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In Search of Green Men

Mercia MacDermott
(1927 – 2023)

Editors' Introduction

In *Explore Green Men* (Heart of Albion Press, 2008) the British scholar Mercia MacDermott provided one of the most important and serious works on foliate-human iconography, which has become widely known in common parlance as the Green Man. She graciously agreed to let us reprint the chapter 'Triple Hares and the Green Men: The Indian Connection' along with a significantly shortened version of her introductory chapter, 'In Search of Green Men'. Her introduction provides an important background for understanding Green Man research. The reprinted chapter suggests that Green Man iconography originated in India and subsequently journeyed to Europe with the Vikings. Because two of the articles in this issue of the JSRNC focus on such iconography in Norway, MacDermott's proposal provides an essential baseline for exploring whether the Green Man was originally a cultural export that journeyed to Europe on a Viking ship. MacDermott's niece, Dr. Gwen Adshead, assisted us with the editing of the article republished here; she can be contacted at Gwen.Adshead@westlondon.nhs.uk.

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Finding Green Men

Strange leafy faces may stare back at us if we look carefully at the details of most cathedrals and many ancient parish churches. Sometimes the face is composed entirely of leaves; sometimes sprays of foliage issue from the mouth, nose, forehead, or even eyes. Its expression may range from sad, anguished, tormented or downright sinister to benign

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and almost jovial. Sometimes it peers out through petals or greenery, scowling, or serene, or smiling like a Cheshire Cat; sometimes it actually has a cat's face, and sometimes there is no real face at all, but just an arrangement of leaves whose indentations suggest a mouth, nose and eyes.

All these leafy faces are commonly supposed to be aspects of the Green Man – an image so potent and mysterious that some people, having once set eyes upon it, become as addicted to the pursuit of fresh sightings as spotter of birds and trains.

Discovering Green Men is comparatively easy, since, unlike birds and trains, they conveniently stay put for centuries on end. They are, moreover, not confined to ecclesiastical buildings, but can also be found in a great variety of secular and domestic settings, from streets and gardens to suits of armour, tapestries and table-legs. They know no frontiers, and lurk in countries as far apart as China and Spain, as well as in most of those in between.

Interpreting Green Men

The now familiar term 'Green Man' is, in the context of church carving, a comparatively recent invention, dating only from 1939 when it was introduced by Lady Raglan in an article published in Folklore. Here she expresses the opinion that the motif represents an archetypal 'green' folk-figure, whom she identifies with Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood, the May King and the Garland. The term 'Green Man' caught on, probably because it was both straightforward and evocative, and because growing interest in the image required that it had a name. Thus, nowadays, the name is accepted and used by everyone, including those who are skeptical about Lady Raglan's conclusions.

One should, however, be wary of basing any theories on a name that is not only new, but also purely English. The terms used in other countries where the motif occurs are likely to be totally different. Present day French writers, for example, usually describe Green Men as masques de feuilles (leaf-masks) or masques feuillus (foliate masks). By doing so they are following the tradition of a rare written reference to the motif. This occurs in an illustrated architectural notebook compiled by the thirteenth-century master mason, Villard de Honnecourt. He shows four examples of foliate heads: two in which the leaves seem to be sprouting like hair and beards from otherwise human heads, and two in which leaves, with stalks instead of necks, have acquired eyes, noses, mouths and other human features. De Honnecourt refers to both types as têtes de feuilles (leaf heads). We do not know whether he used the same term to describe heads disgorging sprigs and sprays,

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because these are not illustrated in his notebook, although they certainly existed at the time.

Although 'foliate heads' might be a better and more accurate term than 'Green Man', we appear to be stuck with the popular name, even though it can give rise to misconceptions and confusion.

In one form or another, foliate heads have been around for centuries, even millennia. In recent years, however, the motif has been 're-discovered', and now attracts a great deal of attention. Groups and individuals, justifiably alarmed by certain negative aspects of modern 'progress' and 'development', and by the growing threat to the natural environments, have adopted the Green Man as their emblem. In the process they have invested the image with significance and meanings of their own choosing. These may or may not reflect the intentions of the original carvers. For example, what some people today like to regard as a symbol with our unity with Nature may at times have been perceived by our medieval ancestors as a warning against becoming entangled in the weeds and wild wood of Sin! Thus paradoxically, this 're-discovery' of the Green Man has often proved more conductive to the creation of new mythologies than to a better understanding of his real significance.

