STONEZINE 17
THE DIGITAL COUNTERPART TO STONEXUS MAGAZINE,
A TRIBUTE TO STONE, STONWORK AND STONE ART
STONExZINE 17
THE DIGITAL COUNTERPART TO STONEXUS MAGAZINE
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This, like all issues of the STONEZINE, can be printed on 8.5" X 14" or 11" X 17" paper.
The Green Man

ANCIENT MYTH, CELTIC GOD OR MEDIEVAL CREATION?

by Nicholas G. Fairplay

"[The Green Man/Knight] is as vivid and concrete as any image in literature...a living coincidentia oppositorum; half giant, yet wholly a 'loving knight'; as full of demoniac energy as old Karamazov, yet, in his own house, as jolly as a Dickensian Christmas host."

C.S. Lewis

The Green Man is a popular motif in architectural stone carvings and other art forms. Much has been written about who he is and where he comes from but he remains one of the most evocative figures in Western art. We may not be aware of the Green Man’s veritable significance yet we know that it is deep and vital.

My interest in Green Man started when I worked on English cathedrals as a young stone carver apprentice. I wondered then and wonder still about this mysterious man in green—who is he, what is his message and how has he changed over time? Tolkien said that “. . .he (the Greene Knight) is the most difficult character to interpret.”

The name ‘Green Man’ was coined in 1939 by Lady Raglan, a well-known folklorist, in her book The Green Man in Church Architecture. Prior to that the entity was referred to as a ‘foliate head.’ He was known variously in popular culture as Jack O’Green, Jack in the Green, Robin Hood, Robin of Greenwood, the Garland King, King of the May, etc.—but the bestowal of the name The Green Man had the effect of consolidating the image’s power.

This article will explore Green Man carvings from different places and different periods, examining the images for visual clues and comparing these with contemporary sculptures and carvings. Cultural and visual evidence suggest that the Green Man is related to the primal god of nature, to Dionysus or to Bacchus. The transformation of the Green Man from ancient times to the present day, however, remains unclear.

My aim is to elucidate certain features of the Green Man images, particularly in stone carvings, to understand his nature, his history, his function and his relationship with the Celtic God Cernunnos.

The Green Man is often depicted as part human and part plant. The head, the vessel of divinity and power, is often carved as if it has been severed from the Tree of Knowledge. The leaves sprouting from his mouth, ears and face are symbolic of fertility and growth. The Green Man is the message of the tree. Additionally he represents rebirth, the renewal of the spring, creative inspiration.

According to Sir James George Frazer, the Green Man could be related to sacrifice.

“. . .that a man was chosen to represent the god, and he, after conferring by the proper magical ceremonies his strength and fertility upon his people, was sacrificed (perhaps by hanging), decapitated, and his head placed in the sacred tree.”

He delivers the same message as other sacrificial Gods such as Attis, Osiris, Dionysus or Jesus—vitality, death and rebirth. Throughout the centuries the Green Man images have been associated with religious and social aspects of life. He has found his way into popular culture as well; numerous pubs throughout the UK are named The Green Man and Green Man embellishments abound in gardens and buildings all across America.

His is one of the most-liked images in Europe and the US...but he is an enigma.

So, where did the Green Man first appear? Some scholars believe that the earliest Green Man image is the one in the Museum de Vesome in France which is dated to the first or second century AD. (figure 2) Other evidence, however, indicates that the Green Man may have originated outside of Europe. A very early Green Man is found on a wall in the ruined city of Hatra, in present-day Iraq, (figure 3) dated to the first century BC. This Green Man has a foliated face with snakes coming out of his hair like horns. On one side, the snake and part of his head have broken and eroded away.

There is additional support for the theory that the Green Man actually originated in ancient Mesopotamian culture. In her master thesis Green Man Resurrected, Phyllis Araneo cites two scholars who believe that a carving from a temple in Hatra, dated 400 BC, is the oldest Green Man image.\(^5\) (figure 4)

This visual evidence opens a new avenue to investigate the Green Man and his cross-cultural connections. In the seventh century when Mohammedan forces conquered Syria, Egypt, Africa and Spain, refugees from these areas fled in large numbers to Europe and settled in Southern Gaul and Northern Italy. Arthur Gardner suggests that English clergy went to Italian refugee camps in search of skilled craftsmen and took them back to England to build their churches.\(^6\)

Early crosses erected across England though Celtic in form have a strong resemblance to Coptic ornaments. The work on those crosses and on some contemporary churches is more accomplished and less typically Celtic in content than the work that follows it. When compared to these early carvings, the later Celtic works were less refined. It seems that the carving skills and techniques were carried down through generations in England but the stylistic and iconic representations vary. Does the image of human and plant have a Coptic origin? Was there any artistic influence coming from Gaul during the same time?


