comes up during a pub quiz, this is the first documented use of the word ‘fart’ in English.

And such emanations did not only appear in literature. The Domesday Book for Leicestershire includes a now-lost hamlet called Windesers (yes,’ Wind’s arse’ in Old English) – which presumably survived only as the field name recorded near Waltham on the Wolds in the late fifteenth century. We are led to believe by the highly-respected etymologist, Barrie Cox, that this toponym perhaps referred to a ‘conformation of hills resembling buttocks lying in a windy, exposed situation and which funnelled the wind.’ (Cox 2002: 281).

For those who wish to discover more about medieval scatology and farting then Malcolm Jones devotes a chapter to his book The Secret Middle Ages to this topic (Jones 2002: Ch.13)

While the humorous associations of farting seem to be a pan-European form of wit, the word remains more taboo in Britain than in the New World – where both ‘fart’ and ‘pissed off’ are acceptable for American children’s television programmes. This difference came to the fore in 1998 when Channel 4 began broadcasting South Park, the Canadian animation series. Aimed at adult audiences, the writers ‘commonly [make] use of carnivalesque and absurdist techniques’ (Johnson-Woods 2007: 89–103). Many of the running gags are scatological – indeed the pilot for the series was ‘Cartman gets an anal probe’ and every episode (at least in the first few series) famously included one or more ‘fart jokes’. Similarly the makers of Shrek, keen to break the as many as possible of the taboos inherent in Disney’s squeaky-clean scripts, also included assine flatulation.

But how relevant are the makers of contemporary animations to medieval sculptors? As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, I think the answer is ‘very’. These days there are few people producing carvings for churches, and the constraints on their subject matter are far greater than in medieval times so there are no opportunities for significantly transgressive images. Whereas a substantial number of highly-skilled professional illustrators create animated cartoons, classic comics and graphic novels – and an even greater number of amateurs produce similar material for their own websites. These genres are mostly associated with counter-cultural attitudes and are widely considered (by both fans and critics) to be some sort of antithesis to ‘high art’ (although some of the most
highly-regarded comic book writers, such as Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore, blur such boundaries. These genres of popular culture share something of the same liminal and ‘slippery’ sensibilities which marginal carvings – Camille’s ‘images on the edge’ – once occupied.

Yet mooning is not simply comical. Part of the humour is the implied insult – or, in the case of farting, the ‘bad manners’. And the insult can be more than implied – a few years ago I heard of someone who volunteered in an English charity shop. A female customer, said to be from eastern Europe, entered the shop and ended up arguing with the volunteer. As she left the shop in a bit of a huff she bent over and lifted up her skirts. Presumably this ‘gesture of defiance’ is still alive in her home country!

The gesture is insulting to the ‘recipient’. And yet also transgressive for the person performing the insult. Both male or female, the gesture has some self-evident sexual connotations which imply subordination. We also have a striking image of three witches from 1514 attributed to Hans Baldung Grien. By the early sixteenth century witchcraft was being regarded as the inverse of the acceptable social order – and here is a witch, not only indecently upended, but thereby viewing the world upside down. According to a contemporary German proverb, those who knelt on one knee and stared backwards through their legs would be sure to see the Devil. Which means that any viewer of this voyeuristic image personifies the Devil... (Clark 1997: 11–13). The Devil will reappear when I discuss the apotropaic beliefs associated with female genital display in the next chapter.

The world turned upside down is, as was established in the name of Christa Grösinger’s 1997 study, a good description of many of the motifs on misericords. Because there are no surviving examples in either Leicestershire or Rutland a more detailed discussion of these invariably excellent carvings is not relevant to Project Gargoyle. However, just in case it has not already crossed your mind, every one of them has a close connection with the principal subject of this chapter, as they are ‘bum squats’ offering support to monastic posteriors.
Chapter Eight

Male and female exhibitionists

Although not an especially common motif, the sight of a full-frontal naked human inside or outside a church does tend to get one’s attention. While not quite as many books have been written about such ‘exhibitionists’ as have been published about green men, they nevertheless make up a sizeable amount of the literature on medieval carvings.

The naming of the parts

While most recent scholars have been happy to call such distinctive figure ‘exhibitionists’, the use of this word to denote male genital display only originates in the 1960s. Prior to that men moved to such acts were known as ‘flashers’, a contraction of the term current from the 1890s, ‘meat flasher’.

Older scholarly writing about the figures attempts to hide the obvious behind either Classical allusions or borrowings from Latin or Greek. So the deity Priapus was evoked to describe a wide range of non-Classical tumescent male figures. Such figures might also be described as ‘ithyphallic’ or ‘megaphallic’ – or both. The origin of the word ‘ithyphallic’ is intriguing as it enters the English language in the early seventeenth century to describe a poem in the ithyphallic meter. This meter was used for the Bacchic hymns, sung in the rites during which such phallic-shaped objects were carried in processions. Indeed ithyphallos is derived from the Greek ithys ‘straight’ and phallos ‘erect penis’ but actually had the sense of a ‘phallos carried in the festivals’. By the end of the eighteenth century ithyphallic had become an English adjective and then in Victorian times took on the wider sense of ‘grossly indecent’. More recent writers about Romanesque and Gothic carvings

In case you need a reminder as to what a ‘typical’ female exhibitionist looks like. That corbel, Kilpeck, Herefordshire.
usually, but not always, use the word ‘ithyphallic’ to denote an erection. Hence why a megaphallic carving may or may not also be ithyphallic.

Explicitly male figures were relatively common in Ancient Egyptian art – mostly of those that have survived are illustrations on papyri – and in Classical Greece and Roman both statues of Priapus and Herm seem to have been prevalent. Phallicism as emblems of good luck were also part and parcel of Roman life. So perhaps we should not be too surprised that this tradition continued well into the Christian era of Rome. They evolve into carvings which can be interpreted as inveighing against licentiousness or adultery. However, interestingly they rather too often depict monks and friars who clearly were considered not to be sufficiently chaste in their ways.

For those who feel a need to get a grip on this substantial body of work then try to obtain a copy of *Saint Priapus*, Ian Cooke’s self-published study of Ancient Egyptian, Classical and Christian examples of male exhibitionists, illustrated with his own drawings (Cooke 2002). His scope is comprehensive, offering over two hundred illustrations and a fairly detailed commentary.

A more accessible source of information about male exhibitionist carvings is Anthony Weir’s web site called ‘Satan in the groin’ (www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/satan1.htm) which includes photographs of a number of relevant Romanesque corbels and other carvings. He cites as an important source William Burgwinkle’s study of sodomy, masculinity and law in medieval literature (Burgwinkle 2009) although it is not a work I have read.

**The fairy woman with her gee**

There are two well-established euphemisms for female exhibitionists. For reasons which will be clear later in the chapter, Classically-trained scholars used the entirely appropriate Greek word *anasyrma*. Other writers opted to borrow a misheard Irish Gaelic phrase – and then Anglicise it and spell it in various ways. Mostly it appears in print as ‘sheela na gig’ or a recognisable variant. The earliest known instance of the phrase ‘sheela na gig’ is about 1770.

But it makes no sense in Irish or etymologically. Much ink has been spilt by non-Irish speakers as to what this phrase meant in Irish before it was corrupted. But the
pseudonymous ‘Galteeboy’ seemed to put the matter to rest in an online posting in 2006. He argues that sheela na gig is a corruption of the words shee lena gig. Rendering this as ‘sheela na gig’ is an easy enough mistake to make, doubly so for an eighteenth century English-speaker unfamiliar with Irish slang.

‘Shee’ is just a phonetic spelling of Sidhe, the widely-used Gaelic word for ‘fairy woman’ or sprite; after the eighteenth century it also begins to be used for a fairy mound or a mound beneath which the fairies lived. But in the eighteenth century – when the corruption ‘sheela na gig’ is first attested – Sidhe meant ‘fairy woman’.

The word lena, then and now, means ‘with her’. So, ñoláionn dííhostú fostáidhochta lena fostóir translates as ‘dismissal includes the termination by an employee of her contract of employment with her employer’.

Gee or gig – pronounced with a hard ‘g’ as in ‘go’ – are two ways of spelling the same slang word. If you look again at the photograph of the Kilpeck carving and think of her as a Sidhe then the phrase ‘The Fairy woman with her…’ should be fairly easy to complete. The word is still current slang. Galteeboy also states that an unspecified online dictionary of Irish slang confirms this: ‘Gee, Gee-box (n): female genitalia’. The Irish-born writer Tom Murphy, in his 1994 book The Seduction of Morality, provides confirmation that this use of ‘gee’ is still current:

She withdrew her arm and then took her hand upwards to stroke the curve of her belly, then downwards again, through the hair, turned the fingers in between her legs to find the it of the girl, the what, the quem, gee, the job, the word that offended her, the font, the nothing, the everything, the hole, to find it wet. Good.

(Quotation supplied by Anthony Weir, pers. comm. 22 August 2004)

So far as I am aware recent writers about female exhibitionists have retained the conventional usage ‘sheela na gig’ rather than adopt Galteeboy’s persuasive suggestion for ‘shee lena gig’, although I hope this more correct usage gains wider currency. However, despite this interesting insight into the Irish phrase, as my chapter title indicates, I will use the entirely Anglophone terms ‘male exhibitionist’ and ‘female exhibitionist’.

A ‘good luck’ carving in the floor of Chesters Roman fort
Monstrous sexuality

As Malcolm Jones observes, there is something ‘monstrous’ about the sexuality of both male and female exhibitionist figures (Jones 2002: 74–5). They are more than merely ‘naked’ yet seem to have no overlap with modern concepts of pornography. Similarly, while there are Romanesque carvings of Adam and Eve – often rather charmingly coy – the directness of these carvings has nothing to do with Genesis. The exact message may be lost but we get the drift that This is Not a Good Thing.

By the Gothic period these explicit carvings overlap with the subject matter of bawdier lead badges. These badges were made in the same way as the better-known pilgrim badges but were perhaps sold under different circumstances. (Or were they – might they have been the antecedents of the ‘naughty seaside postcard’ sold alongside somewhat more tasteful holiday souvenirs?) Presumably, they were worn in a different manner than pilgrim badges – perhaps underneath clothing rather than prominently displayed.

On the basis of specific examples of these bawdier badges – the ones which also have brief inscriptions – they were regarded as ‘good luck’ tokens. This would accord with Classical traditions of winged phalluses which were regarded in just this way. Generally, we should regard these badges as more actively apotropaic rather than passively seeking ‘good luck’. Indeed the belief that female genital display could ward off evil dates back to at least Classical Greece – and the Greek word anasyrma, which describes such actions, was adopted by nineteenth century scholars (Jones 2002: Ch.12).

The oldest references to female genital display are not strictly apotropaic but are part of religious veneration. Ancient Egyptian women are described as lifting up their skirts in worship of deities such as Apis and Hathor (Kilmer 1982; Broadhurst 2005)

Carved wooden female exhibitionist figures are to be found frequently in Micronesia, especially in in the Palauan archipelago. Called dilukai or dilugai, they are typically depicted with legs splayed, revealing a large, black, triangular pubic area while their hands rest upon their thighs.

These female figures protect the villagers’ health and ward off all evil spirits as well. They are constructed by ritual specialists according to strict rules, which if broken would result in

A shee-nala-ghee formerly in Kiltinane Church, Tipperary. It was stolen in 1990. Photograph by Anthony Weir.
A Roman winged phallus or tintinnabula – so-called because they always had bells on...

A medieval lead badge depicting a woman riding a tintinnabula.

Reconstruction by Winifred Milius Lubellof Ancient Egyptian women venerating the bull-god Apis.


Opposite right: Thomas Rowlandson’s version of the same topic 1785–99.

The vulva is the primordial gate, the mysterious divide between nonlife and life. It is not coincidental that each example of signs representing the female genitalia used as apotropaic devices are found on gates. In the specialist’s as well as the chief’s death. In the specialist’s as well as the chief’s death. It is not coincidental that each example of signs representing the female genitalia used as apotropaic devices are found on gates. The vulva is the primordial gate, the mysterious divide between nonlife and life.

*Encyclopedia of Religion*

Similar figures, more typically in stone, are venerated at Indian shrines and are part of wider worship of more abstract yoni carvings and natural simulacra (often combined, understandably, with lingam stones). And this veneration is not specific to Hinduism – the most holy-of-holies for Moslems, the most venerated part of the the Qa’aba at Mecca, is the depiction in solid silver of the vulva of goddess Q’re (or Al’Lat, which simply means ‘goddess’) whose shrine at Mecca long predated the Prophet Mohammed. Indeed, the priests of Mecca still known as Beni Shaybah or ‘Sons of the Old Woman’ – Shaybah being, of course, the famous Queen Sheeba of Solomon’s times (Trubshaw 1993, based on Camphausen 1989). ‘Yoni-worship’ is the ultimate aspiration of every Moslem who sets off on the hajj.

Clearly genital display was, and is, a fairly universal act. However to understand such gestures on medieval carvings we need to restrict our interest to Continental examples.
Mawming and Mooing

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The Hairy Prospekt or the Devil in a Fright.

Once on a time, the Lord of Hell,
In pleasant English called the devil.
Some new experiement to try
At Elles stait a requish eye.
But she who all his arts defied,
Pulled up and showed her grete force.
A thing all stagg'd about with hair,
So much it made my Satan stare.
Who frightend at the groome display.
Took all her knees and runs away.
The gesture was certainly still alive and well in early modern Europe as Erasmus (1466–1536) in his *Apothegeons*, elaborates on Plutarch’s description of a battle between the Cyperi and Astyages where the Cyperi women insult their cowardly men folk in this manner. Rabelais (c.1494–1553) includes the gesture in Chapter 47 of *Quart Livre*, published in 1551. Various ‘folk tales’ in circulation during the eighteenth century include an account of the Devil being driven away by female genital display. An engraving known as ‘The Devil Defeated’ by Charles Eisen for an eighteenth century edition of Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables* depicts this quite tastefully. True to character, a print produced between 1785–99 by Thomas Rowlandson, ‘The hairy prospect, or the Devil in a fright’, is less cultivated.

A hundred years later, in 1885, Émile Zola’s novel *Germinal* appeared. As Germaine Greer notes:

> When Maheude wanted to show her utter contempt for the oppressors of the poor in Zola’s *Germinal*, she turned her back, parted her legs, stooped and threw her skirts over her head, displaying her split buttocks, as if to say, ‘You can kiss my big, fat, smelly arse!’

(Greer 1999: 238)
Greer continues by drawing a comparison to ‘the riotous bare ass displays of the midinettes of Paris who danced the original can-can’. Yes, the sight of frilly knickers was not why the Quadrille (dubbed the ‘French Can-Can’ after it was exported to London) was deemed so ribald…

In the previous chapter I have also recounted the anecdotal report of a woman of east European origin offering exactly the same insult in an English charity shop within the last two decades. But if this gesture seems all to be about being rude – or at least offering transgressive entertainment – then clearly you are not familiar with the Catalan saying La mar es posa nona si veu el cony d’una dona (‘The sea calms down if it sees a woman’s coney’) (Blackledge 2003: 8). Indeed everything else you need to know about female genital display makes up the opening chapters of Catherine Blackledge’s scholarly tour de force.

And, yes, there is a male apotropaic counterpart: to this day, Italian men ward off evil spirits by grabbing their genitals – a gesture ‘mimicked’ as part of his dance moves by Michael Jackson but which, in 2008, led to a 42-year-old man from Como being fined two hundred Euros for offending public decency (Screeton 2008). And we should also bear in mind that oaths in Mediterranean lands commonly invoke the Virgin’s or the Devil’s private parts, Jesus’ turds, and such like (Anthony Weir, Pers. comm. 10 February 2013).

The witch on the wall

From the overall perspective of the study of medieval carvings, female exhibitionists hold a pioneering role. As already described in Chapter One, one of the first to develop Meyer Schapiro’s belief that marginal carvings did indeed have meaning was Jørgen Andersen. He went as a postgraduate to the Courtauld Institute at the time George Zarnecki was the deputy director. Andersen’s study of Romanesque female exhibitionists was published in 1977 as The Witch on the Wall. He was assisted in his research by Anthony Weir who, with James Jerman, was to publish another early study of Romanesque exhibitionists in 1986, with the title Images of Lust.