Some Contrasting Approaches to the Green Man

Fresh interest in the image has produced a spate of books and articles with fundamentally differing approaches to the topic. Most fall into two main categories. The first of these assumes the existence of an ancient, all-pervading concept or deity, identified as the Green Man, who plays a leading role in practically every belief and custom regarded as traditional.

All the early civilizations of Asia Minor and the Easter Mediterranean had among their many gods one or more who originally represented vegetation in general and who came increasingly to represent the corn-seed that was buried in the earth to rise again in the new harvest. Such gods include the Mesopotamian Dumuzi (Tammuz); the Egyptian Osiris, who, originally a nature god, took on the role of the god of the Dead; the Phoenician Adonis, born of a mother who had been transformed into a myrrh-tree; and the Phrygian Attis, whom Cybele turned into a pine-tree.

Folk imagination has peopled forests with innumerable supernatural beings, such as nymphs, fairies, elves, sprites, goblins, and witches, many of whom are essentially malevolent, and most of whom are, at best, capricious and treacherous. The beauty and majesty of trees led people to regard individual specimens, and even whole groves, as

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sacred. Even today, in the twenty-first century, people make sure of obtaining suitable greenery for Christmas and other traditional festivals which require it.

One of the earliest and most influential of a number of publications belonging to this first category is *Green Man; The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth by William Anderson*. Anderson's book, which appeared in 1990, undoubtedly had the effect of bringing foliate heads to the attention of enthusiasts. However, not all of those who were initially intrigued and inspired by the book remained wholly satisfied with its approach and its assumptions. Some felt that, on closer inspection, it contained too many flights of fancy and failed to make a proper distinction between proven fact and the author's own personal, subjective reaction to the image. Not everyone was convinced that the foliate heads in churches actually represented all that was claimed.

A different approach is adopted by writers such as Katheen Basford [*The Green Man* (1978, reprinted 1996)], Mike Harding [*The Little Book of the Green Man* (1998)] and Jeremy Harte [*The Green Man* (2001)] who are reluctant to venture beyond what can be asserted with reasonable certainty, and who do not set out to create an icon for environmentalists, or gather the maximum number of religious and folkloric phenomena under a single green umbrella.

Definite conclusions are, indeed, hard to reach, given the many forms of the motif, spread over so wide an area and so great a timespan. A lot of nonsense has been written about Green Men, much of it imaginative and thus superficially attractive. This has had the effect of leading some enthusiasts into blind alleys, and of preventing them from picking up vital clues. My book, *Explore Green Men* (2008) explores Green Men found in churches and elsewhere without making any limiting prior assumptions of the kind that all Green Men represent a single archetype or some pagan fertility deity. It aims to dispel some popular misconceptions and to trace the history of the image, as far as it can be ascertained, taking into account the changing character and outlook of the communities which used the motif in their architecture and applied arts. In evolutionary terms, Green Men form an extraordinary successful species. For centuries, they have survived by colonising new niches and adapting to changing conditions, and, as we shall see, they are still at it.

Triple Hares and the Green Men – An Indian Connection

Indian foliate heads have names that have conveniently remained unchanged for two thousand years and more. They also have legends, equally old, that explain every element in their iconography.

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The Kirttimukha and the Makara

The kirttimukha is a face, fierce and suggestive of a lion or some kind of monster, with large bulging eyes and a wide mouth, often lacking a lower jaw, from which emerges what appears sometimes to be foliage, sometimes flowers, sometimes ribbons strung with beads, and sometimes curling foam or smoke.

The word kirttimukha means 'Face of Glory', and its origin is explained in several Hindu legends. One tells how an ambitious king, named Jalandhara, became so full of his own importance that he sent Rahu, the Eclipse Demon, to the God Shiva, demanding that he surrender his bride, Parvati. Shiva was so enraged that his anger burst forth from his third eye in the form of a lion-headed demon, which would have consumed Rahu, had not the latter cunningly taken refuge in Shiva, who was bound to protect him. Deprived of his victim, the newly created hungry demon begged Shiva to provide him with food. The god advised him to eat his own hands and feet – which he promptly did, and he continued eating until only his head remained. Impressed by the creature's all-consuming power, Shiva declared that he should henceforth be known as kirttimukha, and that he should dwell by his door to protect the righteous and to deter evil-doers from entering. In Indian art and architecture, the kirttimukha often appears as an auspicious, protective symbol above doorways, and also above the mandorla or aureole, behind images of the gods.

According to another legend, it is Rahu's head which became the kirttimukha, and Vishnu who was the deity involved. In this story, Rahu manages to steal some *amrita* – the elixir of immortality made by churning the primaeval ocean. The Sun and the Moon report the theft to Vishnu, who takes a sword and beheads Rahu. Since the demon has already tasted the amrita, his head becomes immortal and wanders about the Universe seeking revenge on the Sun and Moon. Every time he catches up with either of these heavenly bodies, he swallows it, thus causing an eclipse, but each time it slips through his severed neck and escapes. This version of the legend not only provided a popular, easily understood explanation of eclipses, but also served to illustrate the futility of desire, which is an important teaching in Indian theology.

Neither of these legends, however, explains why the kirttimukha should disgorge greenery or beads. Indeed, this element of the image came from another mythical creature – the makara, which became associated with the kirttimukha during the Gupta period (fourth to sixth centuries CE). The makara combines the features of several creatures, including the crocodile, elephant, and fish or dolphin. Makaras are depicted as the vahana (mount or vehicle) of Varuna, God of the

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Waters. They also appear on the banners of Kama, God of Love and Fertility. While the kirttimukha first occurs in Indian art in about the second century CE, the makara was already in evidence during the third century BCE.

The makara is found in both Hindu and Buddhist iconography. An early form of the creature can be seen on the red sandstone north gate-post of the Bharhut stupa (second century BCE). Here a seductive *yakshi* (earth spirit) stands with her arm round a tree and her foot on the head of a makara (Craven 1987: 64–65). Another fine example of a makara – this time clearly showing its elephant's trunk, crocodile's head and jaws, and fish-tail – appears on a carving which once stood at the doorway of an early fifth century temple at Beshnagar (north-east of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh), and is now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Here a yakshi, probably representing the goddess Ganga, stands on the back of the makara to symbolize the sacred river.

The makara is also sometimes present in the famous image of Shiva Natarja – Lord of the Dance – immortalized in the Chola bronzes (tenth to twelfth centuries CE). In the course of his dance, Shiva creates, destroys and renews the cosmos, which is shown as a ring of flames encircling the deity and issuing from the mouths of two makara.

The makara was believed to disgorge wonderful things, among them the 'Cosmic Tree' or 'Wish-fulfilling Tree', usually depicted as a kind of vine or tendril derived from the sacred lotus plant, combined with strings of pearls. When the kirttimukha and the makara are shown together these pearls may flow from the mouth of one into the mouth of the other. On a late fifth-century CE pillar in cave number one at Ajanta (north-east of Mumbai/Bombay), two makara flank a magnificent kirttimukha, with multiple strings of pearls joining their mouths.

In early Indian art, the lotus is often shown not merely as flowers and leaves, but also together with its root-like rhizome, which grows horizontally under water or mud (Singhal 1972: Vol.2, 56, Illustration 58). The mysterious cone-like motif which we see in Romanesque sculpture is also in evidence, clearly identifiable as a lotus-bud. Examples can be seen in vases of lotus-flowers carved on the inner face of the north gate of the Great Stupa at Sanchi (first century BCE to first century CE).

When the two images of the kirttimukha and the makara were combined, it was no longer obvious which was the disgorger and which the swallower. Since the combined image was used mainly as a protective device, the details of the myths surrounding its component parts were no longer of great importance. The differences between the two creatures became blurred, and the kirttimukha absorbed some of the attributes of the makara. As a result, even when it appears alone, the

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kirttimukha now disgorges the pearls and lotus-stems of the absent makara.

Despite their Hindu origin, the kirttimukha and the makara were painlessly incorporated into the art of India's other religions – Jainism and Buddhism – in the role of auspicious, protective images. When Buddhism spread to neighbouring countries, including Tibet and China, the kirttimukha and the makara went with it, and their salient features were adapted to local needs.