Weir has continued to take an active interest in Romanesque carvings, not least exhibitionists. Indeed in July 2000 he generously spent nearly two weeks taking me around

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Toulouse Lautrec’s famous poster.
sone of the more impressive Romanesque churches in Normandy and the Île-de-France.
In a recent email he described his early involvement and continued:

Since then I have documented hundreds of exhibitionists in France, and now am fairly certain that males outnumber females. Some have moneybags – linking them with Avaritia. So I was the first to suggest that corbel-tables often presented a coherent series of sins – usually drunkenness, gluttony, concupiscence and greed. More common than these, though, are acrobatic or contortionist figures, which represent the vileness of public entertainers.

(Weir pers. comm. 1 September 2012)

And, as you will have gathered, I share Anthony’s belief that male and female exhibitionists are distinct from the ‘mooners’ and contortionists discussed in the previous chapter. Yes, I am well aware that these mooners often reveal their masculinity – but almost always only their scrotum not their penis. The Queniborough roof boss (see photograph on page 103 is one of the less-frequent examples which combine the attributes of both mooners and exhibitionists.

Like Anthony Weir, I am entirely happy to regard the principal significance of these carvings as apotropaic. Whether additional or alternative meanings have been acquired in more recent times is always possible, although until recent decades it would be prudent to assume that each individual carving had its own locally-transmitted meaningfulness.

**Sheela na gigs and modern pagans**

Predictably enough, one of the recently-acquired ‘meanings’ given to female exhibitionists is that they are evidence for the survival of pre-Christian paganism. In part this is based on descriptions of Irish deities such as the Caillech or Calliagh (pronounced ‘ca-lee’) who, like the medieval exhibitionists, is described as ‘hag-like’. There is probably a vast number of articles and books written by modern pagans who take it for granted that ‘sheela-na-gigs’ are pre-Christian deities. Even the well-informed authors of the *Reader’s Digest Folklore, myths and legends of Britain*, published in 1973 included a drawing of the hideous female carving outside the church at Braunston in Rutland and call her both a
‘sheela-na-gig’ (even though no genitals or hands are depicted) and an ‘Earth goddess’. I will return to this figure in Chapter Thirteen.

Two authors who made some effort to argue for these carvings being remnants of a pre-Christian fertility or mother goddess religion are Joanne McMahon and Jack Roberts. Their study, *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland and Britain: The divine hag of the Christian Celts – an illustrated guide* was published in 2001. It is both a comprehensive catalogue of Irish female exhibitionists and a fairly detailed rehashing of the ideas of Anne Ross and other writers about the supposed survival of a pre-Christian faith. However McMahon and Roberts neither address the fundamental implausibility of this thesis nor come up with any new supporting evidence.

**Birthing stones**

I would also note that McMahon and Roberts clearly did not set out to write a ‘scholarly study’ of sheelas – their approach, quite understandably, was principally to offer an accessible illustrated guidebook aimed mostly at people who share their belief that sheelas are indeed pre-Christian goddesses.

Not sharing that belief is the art historian Marian Bleeke who published an article about the Kilpeck female exhibitionist in 2005. She attempts to show that this corbel – in combination with others on the church

... become a site for reconstructing some of the meanings that the physiological processes of reproduction may have held for the local lay community. These sculptures suggest that the dramatic effects these processes have on the woman’s body – causing it to swell and to contract, to take other forms in and finally to expel another out – were literally seen as dangerous and disturbing. (Bleke 2005: 22)

However is Bleeke telling us more about post-modern academic mindsets – where excessive ‘explanationism’ and over-interpretation still prevail – than medieval mentalities? Perhaps my doubts are simply a result of the rather fragmentary view of the subject matter inevitable in an academic article. Since the pioneering work of Andersen, Jarman and Weir, the only scholar to have written a book-length study of female exhibitionists is Barbara Freitag. Her book, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an enigma* appeared in 2004.

After a summary of previous literature Freitag offers her own theory that figures were used to enhance fertility and also as ‘birthing stones’. Indeed she offers accounts from folklorists which strongly suggest that in recent centuries at least some of the sheela na gigs were used in such ways, with portable carvings being loaned to women in labour. But this book fails to make a distinction between the use of these sculptures in recent times and the reasons why they were carved in the first place. Self-evidently female exhibitionists built into the walls of churches and castles were not created to act as ‘birthing stones’ to be loaned out. Neither are most of them accessible enough to be touched for ‘fertility’ – although much has been made of the few which are accessible. Even a carving at Ballyvourney which is not a sheela na gig, but nevertheless plausibly depicts Saint Gobnait, a Christianised fertility-goddess, is sometimes used as evidence for this tradition as it is ‘touched’ in the groin area as part of the *türas* (or Pattern) of St Gobnait on the eleventh of February each year.

Freitag seems to assume – and I can find no evidence in her book that she thinks otherwise – that folk customs are somehow ‘timeless’. It is an easy assumption to make and one made by nearly all nineteenth century folklorists, and rather too many of their twentieth century successors. But it simply does not fit the facts. Even if a tale or custom can be traced back over an extended period of time, it does not mean that the meaning or significance remained constant – or even that there was only ever one meaning at any one time (see Chapter One of this work and also Trubshaw 2007).
While the fertility and birthing stone folklore is valid for at least a small number of these carvings, this does not mean that Freitag has unravelled the enigma of the original significance of these carvings, merely shed light on recent developments. Sadly the academic status of Freitag and her publisher mean that these less-than-rigorous ideas have been cited uncritically by other academics, whereas independent scholars more knowledgeable about female exhibitionist carvings have been much more perceptive of the major omissions and woeful assumptions in this study.

Despite a decidedly academic publisher, Theresa Oakley's 2009 study of female exhibitionists has so far been ignored by both academic and independent scholars – except for some very dismissive reviews (e.g. Weir c.2010). Her uncharitable dismissal of the previous work of scholars with a much greater understanding of the subject than herself does not encourage me to offer any further comment than 'best avoided'.

**Moralising in the mid-fifteenth century**

Much of the interest in exhibitionists has been devoted to the female examples and to examples from the Romanesque carved in stone. But this distorts the evidence, especially for Leicestershire where there are no known female exhibitionists, with the possible exception of a figure high up on the tower of the church at Burrough on the Hill.

However there are two indisputable male exhibitionists – both in wood and both from the mid-fifteenth century. One is the roof boss at Queniborough, already mentioned in this chapter, and the other is also high up in the roof (although not a roof boss) at Claybrooke Parva.

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*Just possibly a shee lena gig giving birth. An unusually ‘cubist’ representation of a figure very nigh up on the north side of the church tower at Burrough on the Hill, brought to my attention by Tina Negus. The carving is only seen clearly – as in these photographs – by the light of the setting midsummer sun.*

*The depictions of Saint Gobnait, at Ballyvourney. Photographs by Anthony Weir.*
Thanks to the work of the churchwarden at Claybrooke, Nicholas Jenkins, during a restoration of the roof in the 1990s samples were taken for tree-ring dating. These provided good evidence for the roof timbers having been felled between 1425 to 1450 – the reign of Henry VI.

The male figure is one of a great number of decorative heads and figures in the complex nave roof structure at Claybrooke. Most of these carvings are seemingly-anonymous regal or noble heads. The male is one of very few few-length figures. While the photograph, taken by Nicholas Jenkins from scaffolding erected during the conservation of the roof, suggests that the figure would be all-too-obvious, in reality it is tucked away at the western end of the nave and quite small to the unaided eye. Without binoculars and a powerful torch it would be easy to overlook. In passing I would note that the Queniborough male is also the most western of the bosses in the nave roof although, unlike Claybrooke, entirely obvious to anyone who looks in his direction.

While Anthony Weir has identified a number of French Romanesque male figures who are apparently masturbating, I am not aware of any other surviving examples from the fifteenth century. Unlike the more ambiguous meanings of Romanesque and early Gothic male exhibitionists, the Claybrooke figure is self-evidently moralistic. This is reinforced by the nearby presence of a female half-figure who is revealing her breast. This ‘harlot’ (as she was presumably intended to be deemed) faces the male figure in the western bay of the roof.

So far these two carvings are the only known examples of exhibitionists in Leicestershire. As will become clearer
when I look more broadly at the decoration of fifteenth century roofs in Chapter Fourteen, they are very much an exception to the normal types of decoration.

**Postcards or prentice pieces?**

Exhibitionists are one of the more unusual subjects depicted by the medieval sculptors. Even if medieval minds were not as prudish as Western sensibilities of around a hundred years ago (and still to be found among more conservatively-minded people) then they would seem to have been among the more ‘transgressive’ images.

Anthony Weir has succinctly summarised two perfectly valid reasons for such transgressions in an email:

> My favourite theory is that sheela-na-gigs are a kind of dirty postcard, copied from Romanesque originals on the Pilgrim road (usually from near Bordeaux) to frighten the neighbours (on Irish castles) and to warn people of various horrors connected with femaleness in Britain. I am sure, though, that different carvings served different purposes insofar as they serve a purpose at all.

> There is a sub-group which are almost certainly Guild-pieces, carved to obtain entry into a band or guild of sculptors. These are the high-up invisible ones, as at Ely and Exeter cathedrals, and also on churches in France. Sculptors obviously enjoyed carving big dicks and juicy cunts, and could easily justify their carvings with *Galatians* chapter 5 etc.

(Weir pers. comm. 1 Sept 2012)

Before we move on to discuss this is more detail, here is *Galatians* 5:16–26 in the King James Version:

> This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

> For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

Tina Negus has identified two possible female exhibitionists. One is the figure very high up on the tower at Burrough on the Hill (see photograph on page 112 and the other is a small figure at Empingham in a most unlikely location – it is at head height at the west end of the aisle wall, facing towards the nave wall, ‘lost’ in the surround of a window.
But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another.

I can only reiterate Anthony’s sentence ‘I am sure, though, that different carvings served different purposes insofar as they serve purpose at all.’ Harking back to remarks in Chapter One, my wording would be ‘I am sure, though, that different carvings had different meaning and significance insofar as they had any meaning and significance at all.’ But clearly this is little more than semantically diverse ways of skinning the same feline.

The idea of ‘Guild-pieces’ perhaps needs to be elaborated. Traditionally at the end of a trade apprenticeship there was a ritualised ‘passing-out’ ceremony. Quite usually this was transgressive. And, although there is no direct evidence, it would be consistent with such widespread traditions for an apprentice carver’s final piece of work to break all the rules. Just for once in his career he could get away with anything – and he would be letting the side down if he didn’t go for something that would raise eyebrows.

So should we see all exhibitionists as such ‘prentice pieces’ (or, as Anthony more accurately calls them ‘Guild-pieces’)? Probably not. Anthony considers that there is a sub-set of exhibitionists which are all-but concealed from view. I have already noted that the Claybrooke chap could be considered as an example.

To this small collection of all-but hidden exhibitionists we could add the ugly face-pulling corbel in the nave at Thorpe Arnold. As the photographs show, by available light there
seems nothing unduly transgressive about this carving. Only with a paparazzi-like ‘up skirt’ shot using flash do we find out that this chap is wearing nothing under his kilt.

More work is needed on the suggestion about ‘prentice pieces’ being the origin of at least some carvings. While this reasoning fits well with exhibitionists, presumably other ‘transgressive’ ideas might also have been depicted by these works created at a liminal point in the carver’s career. Since writing this chapter Lionel Wall shared with me his investigation of the ‘Oakham school’ of masons. Quite plausibly this school – or lodge – used as their ‘trade mark’ the mooning motif (two examples are shown on page 97). Further work might identify other motifs – not necessarily risqué ones – being used in a similar way to collectively ‘sign’ other lodges’ contributions to a church.

**Thinking again about face-pullers and tongue pokers**

If male and female exhibitionists were always a bit risqué – with the risk that a patron might regard them as going too far – was there a way of alluding to them somewhat more politely?

Look again at face-pullers. What they are doing with their hands is barely different from what female exhibitionists are doing with theirs. So should we think of all face-pullers as metaphors for more blatant exhibitionists?

Look again at mooners. Most show their scrotums but rarely is the penis shown. But where the face is depicted between the knees then they are often tongue-poking. You have to be called Sigmund to spot a ‘subconscious’ substitution. So should we think of all tongue-pokers as metaphors for more blatant exhibitionists? Alex Woodcock devoted several pages of his PhD thesis to tongue-pokers and mouth-pullers (Woodcock 2005: 79–75) and came to the similar insight that tongues ‘replaced’ penises (Woodcock 2005: 12).

It would all too neat and tidy to think that every face-puller and every tongue-poker was carved as a ‘polite’ version of something more taboo. Clearly these motifs simply took on a life of their own. But further work based on accurately dated examples might reveal that the older examples of these motifs were bowdlerised versions of the more explicit images.

Above: Three examples of ‘pulling hands’ - the Kilpeck sheela, the Thorpe Arnold male exhibitionist, and a mawming sheep, also in the nave at Thorpe Arnold.

Opposite: Tongue-poking male contortionists.
Rethinking sheela-as-goddess

There are other aspects of the female exhibitionists which deserve more considered attention. Despite the poor arguments offered by modern pagans, the ‘sheela-as-goddess’ remains a seductive idea. The parallels with Indian and Micronesian examples confirm that a similar origin must be considered event though, so far, the available evidence, either from the carvings themselves or from other aspects of culture, offers no support for this belief in the British Isles and northern Europe. This may change because, as I outlined in Chapter One, current work by Anglo-Saxon scholars such as Martin Carver and Sarah Semple (see contributors to Carver and Semple 2010) are in the early phases of a major rethink of belief in Britain in the sixth to twelfth centuries.

While no one has yet found any direct evidence in the British Isles for the veneration of the dísir, the female tutelary spirits ubiquitous in north European paganism, the possible similarities between early cross-shafts and weohs (see Appendix Two) leaves me open-minded about the possibility of an overlap between icons depicting the local manifestation of the dísir and the Romanesque exhibitionists.

While not necessarily having any influence on the iconography, the pre-Christian worldview in which dísir were, literally, everywhere in their manifestations as the local tutelary deities does seem to have some relevance to the remarkable resurgence of interest during the medieval era in the only major female saint in Christianity, the Virgin Mary. But don’t misunderstand me – any such ‘continuity’ to the veneration of female spirit-deities would not fit the simplistic dualistic pagan or Christian worldview offered by modern pagan writers in recent decades. Any pre-Christian meaning and significance would have been well-and-truly synthesised into Christian thinking and terminology (just as the ódr of paganism becomes the potentia of saints and their relics – see Trubshaw 2012: 12–16).

Volvas and vulvas

If the speculation in the previous section proves to have any validity then a further speculation can be made about female exhibitionists. I have written elsewhere (Trubshaw 2013c) about the prevalence of narratives written in the first person, when the apparent speaker is as varied as the cross on which Christ is being crucified, a dead woman in a
burial mound – and even riddles where the first person is an onion or a dildo. Such ‘metaphysical relocation of self’ seems to have been part of ‘ritual’ narratives.

My suspicion is that the origin of these examples written down by Christian scribes goes back to the ‘professional seeresses’ called either seiðr, volur or volva who are referred to in accounts of Scandinavian and north European paganism. Did these women also express their prophecies in the first person – but while ‘impersonating’ a deity or spirit of place? Presumably this would have been the female tutelary spirit, one of the disir. We have no recorded examples of what was said and only a broad indication of the whole ritual. (A focused account of ‘professional’ Dark Age divination has yet to be written but provisional information is available, although dispersed in a number of scholarly works, such as North 1997:87; DuBois 1999: 122ff; Price 2002: 78, 113, 168–9; McKinnell 2005: 95–108; Tolley 2009: 25–6, 152, 419ff.) Furthermore, Medieval Irish literature provides various examples of ‘talking heads’ – that is, heads which, despite have been separated from the rest of the body, continue to offer prophetic utterances.