An exciting insight into what happened to the motifs in China was provided by items in an exhibition of sixth-century CE statues representing Buddhas and bodhisattvas at the Royal Academy in London during 2002. These statues had been unearthed by a bulldozer in the city of Qingzhou (Shandong Province, in north-east China) in 1996. One of the most beautiful exhibits was a free-standing bodhisattva, wearing elaborate jewelry, including two pendants adorned with disgorging animal masks. The more impressive of these masks disgorges strings of beads and pearly-petalled flowers.

Other items in the exhibition included fragments of triads – Buddhas, flanked by two smaller bodhisattvas and surrounded by a mandorla. In some cases, the bodhisattvas were sitting or standing on pedestals arising from lotus plants (sometimes complete with 'fir-cone' buds!), disgorged by dragons, which, on Chinese soil, replace the makara. The change is not as dramatic as it might at first seem, because the Chinese dragon, unlike its western relatives, is a benign, non-inflammable beast, traditionally associated with water and pearls, just like the original makara.

The Dorling-Kindersley Eyewitness book on Religion (1996: 28) has a picture of a beautiful oval amulet, showing a Tibetan adaptation of the kirttimukha in a mosaic of what appear to be turquoises, pearls, and other precious and semiprecious stones, set in gold. The fierce face, with tusks, pearly teeth and protruding ruby eyes, is intended to terrify hostile demons and to protect the wearer. Although there is no makara, the kirttimukha is disgorging golden stems bearing what seem to be lotus-flowers with petals made of pearls.

Parallels Between Indian and Romanesque Art

We are not the first to explore Indian territory in search of the Green Man. Others have been here before us. In most cases, however, their discoveries have either not been followed up, or failed to reach a wide enough public.

One of the very first to perceive a connection between Indian and Romanesque art was the French architect, E. Viollet-le-Duc, best

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known for his restoration of the mediaeval city of Carcassonne. In his Dictionnaire Raisonné de l'Architecture Française du XIe au XVIe Siècle (Paris 1875: Vol. 7, 187 ff) Viollet-le-Duc suggested that the kirttimukha occurred on the facade of Notre Dame-la-Grande in Poitiers (c. 1130–45). In 1931, an Indian scholar, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, expressed his conviction that the makara occurred frequently in mediaeval European art (Coomaraswamy 1931).

These pointers inspired an American scholar, Millard B. Rogers (then Associate Director of the Seattle Art Museum, Washington State), to travel to Europe in the spring of 1959 in order to journey along the pilgrim routes to and from Santiago de Compostela, examining early Romanesque churches for signs of Indian influence. He found more than he had expected, and concluded that Coomaraswamy was correct and that Viollet-le-Duc's observation was 'an understatement'.

Rogers published an article about his findings in a leading American learned journal (Rogers 1960: 1176–82) but unfortunately this extremely important piece of research has largely gone unnoticed by those whom it would interest most – Green Man enthusiasts.

Rogers found that makara and kirttimukha appear on the majority of French and Spanish churches built during the twelfth century, but not on earlier Romanesque churches. He also noted that the use of the two motifs was discontinued after 1200.

His findings open up new avenues for exploration just when the trail is fading. Even if we know little about Indian art and have never visited the country, books and museums can equip us to look at Romanesque sculpture with new eyes.

We must not expect to see all the elements associated with the kirttimukha and makara in every Romanesque church. Variations and omissions also occur in Indian carvings, and we have to allow for the accidental changes that accompany repeated copying. Most Romanesque churches have little more to offer than the odd leonine kirttimukha disgorging tangles of long stems. There may not be anything resembling a makara, or it may take an unusual form. Even a solitary foliate head, however, may embody typical Indian features, such as the missing lower jaw of the kirttimukha, or the pearly stems, lotus-flowers or cone-like buds associated with the makara. Regardless of the range of elements present, the stylistic similarities between Indian and early Romanesque motifs are too close to be coincidental.