There was something indecent about this process of prophecy by seiðr, volur or volva which the writers – by their very nature Christian converts – deliberately left out of the accounts. One possibility – and I will readily admit this is something of a wild card – is that the volva were speaking ‘on behalf’ of the tutelary goddess by adopting a birthing position. Birthing postures ‘go with’ prophecy as both are linked to ‘the source of everything’. We know they sat in a ‘high chair’ as this is consistently recorded. What if they adopted a posture we now associate with female exhibitionists? In other words, they ‘talked out of their arses’. A modicum of ventriloquism skills (or a handy scarf, mask, veil or whatever covering the lower face) would add to the effect. As would something akin to a Punch and Judy professor’s swazzle.

If there is any validity to this suggestion that the volva uttered such ‘vagina monologues’ then they would have adopted a position akin to either of the two of the most traditional birthing postures – either laid back, feet in the air, head between the knees, or kneeling down with the head facing outwards below the buttocks (see Hans Baldung Grien’s illustration on page 99). At this stage the suggestion of continuity from volvas to the vulva-displaying sheelas has to be regarded as nothing more than highly speculative. But, it has
any validity, then it would also add the right amount of parody to the most characteristic of the fools’ contortions.

These suggestions form the basis of two web pages (Trubshaw 2013e; 2013f) which are regularly updated with further suggestions about what can be reasonably surmised about pre-Christian ‘idols’.

**Further information**

Unsurprisingly, there is considerably information about exhibitionists online. Anthony Weir has continued to collect examples (mostly Irish or Romanesque) and write extended essays about their possible meanings and significance.

www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/satan1.htm (illustrated essays)

www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/irish.htm (gazetteer of Irish sheela na gigs)

Other useful web sites include:

dmoz.org/Arts/Visual_Arts/Sculpture/History/Sheela_na_Gigs

www.sheelanagig.org/sheelalinks.htm

www.irelands-sheelanagigs.org/archive

A female (left) and male (right) exhibitionist on the Romanesque corbel table at Devizes, Wiltshire.
Chapter Nine

Animals, monsters and grotesques

After several chapters discussing carvings of humans we finally get to what many people would think of as the most characteristic type of medieval sculpture – monstrous grotesques. After all, as I discussed in Chapter One, at the time these carvings were made they would have been referred to collectively as *fabulae, curiositates, babewyns* and *chimeras*. Being at least somewhat monstrous was just what was expected.

However, as Alex Woodcock has identified, there is – or at least, was – some inherently sacred about monstrosity. Medieval people thought monsters had an ontological status approximate to saints and angels. The reason is that the word ‘sacred’ once had a second level of meaning – long since obsolete – as something ‘accursed or horrible, something devoted to divinity for destruction, and hence criminal, impious, wicked, infamous’. (Woodcock 2005: 15, 20; 122, citing Durkheim 1915: 411 and Pickering 1984.) This is why it would make sense for pagans to sacrifice criminals and other ‘social deviants’ to their deities.

This broader sense of the sacred, one which includes the dangerous and impure as well as the benevolent and blessed, is a paradox alien to modern Western thinking. Both the sanctified and the abject are considered indefinable, while descriptions and depictions seek to express the ineffable ‘in excess’. On the one hand there are the ‘holier than thou’ icons, on the other the ‘horribler than thou’ grotesques.

Above: Fifteenth-century allegorical depiction of Lust by Pisanello. Note the rabbit or ‘coney’, at the time regarded as the ultimate symbol of sexual depravity.

Right: From a 1425 edition of De Rerum Naturis now in the Vatican.
However this seemingly linear dualism can also be seen as a continuous circle, where the two extremes meet in a ‘place where meaning collapses’ (Woodcock 2005: 15, quoting Kristeva 1982: 2). In other words, a liminal zone of ever-emergent unknown and unformed beings – the very essence of the grotesque in art.

Liminal zones are always cultural weak spots, transitional zones where a culture’s knowledge and meaning can never be fully imposed, where popular meanings can be as valid as those of the authorities and institutions. Only later were ideas segregated according to different rationalities, as human reasoning and spiritual insights evolved into more modern ways of thinking (Woodcock 2005: 15–16; 28).

Alex Woodcock, drawing upon theorists as diverse as Émile Durkheim and Julia Kristeva, has offered the best insight into how medieval monsters had meaning in the minds of their creators and their contemporaries. He is content to use the technically-correct term ‘liminal’ to refer to the monstrous in medieval sculpture. I am more inclined to refer to such carvings as having ‘slippery meanings’ and other such phrases. But we differ only in choice of words, not in underlying sensibilities.

While Woodcock has succinctly identified how the monstrous had meaning, there is no succinct approach to what those meanings might have been. Indeed, he specifically refers to the ‘excess of meanings’ which are part-and-parcel of the liminality of the grotesque (Woodcock 2005: 16). While popular medieval culture increasingly identified deformity with punishment for sin (especially sexual deviance), the presence of monsters in ecclesiastical art predates this exegesis. At the risk of repeating myself once too often, we should not seek ‘the meaning’ of a specific motif, but instead attempt to identify the ways in which a variety of different meanings were attributed.

Monsters, especially the more demonic ones, not only had meaning but they had power – at least in the minds of medieval clergy who were familiar with the writings of St Augustine. He devotes a considerable part of this hugely influential work, The City of God, to explaining how demons were empowered and how they must be combated (Camille 1989: 61). By deeming them merely ‘grotesques’ the Renaissance effectively disempowered these demons. But to their medieval creators such demonic powers were still real rather than imaginary.

Medieval attitudes to monsters are the subject of a collection of academic papers (Bildhauer and Mills 2003), itself in part inspired by the prior work of John Block Friedman (Friedman 1981), David Williams (Williams 1999) and Jeffrey Cohen’s intensely erudite study of giants (Cohen 1999). While all these books may be deemed as ‘theorising monsters’ rather than practical guides, they establish some of the foundations for further research.
Where did you get that monster?

the ‘context’ for the grotesque and monstrous, the inspirations for specific images – and the complexity of possible meanings – are, however, much less easy to pin down.

One of the main sources of inspiration were the more monstrous entities described in the numerous copies of *De Rerum Naturis*, many of which were elaborately illustrated – although the written descriptions alone would inspire any sculptor’s imagination.

But, as ever with medieval carvings, the boundaries are slippery. Firstly, some of the motifs mostly associated with human heads may also appear in animal guises. In Chapter Six which discusses green men I briefly mentioned ‘green animals’, which appear among the very earliest of the Romanesque foliage sprouters and also during the heyday of the motif in the Gothic.

Secondly, at first glance some of the monsters look almost human. I am not thinking here of the more grotesquely-contorted caricatures and such like; in the final analysis all the features – no matter how distorted – are human. I am thinking instead of the faces with non-human ears. Typically these look like a hare’s ears but are actually intended to be ass’s ears. Either way there would be an implied insult as in Classical times hares were associated with Venus and so depictions of hares symbolised lascivious concupiscence (a word which strictly means ‘ardent longing’ but, in Christian preaching, refers to a belief that humans have an innate tendency to long for fleshly appetites, often associated with a desire to do things
which are proscribed. These days, where hares are comparatively uncommon, these concupiscent associations have shifted to rabbits.

We know from other carvings that medieval fools were rather fond of wearing hoods with just such ears (Jones 2002: 109–10). We may think it appropriate that a fool would wear a hood depicting an animal considered foolish. But at the time the significance was somewhat different because such hoods, however decorated, were all-but synonymous with the coxcomb. So quite what ass’s ears denoted is open to debate, but all ribald suggestions are plausible.

Less common are human heads with cat-like ears, such as the corbel at Sproxton. The meaning of this hybrid is, so far, less clear. I will return to the topic of hybrids later in this chapter.

**Demonic without and within**

A quite specific form of monstrosity is when the mouth takes on other-than-human forms, as with the remarkable series of heads which make up the springers of the nave at Lyddington. In Chapter Seven I suggested parallels between medieval farting mooners and modern animated cartoons. With the Lyddington heads I feel that were the sculptor alive today he would be producing SFX for horror films such as *Eraserhead*. Horror films have their counterparts in graphic novels and more conventional ‘comic’ strips and, as I noted in Chapter Five, these genres share something of the same liminal and ‘slippery’ sensibilities which the ‘marginal’ medieval carvings once occupied.

Why can we be reasonably sure that the Lyddington heads were intended to be regarded as demonic? It is all too easy to pass over this remark as ‘obvious’. The abundance of medieval illustrations showing devils in more-or-less human form confirms that this ‘obvious’ deduction is indeed correct. But why should devils be anthropomorphic?

We may take it rather for granted, but the boundaries between humans and demons are slippery for doctrinal reasons. Probe a little deeper into the psychology of devils within Christian thinking – as indeed Islamic or Buddhist teachings too – and clearly there is the trope of the ‘devil within us all’ and, indeed, the ability for at least some fellow human...
beings to exhibit diabolical behavioural traits (cue reference to Jingiz Khan, Attila the Hun, Caligula, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, Kim Jong II, Saddam Hussein or other despised tyrant of choice…).

In other words, the very idea of devils was created ‘in our own image’, so it is little surprise that that we imagine that they look at least a little like us. In more secular times we simply imagine that extraterrestrials look more like us than, say, a lake of slime (cue pedants noting that the Daleks of Doctor Who and The Navigator in David Lynch’s 1984 film Dune are less anthropomorphic than most).

As Simon Danser has observed, ‘Paranoia and phobia thrive in the fuzzy frontier zones of identity.’ If we have trouble recognising how the fear of Hell was ‘subliminally’ indoctrinated into medieval minds or recognising how analogous ideas are ‘subliminally’ conveyed by modern spin doctors then perhaps Danser’s following remarks will help:

The underlying theme of heroes protecting ‘us’ (usually the ‘US’ of the USA) from an alien ‘other’ has been explored in popular culture in the form of myths that have migrated from a Wild West that was largely a fantasy (although the deep racism was most certainly not fantasy), through a romanticised World War II or Vietnam, and then to extraterrestrial encounters.

While perhaps epitomising the yearnings of the Reagan and first George Bush eras, the ‘final frontier’ metaphors of Star Wars now seem less relevant. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ distinctions have become progressively more blurred. In ET (1982), a less-than-threatening homesick alien takes up residence within an archetypal American home. With Alien (1979), the alien is born from a human womb, but on a spaceship remote from Earth. When the birth of an alien from a human recurs in Men in Black (1997) the threat is more sinister. Not only does this take place in America, but the distinction between human secret agents and their extra-terrestrial counterparts are blurred by sharing the eponymous dress sense.

(Danser 2005: 58)
If SciFi films seem a tad out of place in a study of medieval carvings then recall my remarks in Chapter Five: the ideas being conveyed by medieval masons are in many ways akin to the ideas conveyed by modern popular culture. Danser’s book, *The Myths of Reality*, is devoted to demonstrating just how rarely we recognise the *implicit* assumptions and ideologies of our own culture.

At the risk of labouring the point, just as modern culture can only be fully understood by having some awareness of the *implicit* modernist and capitalist ideologies, so too the meaning of medieval culture can only be appreciated once the *implicit* doctrines of the Christian worldview – as well as the more explicit ones – are recognised. Interestingly, identifying the underlying ideologies of other peoples’ cultures is easier than recognising those same underpinnings of our own society!

Anyone new to the territory of just how differently other cultures view anomalous animals would do well to read the relevant parts of Roel Sterckx’s study *The Animal and Daemon in Early China* (Sterckx 2002) as, apart from detailed discussions of what he terms ‘social zoography’ in Bronze Age China, he also compares and contrasts with Western views of animals which transgress natural boundaries, either by being monsters or hybrids. Indeed, just as Edward Said’s famous study published in 1977 – which established that the ‘Orient’ is an invention of Western thinking that helps create the concept of *The West* by defining its ‘excluded other’ – so too monsters can be seen as the ‘excluded other’ which help to define humans.

**Hybrids**

As already mentioned, human heads with animal ears are quite commonplace. However there are also more complex hybrid human-animal inventions. The margins of illuminated manuscripts provide many examples. One of the best examples in stone is part of the series of exceptionally well-executed twelve century capitals in the crypt of Canterbury cathedral, where a band of musicians are depicted with human bodies and limbs but a variety of animal heads.

The bible sets a unbridged divide between humans and animals so, as Keith Thomas observed, there was an

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*Hybrid musicians on one of the twelfth century capitals in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral.*
... anxiety, latent or explicit, about any form of behaviour which threatened to transgress the fragile boundaries between man and the animal creation. (Thomas 1983: 38)

And yet that threat of transgression clearly intrigued medieval minds. This chapter is not the place to speculate whether worldviews which predated Christian doctrines were still underpinning thinking as late as the twelfth century (see Continuity of Worldviews in Anglo-Saxon England; (Trubshaw 2013d)). However it is far from speculative to note that throughout the medieval period – and into more recent times – people disguised themselves as animals. A piece of sackcloth over the head and shoulders, a horse’s skull on a pole (and preferably a piece of string to make the jaws ‘clack’ loudly together) and you have a once-common type of hobby horse. Spend a bit more time and money and you could have a ‘tourney’ type hobby horse instead.

Depictions of four-legged animals with human heads are recurrent in Germanic art; indeed they are known as Tiermenschen (animal-men) in the specialist literature. They are often paired, and most often depict hybrid human-headed horses. ‘Objects bearing such motifs may have played a sacred role in the religious beliefs and ceremonies of the communities that made and used them,’ suggests Chris Fern, noting that such pairs offer a parallel to Hengist and Horsa (literally ‘Stallion’ and ‘Horse’) who feature in the foundation myth for Anglo-Saxon England. Farmhouses in Holstein still have horse-head figures on their gables, and these were known as ‘Hengist and Hors’ up to the end of the nineteenth century (Fern 2010: 137).
Whatever the origins of hobby horses, the clergy repeatedly preached against such ‘guizing’ (a word derived from the Old French word desguiser which also gives the Modern English word ‘disguising’) which confirms that such practices continued despite their admonishments. Indeed such animals appeared in miracle plays. We can reasonably assume that ‘hobby dragons’ sometimes formed part of the charades of pre-Reformation St George’s Day parades and celebrations. Nineteenth century folklore collectors were also able to provide plenty of examples of such customs. And where would traditional pantomimes be without the four-legged version of the hobby horse?

In a sense human-animal hybrids were ‘real’ – albeit in the form of costumed actors. Little wonder that medieval masons followed the same lines of thinking but without the practical constraints which apply to costumes.

As anyone who has donned a mask will know, it makes ‘slipping into character’ almost effortless. Guising would easily provide a ‘pretext’ for licentious behaviour. The antics of the Old ‘Oss at Padstow every Mayday – from time to time, the dancer ‘traps’ young women under the hobby horse’s suitably ample-sized skirt ‘for good luck’ – were probably matched by a great many other now lost and forgotten Maytide ‘osses.

There is something exceptionally powerful about dressing up in an animal skin or otherwise impersonating animals. A substantial ethnographical literature about ‘medicine men’ who seek or evoke spirit animals to assist them cure people or animals. This in turn has spawned a vast popular literature about supposed ‘shamanic journeys’ and a small industry of people who run workshops teaching you to find your own ‘power animal’. In the last thirty-or-so years this has, rightly or otherwise, become something children and adults are encouraged to try doing at home.

No matter how we view or value such modern day manifestations, there is one underlying trait which unites all man-animal hybrids – they have an inherent ‘dual nature’ (Milne 2011: 65). Visually, they are the most concise way to get across ideas that would take a great many words to explain. We may not always immediately recognise what the multiple meanings of a medieval hybrid might be – as with car-like ears on an otherwise human head – but, without doubt, we know that some sort of ‘dual nature’ was being conveyed by the carver.
Within the Christian worldview hybrids were, as Keith Thomas noted, transgressive. They were also clearly a useful way for artists and carvers to convey visually ideas about some sort of ‘dual nature’. What is much less clear is whether such polysemic readings were also a throw-back to pre-biblical worldviews, in which the idea of metamorphosis between species was prevalent. This would, for example, accord with the worldview of Bronze Age China explored in detail by Roel Sterckx (Sterckx 2002) and – on the basis of the suggestions of Carver and Semple already discussed – might still have been an effective part of north European Christianity until the twelfth century. At this stage I can only leave this as an open question, with more work needed to either confirm or deny the possibility that the hybrids in Romanesque art are the successors to earlier worldviews where metamorphosis was not yet ‘taboo’.

Bestiaries

However you do not need to be a hybrid to have rich and polysemic meanings. Among the most popular books in medieval times are bestiaries – illustrated collections of folk lore and legend in which the different attributes of animals are shown. Some of these attributes date back to Aesop’s Fables while others draw on different Classical sources, and some seem to reflect indigenous north European lore.

Modern thinking, despite the efforts of several decades of ecological ideologies, sees the human realm as in some way distinct from the ‘natural world’. This distinction did not exist in medieval thinking. Man [sic] had been given dominion over all the creatures, according to Genesis – but medieval lives were deeply integrated with the lives of domesticated animals and the vagaries of arable farming. As Ronald Hutton puts succinctly:

As part of this outlook, animals are regarded not as mere sources of food or sport but as beings with their own independent importance and significance, worthy of respect and taking their place in a complex set of relationships with each other and with humanity.

(Hutton 2010: 201–2)

Among the animals are many which are not native to Europe – lions, ‘pards’, elephants and camels. Some are entirely imaginary – such as dragons and unicorns. But in medieval times the boundaries between exotic animals rarely seen in Europe, such as elephants, and
wholly fanciful creatures, such as unicorns, would not have been as clear-cut as it is to modern minds. If you’ve never seen an elephant – and never met anyone who has – then they could easily be as imaginary as unicorns. And vice versa. The ‘reality’ (and otherwise) of such creatures in medieval thinking has been explored in a nicely nuanced way by Sarah Wells (Wells 2007).

In the minds of medieval people ‘invisible’ beings such as dragons and basilisks were as much a part of the natural world as stags, boars, dogs and birds. In the early medieval period people thought dragons occupy burial mounds in much the same way foxes or badgers live in their dens – they were simply not seen as often. Indeed, few modern people ever see a badger except on television or dead at the side of the road. Although her thesis has not yet been completed, Susan Kilby has looked closely at the depictions of natural and supernatural animals on the twelfth century capitals in the crossing of Castor church near Peterborough, as part of a wider investigation of ‘medieval peasant mentalities’ about the local landscape (Kilby forthcoming).

While domesticated creatures such as sheep and cows dominate the animal species depicted on the carvings in Leicestershire and Rutland churches, there are also examples of creatures as diverse as owls and hedgehogs among the corbels in the nave at Sproxton church. When we encounter eagles, bulls and lions – especially in conjunction with each other, plus a fourth human – then we are looking at the emblems of the four evangelists. But the birds and bovines depicted on corbels rarely, if ever, seem to be part of such symbolism.

When it comes to imaginary animals then one ‘species’ dominates – dragons. Actually, the sheer diversity of such depictions suggests they are less a species than a family or even genus. As Alex Woodcock has noted, in the early Romanesque dragons are depicted ‘wrapped up’ in vine-like plants. Both the plant stems and the dragons wrap around each other and themselves. Perhaps we should think of these early dragons as the ‘life spirit’ of the Tree of Life – or, more accurately, think of the dragon’s breath as such a life spirit. In later times dragons are depicted without the foliage and the life-affirming breath becomes demonised as flames. Dragons, as Woodcock states, were ‘an ambivalent symbol capable of syncretising multiple and often conflicting meanings, only gradually coming to

Top: The tiger in the Aberdeen Bestiary.
Bottom: The tiger on a bench-end at Lakenheath, Suffolk. Photograph by Susan Kilby,
represent evil as its predominant theme in the later centuries.’ (Woodcock 2013: 29; 32 citing Kordecki 1980) (Dragons, wyverns and wyrms form key parts of two of the case histories in Part Three, see Chapters Eleven and Twelve.)

While bestiaries are essentially a literary phenomena, they lend themselves to extensive illustration. Those illustrations, predictably, will have their counterparts in stone and wood. For that matter also in tapestries and other decorative needlework. And the same menagerie of creatures also appear in brass. As Peter Heseltine demonstrates in his book, Bestiary of Brass (Heseltine 2006) if you spend enough time looking at medieval brasses then the same mix of animals can be discovered. Many are included as part of the heraldic arms of the person being commemorated but others are ‘merely’ marginal decoration. In Bestiary of Brass he combines rubbings of the relevant brasses with a short account of the ‘symbolism’ of the creature according to the bestiaries.

Susan Kilby has noted that a bench end at Lakenheath seems to be an almost exact copy of a tiger shown in the Aberdeen bestiary (S. Kilby, pers. comm. email 25 November 2012). But this is the only ‘dead spit’ so far recognised. Overall, bestiaries seem not have been a significant influence on medieval sculptors (Woodcock 2005: 10).

Animals famously bite. Unsurprisingly, sculptors sometime make their animals into ferocious beasts, with wide-open mouths and fearsome teeth. But was the aim simply to frighten? In part, yes – plenty of demons from Hell are shown in illuminated manuscripts with similar mouths.

Above: Just a few of the biting heads on the chancel arch at Tickencote.

Right: One of a pair of splendid column-swallowers on a Romanesque doorway at doorway, Saint-Hilaire-la-Croix (Puy-de-Dôme) Photograph by Anthony Weir.

Far right: The Jaws of Hell. In medieval times such images were prominent on the walls of most, if not all, parish churches, usually on the chancel wall behind the rood screen.
And, as I have noted in Chapter Five, the great and the good never smiled or even showed
their teeth – to express emotion, even so much as a snarl, was in itself a devilish gesture.

But in the minds of medieval people cavernous jaws would have evoked something far
worse – and something that they gave far more thought to than most modern people. And
even if present day minds do, from time to time, turn their thoughts of the entrance to Hell,
they are less likely to think of it as a massive and demonic mouth. Yet this is exactly what
seems to emerge in the minds of Anglo-Saxons. And it is a mostly insular image – such
depictions of the mouth of Hell are rare on the Continent.

So far as we can tell, before the Reformation most parish churches would have had just
such an image as part of the Doom painting above the chancel arch. To one side the souls
of the damned would be shown consigned to cavernous maw of some immense monster
of which only the mouth, teeth and eyes could be seen, on their way to spend eternity at
the pleasure of His Satanic Majesty. Mouths – especially gaping and monstrous ones – had
a clear association then which has now been lost.

Hardly surprisingly, functioning gargoyles – that is, those that were carved to spew out
water – often have gaping mouths. As such gargoyles are usually grotesque, this simply
added to their demonic attributes.

But a few paragraphs back I said that animals bite. Opening the mouth wide may be a
preparatory stage. But biting is something different. Which Romanesque sculptors were
fully aware of. Along with chevron decoration, the most common motifs for doorways
were rows of biting heads. Characteristically they have long ‘beaks’ and are, seemingly,
biting the rounded moulding of the arch.

Biting animals are also characteristic of Anglo-Saxon and, even more so, Anglo-
Scandinavian art. Interlaces of animals where they are biting their own tails are almost
diagnostic. Self-biting animals are found in Romanesque art and the decorative initials of
illuminated manuscripts. They are not common in Gothic art, but I suspect this is because
few Gothic carvings use pieces of stone big enough to depict such actions. So far as I am
aware the snake swallowing its own tail – the ouroboros – does not appear in sculpture
until the Renaissance.

Viking ship prows.
And there is another variant. Less biting than swallowing. It is a motif which first appears in the Romanesque, where a capital appears to be swallowing the column on which it is situated. But the motif lives on in recognisable form, even in situations where there is no actual column to swallow. Once you start noticing this motif it is surprisingly common among Gothic as well as Romanesque decorative schemes.

**The monstrous and the heraldic**

Monsters were seemingly everywhere in medieval times. We read about them in Old English poems, such as *Beowulf*, and recognise them as part of the decoration of Anglo-Saxon cross shafts. In the parts of Britain, such as the East Midlands, where Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture prevails then monsters interlaced with their own bodies and tails are a defining feature. The antecedents of such decoration can be seen on the prows of Viking boats now in Scandinavian museums.

The descendants of these Scandinavian chimeras inspire the more monstrous sculptors of the Romanesque. They in turn begat the wildest of zoomorphic grotesques which are so characteristic of the Gothic. And then, as the Gothic was drawing to a close, animals began to come to the fore in another guise – as heraldic emblems.

There must have been a substantial number of people carving heraldic arms, both to be worn as part of a suit of armour or to decorate the walls and doorways of manorial houses. Some was in metal but most was in wood. Only a small proportion, created for architectural decoration, were in stone. Understandably, few of these – in any of the media – have come down to us. But we must not let the relatively few survivals fool us into thinking that they were rare at the time.

Indeed, although no historian seems to have yet addressed the matter, it is reasonable to suppose that anyone who had the skills to carve heraldic artefacts would have spent a good deal of their time carving such animals. From time to time such craftsmen would, presumably, also work on church restoration and extensions. Little surprise that the gargoyles and other decorative carvings at the end of the Gothic begin to look far more heraldic than demonic.

![A 'hunky punk' on the tower at Long Sutton, Somerset.](From Poyntz Wright 2004)
In Somerset there are a remarkable number of fifteenth century carvings of animals – real and imaginary – decorating the exteriors of some of the churches. They are typically, though not always, on the tower. While a similar size to gargoyles, none of these have any functional purpose. They are known locally as ‘hunky punks’ and Peter Poyntz Wright has devoted a book to illustrating and describing them (Poyntz Wright 2004).

Carvings of a similar date and style seem to exist elsewhere, but further work on dating is essential; at this stage it would be wrong to assume that every ‘heraldic’ and non-functional grotesque was carved towards the end of the Gothic.

**Future research**

The sheer numbers of medieval carvings which could be deemed to be ‘monsters’ means that any attempt to describe them spans a wide range of real and imaginary animals, man-animal hybrids, and imaginative zoomorphic entities. At the very least there needs to be a ‘nested’ lexicon to describe these – from ‘higher order’ categories such as ‘animal’, ‘human’ ‘man-animal hybrid’ through more specific taxonomies. But clearly such categorisation must not be too specific else we each individual carving becoming a category all on its own! This remark, while especially relevant for animals and hybrids, also applies to all the motifs discussed in Part Two and is discussed further in *What can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* (Trubshaw 2013b).

The plethora of individual monsters created by medieval sculptors are manifestations of culture which intentionally created entities whose very existence was ‘slippery’ and boundary-defying. Monster-makers, at least from the perspective of taxonomists, are wilfully untidy.

From the perspective of medieval thinking, these monsters were intended to be outside recognised categories of thinking. Indeed, the unnamed was equally unformed. Although the categorisation of creatures into genus and species was still several centuries in the future, modern obsessions with taxonomies have their roots in the medieval mindset that regarded giving an entity a name as all-but synonymous with giving it a form. And the act of naming was religious, not secular.

Sir Isaac Newton. He sought a better understanding of the mind of God. By the twentieth century he had been converted into the father of secular science.

By recognising the distinctions one was understanding better the mind of God. Throughout the middle ages the cosmogony in *Genesis* was reflected in the widespread belief that God was the primal architect of the cosmos, and that his divine will created form from formlessness. Modern science is the direct successor to these beliefs. (We now think of Isaac Newton as a pioneering scientist. But he regarded his endeavours in mathematics, physics and optics as attempts to better understand the mind of God.

Medieval monsters are part of God’s creation, though right on threshold. They stand at the ‘abject’ end of the spectrum, where the obsolete sense of sacred embraced the accursed and horrific.
PART THREE

Examples from Leicestershire and Rutland
Chapter Ten

Breedon on the Hill

Parts One and Two of this study have looked at medieval carvings broadly, although with examples mostly from Leicestershire and Rutland. In Part Three I want to illustrate how specific carvings can be related to other examples and to what extent this allows the possible meaning and significance to be explored. These discussions will be focused on carvings from Leicestershire or Rutland, simply because these are the ones I have spent time thinking about over the last twenty-five years. Indeed several of the following chapters are revised versions of articles which have been previously published.

As already discussed in Chapter One, we should not be seeking simple ‘interpretation’ and ‘explanationism’. Meanings come and go and, above all, evolve. Yet while we risk making mistakes trying to find the meanings, we would be committing a more fundamental error if we considered that these carvings were never intended to have a meaning. The examples in the following chapters suggest, at least for the carvings I have selected, that if we look hard enough at the available evidence then the meanings are plausibly quite subtle and even, at times, sophisticated.

However, I can only emphasise that my thoughts – no matter how detailed – remain provisional and, at least to some extent, speculative. Only when scholars from a range of backgrounds have devoted considerably more attention to the carvings themselves and the popular culture in which they were created will be begin to have a more certain understanding.
First, let us visit the dramatically-situated priory Church of St Mary and St Hardulph at Breedon on the Hill. Inside is a collection of carvings in which not only deserves pride of place in Leicestershire, but indeed has national importance. Pedantically there are three ‘collections’ of sculptures:

- cross-shaft fragments, mostly Anglo-Scandinavian;
- fragments of an ornamental frieze with animals, foliage and geometrical motifs;
- full-length figures of apostles and an angel in the ‘Winchester School’ style.

The cross shafts and friezes seemingly were carved in the eighth or ninth centuries, while the ‘Winchester school’ sculptures are from around 1000 (Zarnecki 1984: 17).

I am intentionally only discussing two specific examples in this chapter as all these Anglo-Saxon carvings will be described in detail when the relevant volume of the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture is published. In brief I will also mention that one of the cross-
shaft fragments have been interpreted as depicting a mixture of Christian and pre-Christian tales – although that has been questioned by other scholars.

**The friezes**

A minster church was founded at Breedon about 675 and these friezes are assumed to have originally decorated the exterior of the second church built on the site around 800. The mixture of animals, foliage and geometrical friezes on the surviving frieze fragments have no Continental parallels. If – as seems likely – there were once other English churches with such sophisticated friezes then the carvings have since been lost.

The subjects depicted in the frieze were presumably intended to clearly convey a Christian message. And indeed some of the surviving friezes depict what art historians refer to as ‘inhabited vine scrolls’. Such inhabited vine scroll is unique to the British Isles. It occurs on Northumbrian cross shafts of the same era but is distinct from Continental carvings. Precursors, if any, must be with an indigenous tradition of wood carving for which – understandably – no evidence survives. As a quick glance at the illustrations reveals, while the vine scroll may have a biblical reference (Kenaan-Kedar 2002b), the creatures ‘inhabiting’ the vines have less obvious parallels to New Testament tales. And other friezes seem to have no biblical referents at all.

**Tiermenschen**

The human-headed quadrupeds are among the most remarkable of these surviving frieze fragments. They seem lively and alert – while still being disconcertingly Otherwordly. What now-lost legends or lore was the sculptor depicting? Presumably a well-known tale which offered a Christian exegesis – yet not one which makes the later collections of Anglo-Saxon homilies.

As discussed in the previous chapter, depictions of four-legged animals with human heads are recurrent in Germanic art; indeed they are known as Tiermenschen (animal-men) in the specialist literature. They are often paired, and most often depict hybrid human-headed horses. ‘[O]bjects bearing such motifs may have played a sacred role in the religious beliefs and ceremonies of the communities that made and used them,’ suggests Chris Fern, noting that such pairs offer a parallel to Hengist and Horsa (literally ‘Stallion’
and ‘Horse’) who feature in the foundation myth for Anglo-Saxon England (Fern 2010: 137).

The Anglian settlement in England - in 449, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle - was said to have been led by the brothers Hengist and Horsa, whose names mean ‘stallion’ and ‘horse’. Bede says they were the ‘sons of Wicfgils, whose father was Witta, whose father was Wecta, son of Woden’. Farmhouses in Holstein still have horse-head figures on their gables, and these were known as ‘Hengist and Hors’ up to the end of the nineteenth century. (Fern 2010: 137)

Ronald Hutton comments Chris Fern’s remarks and places them within a broader standpoint:

As part of this outlook, animals are regarded not as mere sources of food or sport but as beings with their own independent importance and significance, worthy of respect and taking their place in a complex set of relationships with each other and with humanity. (Hutton 2010: 201–2)

Puca or pocca?

While it is perfectly possible to regard the Breedon Tiermenschen as human-headed horses, the alert, looking-over-the-shoulder posture of these creatures puts me in mind of attentive deer. And the word for deer in Old English was pocca; so far as can be established the word seems to refer specifically to fallow deer, although the situation is confused as fallow deer might not have been introduced into England until the Norman Conquest.