At Moissac Abbey in France for example, the whole arc of the tympanum of the south porch is bordered by a ribbon ornament, studded with 'pearls', which runs from the mouth of a makara into that of a lion-faced kirttimukha. The ornamentation on the lintel below consists

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of roundels of foliage issuing out of the mouth of two makara, with typically elephantine snouts, facing each other.

Rogers does not mention The Church of St. Mary and St. David, in Kilpeck, Herefordshire, in England in his article, and almost certainly he never went there.[1] Had he done so, he would surely have been delighted. Viewed in the light of the Indian connection, the church in Kilpeck gains in excitement and importance. The disgorging Green Man on one side of the doorway is revealed as a kirttimukha, complete with pearly lotus-stems and a bud. The two-legged, long-tailed beast on the other side of the doorway then becomes a makara. The flowers and buds on the plant in the tympanum prove remarkably similar in style to those at the Great Stupa at Sanchi. And that is only the beginning! There is much more to intrigue and set us guessing.

As Rogers correctly observed, things changed after 1200. The Romanesque makara was forgotten entirely or transformed into a wyvern or some other creature. The kirttimukha, on the other hand, was imaginatively 'modernized' by Gothic sculptors, who perceived disgorged foliage as its only attribute, and substituted leaves of their own choice for the long-stemmed lotus-plants, which they neither recognized nor understood.

How Indian Motifs Reached the West

Establishing how Indian motifs reached the West offers a real challenge to Green Man explorers. The possible routes are unexpectedly numerous, but not well charted.

Distant as India appears to be from western Europe, trade and other contacts had united the two areas from classical times. About 45 CE, people came to understand the workings of the monsoons across the Indian Ocean, namely that in winter the prevailing winds blew from the north-east and in summer from the south-west. Using this knowledge, merchants were able to speed up maritime trade with India by bringing cargoes at the appropriate time to Egypt for distribution to the Mediterranean area. Here there was a tremendous demand among the richer citizens of the Roman Empire for costly oriental luxuries, such as pearls, gemstones, spices, ivory, perfumes, muslin and Chinese silk. Evidence of a Roman market for Indian objects d'art was provided by the discovery of an ivory figure of the Hindu goddess, Lakshmi, during excavations in Pompeii.

Indian embassies visited Rome during the early centuries CE, and there were Indian sects in Egypt during the Ptolemaic period. Indeed,

1. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_St_Mary_and_St_David,_Kilpeck#/media/File:Kilpeck_Green_Man.jpg.

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the development of monasticism among the native Coptic Christians may have been the result of Asian influence from India, since neither celibacy nor meditation formed part of the older religious traditions of Egypt (Singhal 1972: Vol.1, 88, 103).

According to legend, St Thomas is supposed to have taken Christianity to southern India, but, even if he did not get so far, India was visited by Christian missionaries during the third century, when Pantaenus found an existing Church (rightly or wrongly said to have been founded by St Bartholomew).

As the first millennium CE progressed, India came to play a far more important role in western Europe than simply that of a provider of luxuries for the wealthy. The decline of the Roman Empire during the fourth and fifth centuries coincided with the rise of the Gupta Empire in India, which ushered in a golden age of art, literature and learning. For the first time, Hindu temples were built of stone, and it was at this time that the kirttimukha and makara were combined as a decorative element. The study of astronomy, medicine and mathematics flourished, preserving the learning of the ancient Greeks and making fresh advances. In mathematics, especially, India led the world, with the invention of the decimal system and the concept of zero. India's superior learning was gradually transmitted to a Europe still retarded in the Dark Ages through the Arabs, who were the leading traders and navigators of the time. Arabic manuscripts became treasured possessions in monastery libraries.

More direct contact between East and West, not always under the most favourable of circumstances, occurred in Spain after the Moorish invasion (711), and in Palestine, where the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099. Both points of contact are worth exploring. The victorious Moors established centres of Arabic culture and learning in Córdoba, Granada, Seville, and Toledo, and their influence extended almost to the very walls of Santiago de Compostela. Raymond IV, Count of Toulouse and one of the leaders of the First Crusade (1096–99), held lands to the north of the Pyrenees through which most of the pilgrims passed and where examples of kirttimukha and makara can be seen in the abbeys where they rested and found shelter.