Curiously there is a near-homophone, puca, which denotes a spirit of place or woodland elf (Hall 2006). Puca evolves into the medieval character Puck who, until recent centuries, was the most prevalent English name for goblin-like entities. Puck is best-known as a character in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and in Rudyard Kipling’s collection of short stories published in 1909 as Puck of Pook’s Hill, named after a hill so-named clearly visible from Kipling’s home at Batemans, near Burwash, Sussex. However before either of these literary incarnations, Puck – otherwise known as Robin Goodfellow – was a well-known figure in medieval British folklore, with his trickster antics standing him alongside the now better-known figures of Loki, Anansi or Coyote.

Interestingly, there is the Old English word aelfscinu. This is the precursor of the Modern English words ‘elf shine’ but pronounced ‘elf sheen’. While scin, like glamour, could describe a beautiful woman – ‘not simply beautiful, but perilously so’ (Hall 2007: 93) – its main usage was to denote the deceptive appearance of anything ‘paranormal’. As Alaric Hall has painstakingly established, in Old English the word aelf did not mean simply an ‘elf’ but instead was a broad category which roughly equates to the modern sense of ‘Otherworldly’. This sense of aelf dropped out of English after the Norman Conquest when the French word faerie (itself a borrowing from the Latin fata meaning ‘fates’) took over the same sense of enchantment and magic. Again this is not fairies as small human-like entities but the sense of fairy in ‘fairy tales’ – bearing in mind that few fairy tales are about fairies per se, but are always tales of enchantment.

This broad ‘catch all’ sense of fairy persists until at least the seventeenth century, as for example when John Aubrey wrote:
Anno 1670, not far from Cirencester, was an apparition; being demanded whether a good spirit or a bad? returned no answer, but disappeared with a curious perfume and a most melodious twang. Mr W. Lilly believes it was a fairy.

Fairies had ‘glamour’ – meaning less an attractive appearance than the ability to hide their appearances by a veil of magic (as John Aubrey observed, they could change shape in an instant). So too the Old English word *aelfsceinu* seemingly denotes the deceptive appearance of anything ‘paranormal’. ‘Fairy glamour’ and *aelfsceinu* seem to be exact synonyms.

Knowing – as I have shown in Chapter One – that Anglo-Saxon literature includes many examples of puns and word play, should we see this Breedon carving as an equally punning play on the words *puca* and *pocca*, intentionally suggesting the *aelfsceinu*? On the basis of many examples of intentionally ambiguous man-animals in Anglo-Saxon art (see Pollington *et al* 2010: 49–50 for a detailed discussion) the answer ought to be a clear ‘Yes’.

However, there is a counter-argument as to exactly what type of deer are meant by *pocca* and also whether fallow deer not known in England until after the Norman Conquest. For the moment there are no infallible answers to these arguments so I will simply leave this suggestion wide open. It may simply be that the *puca/pocca* homophone is no more significant than the modern word ‘fawn’ (which evolved to mean specifically ‘young deer’ in the fifteenth century) also having a homophone, ‘faun’, which is a human-goat hybrid (albeit modern depictions of fauns conventionally have human arms and only two animal legs). Interestingly, the Old English word for male goat was *bucca*, which gives us the modern word ‘buck’, denoting a male deer. We also have ‘buck rabbits’. But ‘buck goats’ have been bowdlerised to ‘billy goats’.

**The Breedon angel**

About two hundred years after the frieze was carved a series of Apostles and other figures were commissioned for Breedon minster. As was most fashionable at the time, they were carved in a Byzantine style, referred to by art historians as the ‘Winchester school’. However there a number of scholarly doubts as to whether or not these sculptures were
Byzantine art showing the same ways of depicting clothing, and suggesting the sorts of colours which may have originally been used to paint, and maybe gild, the Breedon angel.

Top left: Sixth century mosaic from Cyprus

Top centre: Fifth or sixth century mosaic from Istanbul.

Immediate right: Second to fourth century wall painting depicting a Maenad and Satyr. Although this is a secular subject, note the architectural alcove surrounding the figures is similar to the Breedon angel.

Far right: An icon of the Virgin, circa sixth century textile. Such objects were portable enough to travel to the British Isles.
actually carved in Winchester, although the sculptors would have had close links with the city. Based on later medieval working practices the sculptors were probably, in principle, peripatetic and normally moved from one commission to the next. However, as considerable amounts of new building work were successively undertaken at Winchester, several teams of masons may have been more-or-less continually employed there, with only the occasional contract elsewhere.

As already discussed in Chapter Two, Winchester at this time was the power-base for the late Anglo-Saxon kings. It was something of a ‘melting pot’ for cultures because of the close links established by Viking traders over a vast area which spanned the New World, Greenland, Iceland, Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Rhine and Danube river systems into western Russia, together with extended overland contacts to the ‘Silk Roads’ (Trow 2006 Ch.6). Curiously, because these Vikings had yet to convert to Christianity, Winchester was also decidedly ‘multicultural’ – King Cnut was nominally Christian but his regiment of body guards was not. Indeed Cnut commissioned a carving of Sigurd the dragon slayer for either the Old or New Minster at Winchester.

However, although the carvings at Breedon were probably created during Cnut’s lifetime, there is nothing ‘pagan’ about any of them. The most impressive of these carvings is now located inside the tower, in an area normally kept locked. However in 2001 a replica, based on a 3D laser scan, was installed in the nave. Unlike the ambiguities of the meaning of the subject matter of the earlier friezes, everything about this carving speaks clearly. It is undoubtedly an angel.

Everything about this carving mimics well-established conventions in Byzantine art – the sculpted architectural ‘alcove’, the folds of the clothing and even the right hand, which is making a gesture of blessing (a gesture which is known as far away as Tibet where I understand the Buddhists today refer to it as *lhasey zhon-nu*). The original carving has traces of paint in the folds of the wings and, based on Byzantine mosaics and textiles, we can presume that originally this carving would have been brightly painted and probably partly gilded.

But look again at this sculpture. There are two plants either side of the angel’s feet. Without doubt they are poppies gone to seed. And the carving is clear enough to show that this is not any old common or garden poppy. It is *Papaver somniferum* – the opium

Papaver somniferum. The seed heads never burst.
The Latin botanical name means the ‘sleep-bringing poppy’, referring to the sedative properties of opiates. The distinctive feature is that the seed heads on opium poppies do not split and disperse their seed naturally. They are purely cultivars which require the seed to be manually collected and sown. Yes, every opium poppy ever grown has been planted by a human, not by Mother Nature.

As the pain-relieving effects of opiates were known at least a thousand years before this carving was created (and arguably well before that) then we should see the Breedon angel not so much as an ‘angel of sleep’ as an ‘angel of mercy’ – a healing angel. The side-effects of opiates are sleepiness and vivid dreams. ‘Morphine’, the name for refined opium, derives from Morpheus who, in Ovid, was the god of dreams (in Greek morpheus literally means ‘the maker of shapes’) and the son of Sleep. This tentatively suggests that the healing practices at Breedon included something akin to the Greek practice of dream incubation at special temples known as asklepion (after the Greek healing deity Asklepios). The Romans also built dream incubation temples; the best known example in Britain is at Lydney in the Forest of Dean, although the crop-mark photograph of the unexcavated Roman temple near Thistleton on the Rutland-Lincolnshire border suggests this too may have followed the same layout.

The ‘rituals’ of dream incubation temples involved going to sleep and then, the following morning, the specialist theraputes (yes, the origin of our word ‘therapist’) interpreted each patient’s dreams to offer advice for a cure or alleviation of the symptoms. As it was clearly fairly essential for patients to have at least one dream worthy of interpretation, did such temples ensure sleep – and dreams for the theraputes to interpret in the morning – by giving patients a draught of opium-laced drink at bedtime instead of something as benign as Horlicks?

And if this isn’t already excessively speculative then just think about the weird animals on the friezes from about two hundred years before. Any mason who was skilled enough to produce such work probably had arthritis in his hands and other joints. If opiates had been available then – and there is no conclusive evidence either way – they would have been one of the few ways of alleviating the constant pain. If – and I realise there are several big ‘ifs’ here – then are these friezes depicting puca he encountered in his dreams?
Chapter Eleven

‘What is the meaning of this Germanic barbarity?’

The entry for Stoney Stanton in the first edition of Nikolaus Pevsner’s *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland* starts:

> Norman tympanum now over [north] doorway of the chancel. A very odd representation. On the [left] an ox (lamb?) and behind it a bishop with crozier and blessing with raised hand. The ox attacks a dragon (is attacked by a dragon?). On the dragon perches an eagle, and from the [right] a second dragon attacks the first. What is the meaning of this Germanic barbarity?

Pevsner does not answer own query and although Elizabeth Williamson, the editor of the second edition, amends the final sentence to ‘What can it all mean?’, she too leaves it as a rhetorical question.

However such ambiguity was not in mind of the mason who created it. He depicted what must have been an exciting story that would have been readily understood by his contemporaries.

So what can be sensibly said about the meaning of this splendid sculpture? The protagonists comprise of a man, three animals – one clearly mythical – and a large bird. Williamson refines Pevsner’s description to:

> On the [left] an ox (?) and behind it a bishop with crozier and blessing right hand. The ox attacks a dragon (lion?) whose head is drawn back. From the [right] a wyvern attacks it and an eagle perches on it.

Like Williamson I am not convinced that the left-hand beast is an ox, as such beasts would be depicted with horns. Presumably Pevsner’s interpretation was influenced by the emblems of the Evangelists – whereby a lion, ox, eagle and angel signify Mark, Luke, John and Matthew respectively. But, as the scene does not fit representations of the Evangelists, there is little reason to suppose the left-hand figure is an ox. The more obvious candidates are a large canine or feline – perhaps a lioness or leopard, allowing for the probability that the stonemason would have seen neither alive and would be copying other depictions.

The stonemason may have thought of the wyvern as a *wyrm*, the Old English word for dragon-like entities famous for guarding the treasure supposedly concealed in burial mounds.
The Stoney Stanton tympanum, now over the north door to the chancel but originally over the main (south or west) doorway. There is no clear evidence as to why there is a vertical slot. There are no parallels for this being original and I assume it is a fairly recent modification to take a bracket supporting a lantern over the doorway.
Although this menagerie of monsters is unique to the Stoney Stanton tympanum, there are parallels at Parwich and Hognaston (two near-adjacent villages in Derbyshire). However there the Lamb of God (or Agnus Dei) is a prominent motif and the accompany creatures are less Otherworldly – note the eponymous ‘hog’ at Hognaston. (There is perhaps a ‘nod’ here to an entirely distinct decorative theme for tympana which depicts boar hunts, for example at Little Langford in Wiltshire; see Wood 2012.) However the backward-turned head of the right-hand beast at Parwich (perhaps a lion) closely parallels the central creature at Stoney Stanton. And, common to all three carvings, is a bird (pedantically, two birds at Hognaston).

Another similar tympanum is at Little Paxton in Cambridgeshire. Although this too has a bishop and assorted animals, the wheel cross – now detached from the Lamb of God – dominates, and the animals seem domesticated. Notably the bird has flown away. My guess is that the Lamb of God has transformed into the two lambs or sheep either side of the cross, kneeling in deference to the symbol of God. If this interpretation is correct then the Agnus Dei has inspired a visual reference to the description of the Nativity in the apocryphal Gospel of St James, where the ox and ass are described as joining Mary and the shepherds in kneeling by the manger where the infant Jesus lay (although the sheep are described as being uncannily motionless rather than kneeling, so if the Little Paxton scene is a reference to St James’ account, then it is an ‘adapted’ one).

The ‘wheel cross’ begins life as an emblem of the sky or thunder god Taranis (worshipped principally in Gaul and
Top: The tympanum at Hognaston, Derbyshire with birds, Lamb of God, bishop, hog, dog? and (incomplete) biting beasts.

Bottom: Little Paxton tympanum with the wheel cross dominating. This is flanked with two kneeling animals (probably lambs or sheep), with a bishop and what may be a horse completing the composition.

Note that two beasts 'adoring' the cross are common on Anglo-Saxon depictions of the crucifixion. The similarly-paired animals at Hognaston and Little Paxton are, of course, a compositional device readily suited to the shape of tympana. But I suspect a deliberate 'echoing' of the crucifixion. Just possibly such triptychs owe their origin to the conventional placement of pre-conversion idols, although direct evidence is understandably lacking.
the British Isles, but also in the Rhineland and Danube regions). It continued until recent times as a popular decorative motif in East Anglian pargetting (decorative plasterwork) and other ‘folk art’. Quite what it meant to the minds of twelfth century Christians is a moot point. The commonest suggestion by art historians is that it was thought of as ‘the wheel of eternity’ but this may be no more than an oft-repeated ‘truism’ as I am not aware of any scholarly evidence.

**Compare and contrast**

All four tympana incorporate at least two motifs found on the other four, but none of the motifs are found on all four. The scores are: bishop (3), one or two birds (3), Lamb of God or prominent wheel cross (3), backward-facing ‘lion’ (2), hog/pig (2), and possible dogs (2). Of these, the Stoney Stanton carving does not share the Lamb of God/wheel cross or the hog/pig.

Bear in mind that such tympana would have originally been painted, perhaps quite garishly. In a preliterate society the decoration of a church was intended to clearly communicate well-known Christian parables and legends, usually biblical but sometimes taken from the lives of the saints. The nearest Biblical story approximating to the Stoney Stanton activities is Daniel in the lion’s den. Meyer Schapiro has discussed in some detail the various depictions of Daniel in the lion’s den in the Romanesque sculptures of northern France (Schapiro 2006: 140–2).

If we interpret the left-hand animal as a lion then is this a ‘manifestation’ of Christ – at the right-hand of the bishop? Susan Kilby has drawn my attention to a capital at Castor near Peterborough which is a close contemporary of these tympana. It depicts a lion and a dragon in a manner which is closely matched by a somewhat later bestiary image clearly labelled as Christ and Satan. Bearing in mind the more clearly lion-like figure on the left-hand side of the Southwell tympanum, together with the strong lateral polarisation of good and evil in the tympana of northern France (see my discussion of Henry Claman in Chapter Four), and this ‘reading’ of the iconography is perhaps intentional.
It’s about the bird

We can discount the bird at Stoney Stanton being the dove of the Holy Trinity as this iconography is not found in Norman carvings. In any event the bird looks too threatening – if it is not an eagle, as Pevsner and Williamson suggest, then it is an ominous raven or crow. In Old English and early medieval literature such birds are thought of Otherworldly messengers, bearers of omens (Raw 1978: 56; Wilson 1992: 27). If all this sounds remote from modern thinking, then bear in mind that many people today know – even if they do not ‘believe in’ – such auspicial aphorisms as ‘one for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret that must never be told’ (and numerous variants for up to twenty birds) to be repeated when sighting magpies – close cousins of ravens and crows.

Early Christian authorities in England issued repeated edicts against divination from birds – either from watching their flight patterns or by listening to their cries. The need for recurrent decrees suggests that such practices remained part of ‘popular culture’ for many centuries. Indeed, in a curious example of imposing a Christian veneer on such practices, in Anglo-Saxon popular Christianity the prophet Daniel was credited with inventing the interpretation of divinatory dreams of birds (Flint 1991: 196). While this might be thought to support the interpretation of the Stoney Stanton tympanum as Daniel in the lion’s den, the birds in the Derbyshire carvings are clearly not part of a depiction of Daniel.

I have little doubt that the intention of such carvings was to supplant earlier ideas about birds with more Christian ones. Examples of this Christianising of pre-Christian bird portents can be discerned frequently in hagiographies of early saints. Prominent among these is the account of St Cuthbert persuading a sea eagle to change its ways and defer to the needs of the saint by feeding him with fish. On the Continent St Desiderius of Vienne and his companions also benefited from an eagle willing to drop them food. St Servatius of Tongres, St Bertoul of Flanders, St Lutwin and St Medard were all protected by eagles acting as either an umbrella or a sunshade! However we should not take this too literally, as the bird forms a cross-like shape in the sky, symbolically protecting the saint from demons (who, in the early medieval worldview, mostly lived in the space between the earth and the moon). Other saints benefited from birds after martyrdom, such as
St Vincent, St Vitus and St Stanislaus of Cracow, whose bodies were protected by one or more eagles from dogs and other carrion-eating beasts. (Flint 1991: 197–8)

The eagles featuring in these lives of saints are clearly borrowed from pre-Christian worldviews, but with new meanings superimposed on the previous divinatory significance. In Anglo-Saxon England ravens seemed to share with eagles such auspicious associations (Raw 1978: 56) – and also bear in mind that folklore still holds that Britain is safe from invasion so long as ravens reside at the Tower of London.

Mary Webb has discussed the large bird on the font from Hampstead Norreys, Berkshire (now in the church at Stone, Buckinghamshire) as part of a depiction of a passage from early versions of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus (Webb 2010: 116–17). However the presence of a large bird in this scene seems to be based more specifically on several passages in Pope Gregory the First’s commentary on the book of Job, known as the Magna Moralia or simply Moralia, written in the later part of the sixth century but widely known in copies throughout the medieval era. This refers to Christ as ‘the Mediator between God and Man [rightly] called a Vulture.’ In the Anglo-Saxon poems of Cynewulf these passages from Moralia become paraphrased as ‘the flight of the Dear Bird from heaven to earth’, and other passages use the phrase ‘Dear Bird’ to refer to the resurrected Christ (the origin of this seems to be a text attributed to Justin Martyr where the resurrected Christ is equated to a phoenix. One of the bestiaries attributes vultures with the ability to give birth without copulation, furthering the parallels with Christ. (Webb 2010: 109; 121–2; 215 n.8)

The Stoney Stanton sculptor may have intended his bird to be seen as the ‘Dear Bird from heaven’. He may have thought of it as a vulture – even though he had never seen one. However lack of first-hand observation did not prevent the illustrators of later bestiaries from creating images of vultures – even though the birds shown lack all the distinctive attributes of the species!

Is this the Harrowing of Hell?

As briefly discussed on page 130, one of the strongest and most prevalent of the images in medieval churches was of the Harrowing of Hell. There are also corresponding written accounts of Christ’s decent into Hell. The details can be quite varied – sometimes he is
accompanied by St Michael, sometimes not. Christ overcomes Satan, who is depicted as a dragon. In an old penitential prayer used at Winchester in the eleventh century, a dragon and a lion are mentioned as the guardians of Hell. This prayer is addressed to St Michael:

I therefore beseech and entreat, archangel St Michael, that you... deign to take up my soul when it leaves my body and free it from the power of the enemy, so that it may bypass the gates of Hell and the ways of darkness, so that the lion or dragon who is accustomed to receive souls into Hell and lead them to eternal torments may not obstruct it.

An illustration in the Tiberius Psalter of the Harrowing shows Christ before the gates of Hell in combat with both of these guardians (Openshaw 1989: 22). Such details intentionally echo Psalm 90:13 ‘You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot’ as this phrase is an example of supersessionism (see page 61) known as as Christus super aspidem.

Clearly a biblical or Apocryphal reading is intended for the Stoney Stanton tympanum. Yet, while there are elements which belong in the Harrowing of Hell, there is ‘something else’ going on here – not least the human figure is not nimbed (i.e. has no halo) so was not intended to represent Christ. And, just as the Apocryphal accounts of the Harrowing weave in details from Psalm 50, perhaps too this tympanum is weaving in a story well-known at the time, albeit from neither Old nor New Testament sources. After all Beowulf is known to us because it was transcribed and copied by Christian monks, presumably because it too – with a Christ-like ‘superhero’ taking on a dragon – can be regarded as a pagan precedent for the Apocryphal narrative. And many tales once as well-known as Beowulf simply did not get written down.

Is the answer in Denmark?

However the clearest pre-Christian precedent for the events depicted in the Stoney Stanton carving can be discerned in a gold bracteate from Skrydstrup, Denmark. Bracteates were produced between circa 500 to circa 600 AD and worn as protective amulets. The Skrydstrup example shows Odin (more correctly spelt Óðinn and pronounced ‘OO-thin’) or Tyr with a wolf, stag, intertwined snakes and two birds. Scandinavian legends retold by
Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century tell how two ravens sat on Óðinn’s shoulders and spoke into his ears all the news they saw or heard. Their names were Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory). Óðinn sent them out at dawn to fly over all the world and they returned at dinner-time, with the result he got to know about many events. Clearly this can either be taken at face value or regarded as a disguised reference to divination by observing the flight of birds. Óðinn also lost an eye in return for gaining the wisdom of the runes (a further reference to divination); the implication is that it was pecked out by a carrion-eating bird while he was ‘otherwise distracted’, hanging by the neck from a tree for three days.

However the figure’s hand is in the mouth of the wolf and this recalls the legend of Tyr who sacrificed a hand to the wolf Fenrir. So, whether the figure on this bracteate should be thought of as Óðinn or Tyr, or a merging of both, is a moot point. But clearly this depiction of a deity amidst assorted animals illustrates legends familiar to the maker and owner of the bracteate. Among the other depictions of this legend is a cross-shaft originally from Andreas, Isle of Man, but now in the Manx Museum.

Although examples from as late as the twelfth century are rare, there are a number of surviving of precedents for such syncretic blends of Scandinavian paganism with Christian imagery. A fragment of a tenth-century slate cross from Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, depicts an interlace-decorated cross flanked on the left by a saint (or perhaps Christ) with a cross and book treading on a serpent and accompanied by a fish (the biblical reference is Genesis 3:15 according to DuBois 1999: 148), while on the right is Óðinn, with a spear and raven on the right, treading on the jaw of a wolf, Fenrir. DuBois also sees similar merging of Scandinavian paganism with Christian iconography on the Gosforth cross, and also on cross fragments now in Leeds and at Sherburn. He suggests that there would also have been many, now lost, similar wooden carvings as well (DuBois 1999: 150). Mary Webb draws attention to the font once at Hampstead Norreys which shows a wolf at the right hand of Christ. (Webb 2010: 111).

As Aleks Pluskowski has noted, in the Scandinavian poem Völupsá – which mostly describes the beginning and end of time, a pagan counterpart to Genesis and Revelations – the gods who survive the final battle, Ragnarök, will talk about the two animals, the Midgard serpent and Fenriswolf (Pluskowski 2003: 157). And, on the extreme left and right of the Stoney Stanton tympanum are two creatures which can plausibly be interpreted as as a wolf and a serpent (‘wingless dragon’).

Such Germanic and Scandinavian legends are exactly what early Christianity attempted to ‘over-write’ with its own preaching, a process that seems to have taken several centuries to accomplish (see Russell 1994; Carver and Semple 2010; Trubshaw 2013d). Indeed, the surviving texts of Völupsá seem to be attempts to reinterpret pagan cosmology within a Christian world view (Schach 1983: 112).

It is entirely feasible that a version of the legend depicted in the bracteate, but with a saint or bishop supplanting the Óðinn/Tyr figure (and presumably an entirely different exegesis), had entered popular or ‘folk’ Christianity by the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Seemingly the bird has lost any association with divinatory powers, although it remains an ‘auspicious’ presence, The bishop or saint is presumably drawing upon the power (potentia) of Christ to quell the quarrelsome demonic beasts around him; as I discuss in Souls, Spirits and Deities (Trubshaw 2012) Óðinn’s name has the literal sense of óðrin or ‘full of óðr’. And óðr seems to be a direct precursor of the potentia of Christ. Pedantically, the key difference is that while óðr has no source but merely manifests through Óðinn, Christ is the source of potentia, which may also manifest through living bishops and the relics of once-living bishops who, post mortem, evolve into local saints. Another telling difference is that, while Christ is triumphant over demonic entities, such as dragons, and is very much a key player at the End of Days, Óðinn is eaten by Fenriswolf during the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök.
The tympanum from Stoney Stanton and its three ‘companions’ as seemingly the only surviving evidence for a syncretic legend which is otherwise lost. Such legends would not be a part of formal Christian teaching and therefore not to be found in the surviving Old English homilies, although so little has survived that not even educated guesswork can suggest what else might have been circulating at the time. All were swept aside by later medieval parables and preaching.

While the full meaning of ‘this Germanic barbarity’ – more accurately Scandinavian – remains unclear, the pre-Christian bracteate seems to the the oldest of what might be thought to be a ‘series’ of five surviving images, with the Stoney Stanton tympanum continuing the chronology into the Christian era. The Agnus Dei of the Parwich and Hognaston carvings seems to represent a slightly later stage in the christianisation of the legend, with the Little Paxton carving perhaps following shortly after.

(This chapter is a much expanded version of Trubshaw 2010c. Grateful thanks to Ben Elliot for making available a copy of Mary Curtis Webb’s work on twelfth century sculpture. Susan Kilby kindly drew my attention to K.M. Openshaw’s publication on the Tiberius Psalter.)
Chapter Twelve

Diabolical dragons

Dragons are very much alive and well in modern minds. They abound in fantasy literature and art – only a small proportion of which might be regarded as primarily for children. Judging by the numbers of carvings of dragons surviving in churches their popularity seems perennial. And, as anyone who has the most superficial knowledge of the plot of the Old English poem Beowulf will be aware, dragons were also making life difficult for the heroes of pre-Conquest England.

Indeed, in this chapter I want to look not simply at dragons but, rather, at the depictions of dragons meeting their nemesis, usually in the form of a saint. While we mostly think of St George, he only rose to prominence in the fourteenth century. Interestingly there was also a female saint, Catherine, who was regarded as a dragon-slayer. But that the main dragon-slaying saint from the twelfth century onwards – and earlier on the Continent – seems to have been Michael.

Opposite: The twelfth century tympanum at Hallaton, Leicestershire, showing a splendid ‘St Michael’ (who may have been thought of as a winged Christ) with slain dragon.

Note the two small human figures all-but-lost in the shadows on the right. Presumably they would have been the dragon’s breakfast had he not been slain. However in some other depictions of St Michael slaying the dragon, one or more human-like figures being drawn from the dragon’s are intended to depict human souls saved from Satan (Openshaw 1989: 25).

Top: Pitsford, Northamptonshire. Note the curious ‘detachable wings’ on the right.

Bottom: Hoveringham, Nottinghamshire. ‘St Michael’ may be a winged Christ.
I say ‘seems to have been’ because some twelfth century carvings described as depicting ‘St Michael and the dragon’ should more accurately be referred to as ‘a winged Christ’. While depictions of Christ with wings ceased to be created in the thirteenth century, this was a relatively common image before then. Generally – although there are exceptions – in the twelfth century Christ is shown with a sword while St Michael bears a spear. Another difference is that Christ thrusts his weapon directly into the jaws of the dragon, whereas St Michael generally does not (Webb 2010: 26–8). Other iconographical clues include the ‘Hand of God’ which clearly denotes Christ and not a saint.

But if we need to be careful about naming the dragon’s adversary, the real identity of the dragon is undisputed. Revelation 7: 7–9, states unambiguously: ‘Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon... who is called the Devil and Satan’ and there is a similar statement in Jude 9 which refers to ‘the archangel Michael, contending with the Devil’ (Openshaw 1989: 23). However we do need to be attentive to twelfth century names for the dragon. Fairly understandably, he would have been thought of as a manifestation of Satan. But, more commonly, he would be known as Leviathan. There are six mentions in the Old Testament, with Job 41:1–34 being devoted to a detailed description. Pedantically, Jewish literature regards Leviathan is a sea-monster while Behemoth is the land-monster; there was also an air-monster called Ziz. But in northern Europe at the time of these Romanesque carvings, Leviathan had become the sole representative of these biblical creatures, presumably because the references to Leviathan in Gregory’s Moralia were familiar whereas the Jewish literature was, at that time, unknown (Webb 2010: 113).

Despite all this pedantry regarding names, for convenience I will consider such carvings as examples of ‘dragons’ and ‘dragon-slayers’. As the intention of such carvings is to depict the victory of Good over Evil the more conventional portrayal is that at Hallaton, where the dragon has quite clearly been conquered.

So what should we make of the font at Thorpe Arnold, near Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. Although this is clearly the work of a much less accomplished sculptor than, say, Hallaton the depiction, nevertheless, is quite vigorous. The dragon has multiplied – or at least become polypehalic. The protagonists seem to be heading for a score draw. That is, until you walk around the font and spot two more draconian blighters creeping up from behind – all bets are off for the outcome. Far from depicting the victory
of Good over Evil, as at Hallaton and elsewhere, this is a battle which is set to continue until the end of time. Or, at least, until this font crumbles into dust.

We must assume that originally the vigorous carving which brings this cosmological battle so vividly to life – more so, in my opinion, than the more refined carving at Hallaton – would have been coloured in an equally vigorous and vivid manner.

So far as I am aware the font at Thorpe Arnold is unique. However there are some parallels with a twelfth century relief now in Ipswich parish church (but probably carved for a different, now-lost, church). Interestingly, the Old English inscriptions on the background include the statement ‘Here St Michael fought the dragon’. So, for once, we can be sure the protagonists are neither a winged Christ (even though the iconography might suggest this) nor Leviathan! More interestingly still, even though the sculpture is probably eleventh century, the dragon is carved in a pre-Conquest Viking style (Zarnecki 1984: 164). As Thorpe Arnold is towards the western border of a large part of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire where ‘Viking’ place-name elements predominate then perhaps this font is tentative evidence for eleventh or twelfth century ‘cultural contacts’ between this part of Leicestershire and Ipswich, then – as now – a major east coast port. In the church at Scalford, the village north of Thorpe Arnold, there is a fragment of sculpture also carved in an Anglo-Scandinavian style (presumably from a tenth century cross-shaft).

Interestingly, the Thorpe Arnold font also has a four-fold foliage motif with a human head. This is akin to the four-
fold interlaced knot on the font from Hampstead Norreys (discussed in Chapter Six) which has four heads, emulating an illustration of the four elements. While there are clearly some parallels, at Thorpe Arnold the carver did not intend to denote the four elements. However quite what he did intend this motif to denote is ambiguous!

**Unconclusive conclusions**

This attempt at looking briefly at the Hallaton and Thorpe Arnold carvings has three of underlying aims. Firstly, these two carvings reveal that what is essentially the same ‘motif’ can be accomplished in ways which infer that distinct differences were intended in the exact significance of the subject matter. Yes, it is all about Good versus Evil, but the narrative conveyed by the ‘story in stone’ can also be more nuanced…

Secondly, we should not make assumptions about who is depicted. Later traditions may confidently identify such protagonists as ‘St Michael and the dragon’ yet iconographers and those familiar with eleventh and twelfth century homilies may argue that in some cases the sculptors regarded them as a winged Christ fighting Leviathan. But all such scholarly arguments are thwarted when, as at Ipswich, we have an original eleventh century epigraphy unambiguously contradicting the iconography.

Finally, and most importantly, even this briefest of attempts to discuss these two carvings reveals the parallels with other sculpture of the time – both locally, in Nottinghamshire, and perhaps also much further afield on the Suffolk coast. Indeed, a full discussion of these carvings would require consideration of the vast number of depictions of dragons and their adversaries in Romanesque art. Even the less-common motif of four-fold leaves on the Thorpe Arnold font has parallels – albeit rather less than exact – with a font once in Buckinghamshire and with later medieval cosmological illustrations.

The ‘conclusion’ of this chapter is that we must not be too hasty in drawing conclusions about motifs, their meanings, and their ‘parallels’. Even though dragons and their adversaries are a comparatively well-studied aspect of Romanesque and later art, there is still no academic overview which can be used to help understand specific examples. And, if as a result, we are left standing on less than firm ground with such a comparatively well-studied era and motif, then we must remain even more cautious when trying to understand motifs from the Gothic, when there is a dearth of relevant scholarship.
Chapter Thirteen

Goddess or queen?

As already noted in Chapter Eight, the well-informed authors of the Reader’s Digest Folklore, myths and legends of Britain, published in 1973 include a drawing of the hideous female carving outside the church at Braunston in Rutland and call her both a ‘sheela-na-gig’ (even though no genitals or hands are depicted) and an ‘Earth goddess’. This ‘paganisation’ of the carving is part of a broader misunderstanding among British folklorists which I outline in Appendix One.