Rogers claims to have seen motifs derived from the legend of Rahu over the Islamic gateway in Aleppo, and in a section of the Talisman Gate in Baghdad. He concludes, however, that these Islamic carvings bear less resemblance to the original Indian models than the Romanesque foliate heads do, and that the motif must have reached Europe by another route.

One possible route is through the import of ivory carvings, together with unworked ivory for the use of European craftsmen. Another

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is through the import of Arabic manuscripts for royal and monastic libraries.

Here attention to dates becomes of the utmost importance. The earliest known Western disgorging foliate heads appear on manuscripts and artefacts, such as the León Cross, which predate the Crusades. The presence of foliate heads in Crusader churches may have helped to popularize the motif among Crusaders and pilgrims, but it could not have provided the original stimulus. Prior to the Crusades, there were Christian communities in Jerusalem that, despite Muslim rule, were able to worship freely. Unfortunately, we have no information as to whether there were any foliate heads in these early churches.

Manuscripts appear to offer the most promising leads. We already know of foliate heads on Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and on books prepared for the Archbishop of Trier at the end of the tenth century. According to Rogers, kirttimukha appear in Beatus manuscripts of Spanish origin, one of the earliest known copies of which, made about 900, is now in the Morgan Library in New York. Illuminated manuscripts were an important source of guidance for masons engaged in pioneering work on the early mediaeval churches.

We can easily imagine an abbot embarking on the construction of one of the huge new monastic churches and discussing plans with his chief mason: 'And, over the main portal, make us a truly impressive Last Judgement, like this one'. He would then produce one of the treasured manuscripts from the monastery's library, perhaps, one of the many copies of the Beatus commentaries on the Apocalypse, with some eighty illustrations of the episodes described. The mason would examine it carefully, noting the iconography of the main figures and their arrangement. He might also be attracted by the less important elements, such as illuminated capital letters and decorative borders. Seeing a foliate head, he might decide to incorporate one into the border of his tympanum, together with the rosettes and coils of foliage which he had noticed on an ivory cross or reliquary.

Triple Hares

The possibility that Green Men arrived in the West as migrants from the East is strengthened by the analogous case of the Triple Hares. This motif consists of three hares, or rabbits, running in an everlasting circle, with their paws on the circumference and their ears forming a triangle in the centre. At first sight each hare appears to have the requisite two ears, but a closer examination will reveal that the three animals have only three ears between them, and that each hare shares an ear with its

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neighbour, in much the same manner in which the six Green Men on the roof boss in Chichester Cathedral share an eye.

The Triple Hare motif is widespread in mediaeval churches both in England and continental Europe. It can, for example, be seen on roof bosses in several churches in the Dartmoor area of Devon, including Chagford, Cheriton Bishop, North Bovey, Sampford Courtenay, South Tawton, Spreyton, Tavistock and Widecombe. All these date from the fifteenth century. Other examples include a floor tile in Chester Cathedral (c. 1300), a misericord in Beverley Minster and a stained glass window in Long Melford, Suffolk. In many churches in France, Germany and Switzerland the Triple Hare motif appears on roof bosses, and also as decoration on a thirteenth-century abbey bell. In Lyons Cathedral (France) the motif occurs in a four-hare variant, with the four shared ears forming a central square.

The Buddhist Connection

Patterns composed of either three or four animals can be seen far to the East in Buddhist paintings in the Ladakh region of Kashmir. The numbers three and four are both of special significance to Buddhists and, in Ladakh, hares are sometimes replaced by antlered deer – a reference to Buddha's first sermon in the deer-park at Sarnath.

The earliest known examples of the Triple Hare motif occur in Buddhist cave paintings dating from the late sixth or early seventh century in Dunhuang on the edge of the Gobi Desert in western China. Remote as Dunjuang may seem to us, it was once an important garrison town on the Silk Road, along which the motif appears to have travelled westwards, possibly in the form of designs on luxury textiles. At the Silk Road Exhibition organized by the British Library in 2004, the Three Hares could also be seen on Islamic Mongolian coins dating from 1281–2. Trier Cathedral in Germany boasts a silver reliquary of a slightly later date (late thirteenth or early fourteenth century) with the Triple Hare motif on its base. This casket is believed by some art experts to have originally been fashioned in southern Russia by Iranian craftsmen working for a Mongol client!