Undoubtedly the carving is a curious piece with few, if any, near-equivalents. The manner in which the body and face are depicted is seemingly unique. Despite the vigour of the carving it does not share any obvious features with Romanesque or Gothic grotesques. Yet show her to an Anglo-Saxonist and they say ‘She’s not one of ours.’

A highly-respected place-name scholar has stated that she is Iron Age (Cox 1994), without offering any parallels or supporting evidence. Frankly, I find his suggestion decidedly fanciful.

The carving has only stood at the base of the tower since the end of the nineteenth century. During restoration work it was discovered, face down, reused as the lintel-step in the church porch. So, when did she end up in the porch floor? And, more interesting still, where was she before this?

The main clue to understanding – and perhaps dating – this carving is the massive stone base. This is uncarved so almost certainly never intended to be seen. It would allow the
carving to be inserted into a wall with the figure stretching out horizontally in the manner of a gargoyle. The bold and unfussy carving suggests she was intended to be seen from a distance – so the most likely place is high on the church tower.

Although she is not a functional gargoyle there are plenty of precedents for such large decorative carvings on church towers. In Somerset they are known colloquially as ‘hunky punks’ and numerous churches there have examples known to date to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Poyntz Wright 1982). As the tower at Braunston originally dates to the is thirteenth and fourteenth centuries then it seems quite likely that this carving is also from this time. The tower was restored in the 1720s, a time when such ‘Gothick’ carvings would be disparaged, so it is probable – although far from proven – that she entered her period of ‘hibernation’ in the porch floor at this time.

Interestingly, in the medieval era the word ‘punk’ denoted a whore and, contemporaneously, the word ‘queen’ had a double meaning as a whore. Quaintree House nearby on the green at Braunston takes its name from ‘queen tree’ (see Galitzine 1980). This is seemingly from the Old English *quain treow* but we must also be aware that Geoffrey Chaucer uses the spelling ‘queynt’ for a word now spelt with a ‘c’ and without the ‘ey’. A phrases ‘queen tree’ and ‘queynt tree’ of course sound identical. So there is the possibility that the notable tree had a natural fissure which resembled a queynt rather than a ‘queen’ – although the overlapping meanings of the words would mean the tree could have been known ‘formally’ as the ‘queen tree’. The word play may be even more apposite if this fissure was in a yew tree which naturally bled red sap from time to time (and the yews in the churchyard at Nevern in Pembrokeshire famously ‘bleed’ – although the phenomenon has long since been given a Christian exegesis).

Given that the county of Rutland formed the dowry of late Anglo-Saxon queens (see Phythiasn-Adams 1980) and that Braunston church is close to a boundary that was disputed in Anglo-Saxon times (the nearby place-name *flitteris* means ‘a brushwood region of disputed ownership’; Cox 1994) then this medieval stone carving might just possibly emulate a long-since lost wooden Anglo-Saxon boundary marker which perhaps parodied the Mercian queens who owned Rutland during the late ninth and tenth centuries.
Such a putative carving might have been called in Old English a *stapol* (see Appendix Two) but could plausibly be the *quain treow* which gave Quaintree House its name. But, while the origin of these words is pre-Conquest, there is no reason to think that this carving is itself Anglo-Saxon. Above all, while people might think of this carving as a rather scurrilous ‘queen’, she was never intended to be a goddess. Quite whether this putative original *quain treow* was intentionally carved or merely a natural simulacra I will leave as an open question. But if there ever was such a *treow* then my suspicion is that it was a full-length figure rather than from the navel to the crown.

If my suggestion that this stone carving was created in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries is correct and if, at this time, the original *quain tree* was still alive, with a natural simulacra of a full-length *quain* with her *queynt* then the medieval mason could quite happily ‘bowdlerise’ his depiction by only showing his ‘queen’ from the waist up – after all it would take little imagination to think of her as complete. While there are too many ‘ifs’ already in this paragraph, if this deduction is correct then it neatly explains why this carving does not conform to the more typical hag-like depictions of female exhibitionists discussed in Chapter Eight – which the Irish refer to as the ‘shee lena gig’ but here in Rutland might have been dubbed the ‘quain with her queynt’.

Clearly my suggestions about the existence – and nature – of a *quain tree*, still less a *queynt tree*, are decidedly speculative. The main purpose of this chapter is to show that, although this carving has no clear iconographical parallels – so placing it all-but beyond the pale of analysis by art historians – if, instead, we consider the location of the carving near a county boundary, together with parallels and plausible suggestions based on place-names, we might be able to shed some light on both the carving and the medieval ‘social history’ of Braunston. Clearly, considerably more focused light needs to cast before these provisional insights can be considered to have any real validity – or to be firmly refuted!

I have written previously about this carving (notably Trubshaw 1994; 2003b) although the views expressed here are an update on my previous thinking. My 1994 article was based on helpful – and still valid – discussions with Jill Bourne. Simon Garbutt kindly shared his thoughts about *queynts* in an email (17 September 2005).
Chapter Fourteen

Who forgot to invite the bosses?

The previous chapters in Part Three have been concerned with surviving stone carvings. However in Part Two I have referred in passing to several distinctive roof bosses, such as the male exhibitionists at Claybrooke Parva and Queniborough and, and the green men at Lutterworth and Sileby. But each of these is only one among a whole set of contemporaneous roof bosses, each one of which is worthy of consideration. Indeed some of the roof bosses at Whissendine are stunning examples of animated mawming beasties and almost as vivacious vegetation.

Tree-ring dating has established that the Claybrooke roof timbers were felled between 1425 to 1450 – the reign of Henry VI – and the remainder of these roof bosses also seem to have been created at the same time as the roofs they decorate. On the basis of well-understood joinery techniques, even in the absence of further tree-ring dating evidence, these roofs can all be confidently considered as fifteenth century (although, understandably, in many cases later repairs are also in evidence).

Indeed, the fifteenth century was the heyday for such roof bosses, both in Leicestershire and Rutland and nationally. For example, in Chapter Four I briefly mentioned the superb roof bosses in the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral. Sally Mittuch’s research suggests that those in the east walk can be read as a sequence describing the journey of the soul in the afterlife (Mittuch 2007). And in Chapter Six I mentioned the ‘triple rabbits’ or ‘coney trijunct’ motif which is found in on roof bosses various Devon churches.
The volunteers taking part in Project Gargoyle are already creating sets of photographs which include all the medieval roof bosses within each church. As the Project draws towards a conclusion we will have a complete countywide survey of these medieval roof bosses. While many people will be more than content to simply look at these images and admire the often exquisite craftsmanship – and perhaps reflect on some of the more ‘obscure’ subject matter – clearly there is much more which needs to be considered.

Just for once this chapter offers little in the way of any interpretation. Instead I simply wish to draw attention to the quality and quantity of carvings which, hitherto, have been all-but ignored (even in my own previous publications).

Frankly I can see no good reason why these carvings have not already been the basis of some serious consideration. Firstly, the fifteenth century is a comparatively better-documented period of history than the preceding centuries. To my knowledge there has been no systematic work to assess whether documents relating to these Leicestershire roofs have passed into major archives (as, for example, when parish churches passed into the ownership of Oxbridge colleges). Clearly such a survey requires specialists with the necessary paleographical skills and also the time to work through often poorly-indexed archives. But there is just a chance that this will track down documents which reveal more about the construction, and maybe even the names of people involved.

Furthermore, even without such parochial investigations, the social and political history of England is also quite rich, and quite extensively researched. Leicestershire County Council has, understandably, made much of the Battle of Bosworth – including the superb revamp of the visitors’ centre. At the time of writing this, Leicester city museums are responding to the discovery in 2012 of the mortal remains of Richard III. However neither the county nor city museums have little in the way of art which begins to match the quality of these roof bosses. So I hope that this aspect of the county’s fifteenth century legacy – while still in situ as originally created – is recognised as a valuable part of the broader cultural context of the kings and dynastic rivalries.

Two views of one of the wonderful roof bosses in the nave at Whissendine.

See also photographs on page 47.
When the Claybrooke carvings were being created the Battle of Bosworth Field, fought on 22 August 1485, was still at least three decades in the future. The sons or grandsons of the men who carved these bosses were quite like to have been among the armies which met on that fateful day. They may, indeed, have been among the injured or slain. Not everyone in the fifteenth century carved roof bosses or died at Bosworth. And neither roof bosses nor battlefields themselves tell us much about the people who carved them or fought on them. However craftsmen – and those who commissioned them – are all part of the same society as soldiers and their commanders. We have few, if any, examples of medieval art locally which even begin to compare to the quality of these roof bosses. That we have so many makes their exclusion from the county’s fifteenth century acknowledged heritage seem even more perverse.

At the risk of labouring this point excessively, art history, architectural history, social history, political and military history are just different ways of looking at the overall evidence. Yet, despite all the interest in fifteenth century politics, the most exciting parts of the surviving material culture of the age have to all intents and purposes been left out.

If this chapter concludes with something akin to the sound of a fifteenth century gauntlet being thrown at the readers’ feet, then of course at some future date I will be only too happy to draw attention to a long list of scholarly articles or even PhD theses which are devoted to these carvings!

We don’t know this chap’s name. But quite possibly one of his sons or grandsons fought at the Battle of Bosworth. One of the ‘inhabitants’ of Claybrooke Parva roof, almost certainly carved between 1425 and 1450.
PART FOUR

Identifying questions for future research
Chapter Fifteen

What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?

In the preceding three parts of this study I have indicated a number of specific topics where further research seems overdue. Furthermore, in Part One I also suggest that such specific studies are somewhat hampered by the paucity of broader studies of carvings in the Gothic period, certainly in comparison to the comparatively well-studied Romanesque carvings of northern and western France.

My original intention was for this final part of the study to identify a wide range of possible questions for future research. However, my approach to carvings is somewhat from outside; as previously noted in Chapter One I consider my main expertise to be in areas that I regard as ‘cultural studies’ and others may wish to call ‘folklore’ and ‘mythology’. I am all too well aware that I do not approach medieval carvings from the perspective of art historians. So clearly I am not the right person to identify the full scope of possible questions for future research. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that no one individual could identify the full scope because different disciplinary perspectives will interrogate the evidence – and seek further clues – in different ways. After all, as E.H. Carr famously observed in 1964, ‘history is a construct consequent upon the questions asked by the historian’. Predictably enough, social historians tend to ask rather different questions than art historians, while architectural historians at times take an approach more akin to archaeologists.

As my main active involvement with medieval carvings is currently as the Volunteer Co-ordinator for Project Gargoyle, I have opted instead to make what was planned as Part Four of this study into a self-contained document (published as part of Project Gargoyle)
which will be circulated to as many people as seems sensible in the hope they will make
suggestions about the possible questions which could be asked.

As there seems to be a reasonable expectation that within a few years every one of the
medieval carvings inside and outside Leicestershire and Rutland churches will have been
photographed, I am interested in what questions can be asked of the first survey which
offers an understanding of the entire corpus in two counties. So, as part of the planning for
how Project Gargoyle will develop once the photography stage has been more-or-less
completed, I have prepared a stand-alone document called *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?*
This can be downloaded as a PDF file from www.hoap.co.uk/whatcan.pdf

*What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* should be considered as Part Four of this document.
Correspondingly, *Mawming and Mooning* is a vastly distended ‘preface’ to the much more
concise *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?*
APPENDICES
Appendix One

The paganisation of folklore


The belief that folk customs are survivals of a prechristian ‘pagan’ religion is as old as the study of folklore. Indeed, it predates the study of folklore. The origin of the belief is interesting in its own right and has been documented in detail by Dorson (1968). It all starts with a clergyman and antiquarian of the early eighteenth century. Henry Bourne was the son of a tailor in Newcastle upon Tyne. He was born in 1694 and graduated from Christ’s College, Cambridge in 1720, when he became curate of a Newcastle church. Five years later, in 1725, he published a tract titled Antiquitates Vulgares. Far from being intended as a pioneering study of folklore, this work was ‘kindled with Reformation ire and zeal, berating papist and heathen ideas insinuated into Christian rituals.’ (Dorson 1968: 11)

Bourne ‘took pleasure in linking pagan and papist as perpetrators of a vulgar antiquity.’ His sources were his own observations of ‘festal orgies’ and ‘papist rites’. And he was a shrewd observer. ‘He wrote about the populace kindling fires on Midsummer’s Eve, seeing spirits exorcized in haunted houses, carousing at wakes, worshipping at wells and fountains… He saw how the interwoven strands of folk tradition formed a separate culture from the rational, sober, and pious ways of learned men.’ Theologically they ‘were heathen errors renewed and enlarged by the medieval church.’ (All quotes from Dorson 1968:12)

Bourne died eight years after this tract appeared. As the eighteenth century progressed the religious mood in England changed. Anglicanism entirely eclipsed Catholicism. Such exhortations as Bourne’s lay unnoticed. But antiquarians thrived. So, over fifty years later, in 1777 another Newcastle-born cleric-cum-antiquarian, John Brand, added to and reprinted Bourne’s work (under his own name) as Observations on Popular Antiquities. Brand did not share Bourne’s religious stance and expressed disdain for the manner in which Bourne added a ‘spice of Divinity’ into every statement. What drew Brand to Bourne’s work was the record of popular customs and Brand was able to add further information from his own extensive collecting.

Previous page: One of the Romanesque capitals in the north arcade of Morcott church.
Brand did accept Bourne’s prefatory remarks that ‘Christian, or rather Papal Rome, borrowed her Rites, Notions, and Ceremonies, in the most luxurious Abundance from ancient and Heathen Rome...’ And, as Hutton has detailed in less florid pose (Hutton 1991:284ff), a subtler version of this stance is supported by the historical evidence. However, in the pages of Brand’s *Observations on Popular Antiquities* we have the first suggestions of what was to become a key feature of British folklore: ‘inquiry of elderly villagers into seasonal customs supposedly reflecting primitive fertility rituals.’ (Dorson 1968: 16). This is quite a different assertion and one that Hutton has discussed in detail in several books (notably Hutton 1991, 1994, 1996) and ultimately dismissed all but a small handful of such claims.

When Brand died in 1806 he left a vast collection of antiquarian information. Thanks to the efforts of Sir Henry Ellis, Brand’s original work was revised and greatly extended. In 1813 two hefty quarto volumes appeared, retaining Brand’s original title *Observations on Popular Antiquities* but vastly larger than the 1777 edition. ‘This mighty work laid the foundations for a science of folklore, and became a landmark in the history of English thought.’ (Dorson 1968:17). So Bourne’s once-neglected religious exhortation, increasingly augmented, entered into the mainstream of nineteenth century reasoning. And not just the reasoning of academe, but increasingly into the minds of the non-academic public. By standing on the shoulders of Brand, Ellis had single-handedly stimulated widespread interest in what would soon be dubbed ‘folk-lore’. And, implicitly incorporated into that widespread interest was an acceptance that folk customs perpetrated a prechristian past. Indeed by asking appropriate questions of ‘elderly villagers’ this pagan past could be ‘retrieved’.

And why stop at elderly villagers in Britain? Why not link these ‘fossils’ of an ill-defined pagan past to the beliefs of ‘savages’ in the countries incorporated into the British Empire? This was the late nineteenth century. Pioneer anthropologists and folklorists could happily refer to their sources as ‘primitives’ and ‘peasants’. Everything was on course for the heyday of comparative anthropology. Mix-and-match was the order of the day.

And in 1890 a reclusive Cambridge don published the first volume in a series that would make him the undisputed all-time maestro of mix-and-match. By the time Sir James Frazer died in 1941, *The Golden Bough* had long become a household name and inspired shelves of books derived from his ideas.

*The Golden Bough* is best-known in the 1922 single-volume digest. But the whole multi-volume work is vast – and Frazer revised the entire opus twice. The whole tenor of the work is anti-Christian (although this had mellowed by the third edition). He attempts to argue that the ‘myth’ of the crucifixion and resurrection derives from a once-universal custom of a sacred king who reigned for a set term and was then sacrificed. Sadly, apart from a dubious example from Sudan, Frazer was never able to identify a sacred king of this kind. The multi-volume ‘evidence’ was a smoke screen for this crucial failure.

Indeed, as Hutton notes (1991:326) Frazer was never accepted by most of the historians and theologians of his day. But he was accepted by the public. And he inspired such leading writers as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and Robert Graves.