The Three Hares motif is beginning to attract its own following of 'spotters' and would-be interpreters. Numerous theories about its significance are already being put forward. Some even attempt to establish a link with the foliate heads which often occur in the same churches. Sadly, most of these theories are pure speculation with no real evidence to support them. Whatever meaning the motif may have had in its eastern homeland, or subsequently acquired in the West, it appears

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to have reached us purely as a decorative image, like so many other motifs before and since.

Triple Hares and Green Men

For Green Man explorers, however, the Three Hares have an importance that goes beyond their mere decorative value, in that their progress from East to West, from one religion to another, can to a certain extent be traced.

If a motif based on hares can thus migrate across the world, finding favour with Buddhists, Muslims and Christians alike, why should not the Green Man have made a comparable Odyssey?

The probability is that the disgorging Green Man originated in India. All the elements associated with the earliest Romanesque foliate heads are attributes of the kirttimukha or the makara, and cannot be found in any western European prototype. The possibility of Indian influence reaching the areas where Romanesque art developed is also abundantly present. The motifs could have travelled in many ways, along a variety of channels. We have yet to determine beyond doubt exactly how this happened. The secret may be concealed under our very noses in some museum, library, or ancient monument, waiting to be discovered by a persistent explorer following the right trail and looking in the right place.

The Viking Connection

The activities of the Vikings are worthwhile investigating since, at the very time when disgorging heads first appeared in Western art, the routes followed by these intrepid seafarers stretched from Iceland to the Middle East and central Asia. The abiding popular image of Vikings as bloodthirsty pirates, who sacked monasteries and vented their fury on all who stood in their way, is only part of the picture.

The Vikings were traders as well as raiders. They sailed their elegant, superbly designed ships through the Bay of Biscay and past Gibraltar into the Mediterranean, and they followed the great Russian rivers down from the Baltic into the Black and Caspian Seas. From there, some would journey on even further on 'ships of the desert' overland to such centres of culture and international commerce as Baghdad and Khorezm, near the Aral Sea on the road to Samarkand. In Byzantium they appeared not only as merchants, but also in a different guise, as the elite Varangian Guard, which protected the person of the Emperor himself.

In their own environment, Viking craftsmen were as skilled and artistic as any in Europe, and fashioned beautiful objects out of metal,

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wood and stone. The Green Man enthusiast who starts examining their intricate, imaginative designs may well become hooked on the search, hoping every moment to stumble upon a familiar image, since Viking artefacts are crawling with coiling stems, stylized animals and enigmatic human faces. Some animals are even slightly foliate, such as the creatures on the panels of a twelfth-century Swedish font in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which appear to hold sprigs of leaves in their mouths, but which are not sufficiently early to have much bearing on our search for origins. On closer examination most Viking motifs turn out to be disappointingly not quite what we were looking for.

Of greater interest are two full-faced heads which can be seen on artefacts found in Norwegian ninth-century ship burials. Both seem to be disgorging, although only one could be considered even remotely foliate. The first is on a wooden sleigh shaft recovered from a burial at Borre, in the same region where the more famous Gokstad and Oseberg ship-burials were found. The second appears on a rowlock from one of the small boats belonging to the Gokstad ship.

Moreover, among the richer contents of the Oseberg ship there are items which hint tantalizingly at oriental connections. There is, for example, a wooden pail, known as the 'Buddha bucket' because its brass handle is ornamented with a cross-legged figure reminiscent of a Buddha. Its body is decorated with swastikas, which also abound as a motif woven into the tapestry and other textiles found in the burial. The swastika is an ancient auspicious symbol in many parts of the world, including India and the far East.

If, as yet, no one has spotted any undeniable Green Man prototypes in Viking art, it may be that there are none to spot. On the other hand it may be that no one has looked sufficiently thoroughly. But even if the Vikings did not make any significant use of the motif, they could still have played a role in introducing it to the West in the form of merchandise from the East. Although the notion of Vikings riding camels may seem incongruous, ride camels they did, and we could certainly do with a peep into their saddlebags!

All this goes to underline the need for Green Man explorers to keep an open mind, and to be alert to the possibility for finding clues in some seemingly unlikely places.

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