Graves combined Frazer’s unbounded eclecticism with his own fertile imagination and gave us *The White Goddess* in 1948. The sacred king now had a consort – a triple-aspect goddess. By then Margaret Murray, hitherto best known for her work in Egyptology, had begun to catch the attention of the reading public with *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1933). Although Frazer might be criticised for an inability to assess his evidence, Murray combined this trait with deliberate excisions of sections of quotations so they better supported her arguments (see Oates and Wood 1998) that many folk
customs were evidence for continuity with prechristian religion.

Murray was actively involved in the Folklore Society of the 1930s and 1940s, as was Gerald Gardner. Gardner was to draw on Graves and Murray (and much else) to give the world Wicca. Since its origins in the 1950s Wicca has in turn spawned into a whole spectrum of contemporary pagan beliefs. That story is beyond the scope of this book (and the origins of Wicca have been covered by Hutton 1999) but suffice to say that contemporary pagans, whether Wiccans or otherwise, have nurtured the idea that traditional folk customs have an unbroken continuity to a once-suppressed pagan past.

The notions of folk customs as ‘pagan survivals’ was being questioned from within the FLS in the 1920s, although it would be the 1980s before this became the dominant supposition within the pages of *Folklore* and the FLS’s monographs. Frazer’s ideas were extensively criticised by British anthropologists, notably Malinowski, from about 1920. Marilyn Strathern’s delightful article ‘Out of context: The persuasive fictions of anthropology’ (1987) assesses in more detail than Dorson or Hutton the contribution of *The Golden Bough* to twentieth century thought, and the debates between Frazer and Malinowski.

There were a number of books published in the 1970s that ‘debunked’ Frazer (notably Munz 1973 and Smith 1978 Ch.10) but the main thrust of these attacks was not directed at the ideas of ‘pagan survivals’. Only when Hutton’s book *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (1991) gained wide readership did it become apparent to people outside the FLS and academic anthropology that there were doubts about this ‘prechristian continuity’. Decades of popular books about folk customs had reiterated this perpetuity of pagan practice. Not only was it accepted as ‘fact’ by the public, it had become a key factor for the people who were maintaining and reviving folk customs.

One does not have to look very far to see examples of this process – many Morris dancing teams have members who continue to maintain that this custom is a prechristian ‘fertility rite’ – despite the evidence long since garnered that origins lay with sixteenth century courtly dances (summarised in Hutton 1996:262–276). My favourite example of the ‘paganisation’ of a traditional custom is the Hallaton Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking, which takes place each Easter Monday.

The big problem with the notion of the survival of ‘prechristian paganism’ is the total absence of ‘prechristian paganism’ since about the ninth century. The dualist distinction between Christianity and paganism is a recent one. In the form we think of it, this pairing came into existence in the mid-nineteenth century. Before that, from the later part of the seventeenth century, ‘pagan’ was synonymous with the Classical Graeco-Roman deities. For instance, a marble sepulchral monument to Judge Leek (died 1687) in Wymeswold church, Leicestershire, was described at the time of its construction as ‘a fine pagan monument’ – because the symbolism incorporated into the carvings was based on Classical motifs rather than Christian ones (which, at that date, could easily be taken for ‘Popery’).

When Karen Jolly researched early Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon era (eighth to tenth centuries), she was surprised at the almost complete absence of any ‘pagan’ beliefs in the religion, even accepting that the literature was recorded by clergy. Instead, there was a clear distinction between ‘magic’ (such as healing charms) and ‘religion’. The ‘magic’ owed nothing to Christian beliefs but was being practised by people who regarded themselves as Christian. Jolly regards this as a ‘popular Christianity’ that differed significantly from the ‘official’ formal religion but was not intended to be ‘unchristian’ (Jolly 1996). In this she is following a distinction that had been made by a number of European scholars, not least Keith Thomas in his pioneering study *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Thomas 1971) and pursued by Hutton (e.g. Hutton 1996:416–7).
Modern minds since the mid-nineteenth century generally blur the distinction between religion and magic. This leads to claims for the survival of ‘prechristian religion’ when the evidence being offered is for the survival, not of religion, but of magical practices. An example of such blurring between magic and religion occurs when David Clarke and Andy Roberts (1996) discuss their excellent research in the Derbyshire Peak District. The authors claim there is evidence for the survival of paganism over an undefined period, although their evidence is essentially for the survival of ‘magic’ in Christian communities, which is far less surprising. James Oblekevich (1976) provided similar evidence for the survival of magic, without any claims for the survival of paganism, in the South Lindsey district of Lincolnshire in the mid-nineteenth century.

Going backwards in time, Araon Gurevich’s study medieval popular culture (Gurevich 1988) makes it clear that, despite the apparent contradictions between pagan and Christian worldviews, they were inextricably combined in medieval thinking. Whatever beliefs survived from the prechristian era did so in a form thoroughly intermingled with Christianity. The popular belief of the medieval era may appear contradictory but it lacked any ‘dualism’ between paganism and Christianity. Such ‘dualism’ is a modern way of thinking and cannot be followed back in time.

If there is a dualism in religious thought of the late medieval and early modern times it is, of course, that between Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestant rejection of ‘popery’ was rejection of the inextricably intertwined Christian and pagan thinking that characterised the medieval worldview. So, popular traditions retaining elements of possible pagan precursors were killed off in the seventeenth century, not for their ‘pagan’ content, but for their unwanted Christian connotations.

While religious thinking is often thought of in terms of the doctrines of ‘formal’ religion, the reality is that most Christians felt comfortable with a much wider range of beliefs. This ‘popular religion’ sits more-or-less comfortably alongside the ‘formal’ religion and both readily evolve from generation to generation. Some of these ‘popular beliefs’ become clear in attitudes to death and the afterlife, others in folk remedies and charms. With the increasing popularity of printing the evolution of these ‘folk beliefs’ can be followed as they manifested in ballads and broadsides, as Tessa Watt revealed in her fascinating study (Watt 1991).

What such sources reveal is that from the sixteenth century until the early decades of the twentieth century there was an ‘Old Religion’ readily discernible in British popular religion. But this was not the ‘Old Religion’ of witches and Devil-worship, as postulated by, say, Margaret Murray. Rather it was ‘a well-documented one which was brought to an end only four or five centuries ago’ (Hutton 1996:416). The Reformation brought dramatic changes to ‘formal religion’ but the effects on popular belief were not so much dramatic as muddled. Theo Brown summed up popular religion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as ‘a mixture of ancient pagan belief, half-remembered old Catholic teaching and later Puritan doctrine possibly distorted as a result of misleading sermons’ (Brown 1979, cited in Hutton 1996: 417). The passage of time did little to unmuddle this state of affairs. The lack of distinction of many scholars, especially folklore researchers, between ‘formal’ and ‘popular’ religion and between ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ has only made this muddle much messier.
Appendix Two

Averting evil

As discussed in Chapter One, the periphery was dangerous. Therefore such boundaries always need defending against supernatural dangers. Anyone who has taken any interest whatsoever in gargoyles and the like will have come across the suggestion that they were put up on the outside of churches to frighten away the Devil. Which seems plausible until a closer inspection of the inside of churches reveals that the same sort of ‘scare-devil’ motifs are prevalent. Given that the Devil does not generally appear in British folklore before the sixteenth century (Harte 2010) then this folk-belief is no older. Indeed, on the basis of an absence of any such suggestions before the end of the nineteenth century then it is entirely plausible that this idea is only a hundred-or-so years old. This is entirely consistent with many other British superstitions (such as touching wood for luck or not walking under ladders) which are known to have been invented in the late nineteenth century or (as with regarding Friday 13th as unlucky) in the early twentieth century (Simpson and Roud 2000).

And yet, and yet… We must be careful not to discard viable ideas when disposing of discredited assumptions. Carved ‘spirit deities’ whose role was apopotraic – evil averting – were found on the peripheries of early Buddhist monasteries (DeCaroli 2004: 173). And, just as such carvings would have been deemed ‘pagan idols’ by Colonial-era Christian missionaries, so too the early medieval missions in northern Europe repeatedly preached against pagan weohs – even as late as the eleventh century in England.

The Old English word weoh (sometimes spelt wig although the ‘g’ is pronounced ‘y’) was the sense of both a carved wooden idol and a shrine. This dual-sense is shared in Catholic countries where wayside statues of saints – typically the Virgin Mary – are referred to as ‘shrines’; the statue is the key part of the shrine and a shrine is de facto created by erecting such a statue. If we look to the cognate word in Greek, (we)ikon this too describes an icon or ‘powerful devotional image’.

The underlying sense of weoh is of something ‘holy’, an object of devotion (Stephen Pollington pers. comm.). Can we be more specific? Were weohs necessarily carved wooden ‘idols’? Could some have been more akin to ‘corn dolls’? And bear in mind the word ‘doll’ is a contraction of ‘idol’.

Weoh survives in such place names as Wyfordby (near Melton Mowbray), Wysall (a Nottinghamshire village abutting north Leicestershire), Willey (a Warwickshire village adjoining south Leicestershire) and, also in the Midlands, the Weedons in Northamptonshire and Weeford in Staffordshire; there are more examples further afield.

The weohs which gave their names to weoh fords were almost certainly protective. Many more weohs would have
once stood in the centre of Anglo-Saxon burial mounds. The *weohs* on the mounds were likewise protective. Indeed the Old English word *mund* initially means ‘protection’ and only later transfers to the mound. Quite probably at least some were decorated with dragons, as *Beowulf* and other Old English legends tell how the ‘treasure’ in such barrows was protected by a ferocious dragon. The available evidence suggests that hills with such barrows and carvings would have been known as *weoh dons*. Indeed Waden Hill, overlooking the prehistoric henge at Avebury, is a corruption of *weoh don* and crop mark photographs reveal a large number of now ploughed-out barrows which, while probably originally constructed in the Bronze Age, are very likely to have been reused by Anglo-Saxons. Andrew Reynolds has suggested that Waden Hill was the cult centre for the Canningas tribe (Reynolds 2004: 173) and a similar role for the Weedons in Northamptonshire seems plausible.

While there are no surviving examples of *weohs* from England, we do have a good idea of what such carvings might have been like in Denmark. They could have ranged from carvings as skilled as the prows of Viking long boats to the crude anthropomorphic (and ithyphallic) tree branches found in bogs.

If – as seems reasonable – the British *weohs* were even half-way as elaborate as Viking prows then we the people

Above left: Monsters on Viking ships’ prow.

Above centre and right: Anthropomorphic wooden ‘cult’ figures from Danish bogs.

Below: Romanesque corbels in the nave at Tickencote.
of carved them would seem to be part of a long tradition which straddles the best of the Anglo-Saxon stone carving. The vigorous carvings on the font at Luppitt; see photographs on pages 36 and 37) seem to anticipate the more vigorous depictions on twelfth century corbels, such as those at Tickenhote. I am not suggesting that such corbels were still thought of as ‘pagan deities’, just that stylistically they shared an unbroken tradition and, presumably, also shared an unbroken belief in their evil-averting powers.

From weoh to rood

Stretching my neck out a little further than might be prudent and making the assumption, firstly, that at least some of the weohs on burial mounds were plausibly decorated with dragons and, secondly, that weohs which stood on the periphery of property as protective boundary markers might too have had similar embellishment then what should we make of Anglo-Saxon crosses carved in the eighth to tenth centuries which also depict dragons?

And is my neck really so that out? After all the best example of such a dragon-decorated cross-shaft in Leicestershire is the one now in the churchyard at Sproxton – but which was discovered being used as a footbridge over a ditch and which, quite plausibly, was a boundary marker for the minster in the adjoining parish of Buckminster. Could this be, in effect, a weoh with a Christian cross emphatically added? So what should we make of the contemporary cross-shaft at Rothley – albeit without any dragons – which has now lost its surmounting cross? Are we looking at the stone counterpart to a weoh?

Three Anglo-Saxon cross shafts.

Left: Rothley.
Centre: Sproxton.
Right: Stapleford, Nottinghamshire. Possibly the eponymous stapol.
And, if any of this is reliable, the Catholic wayside shrines which I referred to as analogous to weohs are perhaps not simply analogous but, instead, the more recent manifestations of an unbroken tradition. This in turn has the implication that, as might reasonably be expected, not all the weohs had dragons on them but some – perhaps a great many – were images of the disir, the local tutelary goddess or ‘spirit of place’ (see Trubshaw 2013a for a more detailed discussion of Anglo-Saxon beliefs in spirits and deities, and how those beliefs are absorbed into Christianity).

Bearing in mind that the stapols (or stöppull) which give their name to the Staplefords of Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire were also carved posts at fords, just as Dunstable was the stapol on the dune (or heath), then the fragment of the stone cross-shaft now in the churchyard of the Stapleford near Nottingham is also quite credibly either a direct successor to the eponymous stapol or the last exemplar of the stapol, presumably replacing one or more wooden predecessors. The word stapol also appears in the phrase blót stöppull which has the literal meaning of ‘blood pillar’ but has the connotation of ‘heathen pillar’. The word blót alone also refers to a heathen ritual. At first glance this seems like a metonymic reference to blood sacrifices. But, as Alby Stone has suggested (Stone 1989: 32–5) the disir may have been associated with rites involving menstrual blood. But, ignoring for a moment all the subtle secondary meanings of blót stöppull, we are still left with a phrase which blends heathen origins with the Christian ‘blood sacrifice’ on a ‘pillar’ – the Crucifixion.

Interestingly the Latin word crux (‘cross’) is not used in Old English literature to describe a Christian cross or crucifix.
Instead a crucifix is referred to as a either a *rood* or a *Christ mael*. The Old English word *mael* means ‘mark’ (as in the Modern English word ‘mole’). *Christ mael* is the origin of the Wiltshire place-name Christian Malford – the ford marked by the *Christ mael* (and, almost certainly not coincidentally, the parish church is not in the centre of the village but situated close to what is very likely to have been a ford over the River Avon). *Christ mael ford* seems to me a Christian continuation of *stapol ford*.

More commonly than *Christ mael* the words *treow*, *beam* and *rood* are used in Old English to refer to Christian crosses and crucifixes – although it is not clear what distinction, if any, there is between ‘beams’ and ‘treows’ – perhaps both were simple crosses without the depiction of Christ which would make them a ‘rood’ (a word which has the primary sense of ‘gallows’). However none of these three words seem to be interchangeable with *stapol*. Interestingly, the homonym *treow* (‘truth’/’oath’) makes hundred moot sites named after compounds of *treow* (‘Gartree’ and such like) work in both senses of the word, as hundred moots would have been the occasions when oaths were made (Lund 2010: 56–7).

We are perhaps more accustomed to such continuities from the other temporal direction. As Kathleen Kamerick states in her study of popular piety and art in the late Middle Ages:

> ... centuries old tales of wonder-working crucifixes and animated statues of the Virgin. These images appear as the loci of supernatural powers, performing miracles, speaking, and moving. Their heavenly prototypes work through them, and the formal relationship between the image as signifier, and the saint who is signified, fades as the two become one.

(Kamerick 2002: 44)

As such, my speculations on the origins of this well-established medieval worldview perhaps are not so speculative and perhaps merge into Kamerick’s more academic idiom. It was this ‘idolatry’ which the Lollards took exception to in the mid-fourteenth century and which, in due course, led to the Reformation and its iconoclasm.

If nothing else this slightly rambling section about *weohs*, *stapols*, *roods* and such like shows that, predictably, we can only understand such carvings by understanding the language and culture of the time. But I hope this ‘rambling’ also suggests that these sculptures also offer further evidence which sheds a little light on the deeply-rooted continuity of ideas which link pre-Christian and early Christian worldviews quite closely. While the words may change from Old English to Latin, as with *stapol* and *Christ mael*, the practice and underlying beliefs are little changed (see also Trubshaw 2012 for a discussion of how the pre-Christian sense of *óðr* seemingly ‘evolves’ into the Christian concept of *potentia*).

This appendix is adapted from a section of *Souls, Spirits and Deities* (Trubshaw 2013a). A more extended version appears in *Continuity of Worldviews in Anglo-Saxon England* (Trubshaw 2013d).

Further developments of these ideas can be found in two articles which form part of the Anglo-Saxon Twilight web site (Trubshaw 2013e; 2013f).
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