We have found additional examples of Green Man carvings from Eurasia and Europe: one is seen on a sarcophagus in Turkey (figure 5, previous page) dated to the 2nd century; another appears on a cornice in the Landes Museum in Trier, Germany. (figure 6) There is little evidence to tell us how these Green Man images were used and what their functions were. From what we have seen, both heads are similar in that their eyes are hollowed out—a mask-like appearance which may indicate that these images were inspired by the masks worn by performers in festivals or priests in religious rituals. The characteristic hollowed eyes seem to have been replaced by realistic eyes in some other examples of Green Man. In the Great Palace Museum of Istanbul, for example, there is a colorful 5th century mosaic Green Man with a pair of beautiful hazelnut eyes. (figure 7)

Another example is a 6th century foliated Green Man face on a marble capital in the same museum. (figure 8) These early images reaffirm the belief that Green Man carvings may have originated in the Tigris/Euphrates River Valleys—the cradle of Western civilisation. Many craftsmen migrated west from there to places where work was more plentiful. It is likely some went to France and England and worked on churches using ornamental forms familiar to them and the Green Man was a popular motif with which to embellish arches, capitals, corbels, bosses, etcetera.

Stone carvers seem to have been granted a high degree of individual expression enabling them to express their spiritual, personal or whimsical notions about what they were depicting—as well as their love of the craft of carving.

Given scant literary references and the limitations of figurative representation in the earlier examples, it is hard to approach the subject of Green Man from a unilateral perspective. To learn more about the origin of Green Man, we must look at the relationship between early mythological stories in Europe and the influence of the Roman Empire. It is feasible to surmise that the spirit of the Green Man was absorbed by the Greek god of nature—Dionysus, who the Romans called Bacchus (figure 9). The connection to Roman mythology undoubtedly derived from the advent of the Roman Empire in Gaul and nearby areas.
There was no unified Celtic religion in pre-Roman times; regional religious variation would complicate the way the foreign gods were understood and worshipped. Roman gods were modified to correspond with indigenous entities, the easiest way to facilitate their acceptance by the local populace. It is natural that scholars should recognize Roman influence in the Green Man’s evolution as in the late Roman period he was associated with Bacchus, the god of wine who related less to nature than to drunkenness and profligacy.

The Horned One . . .

Another possible prototype is the Celtic god of nature, Cernunnos, the Horned One, or Horned God, who was worshipped across Gaul and throughout Britain. He is usually portrayed sitting on the ground with his legs crossed, flanked by snakes, deer and/or a bull. On the Gundestrup Cauldron from Denmark there is a depiction of Cernunnos with deer antlers sitting cross-legged, holding a torc in one hand and a snake in the other. (figure 10) The specific way Cernunnos is sitting on the ground also can be seen on the Reims monument where the god is seated between Mercury and Apollo. Here, Cernunnos holds a bag with money spilling on the ground. According to Greek writers the way Cernunnos sat was how the Celts traditionally sat to take their meals—apparently chairs, low stools, benches and beds were unknown to them.7 The way Cernunnos was represented with a bag of money relates to the custom of bestowing gifts on those less fortunate in late December—precursor to our own Christmas traditions. A similar image was found on a 2nd century AD stele in Vendœuvres, France; here Cernunnos is shown sitting cross-legged with a bag on his lap, accompanied by two snakes with putti standing on them. The snake, as well as being a symbol of fertility, is often associated with wealth and regarded as the guardian of treasure.

Was Cernunnos merged with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, nature, vegetation, inspiration and religious ecstasy; the Dionysus who became Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and debauchery? There is visual evidence for this merging on the oldest known monument in Paris—the Pillar of the Boatmen, a Gallo-Roman column that was erected in the first century AD by wealthy mariners and ship-owners who plied the river Seine. Portions of the pillar were re-used as building blocks in the fourth century city wall of the Île de la Cité. The pillar was dedicated to Jupiter and depicted Roman deities with gods that are distinctly Gallic. It was divided into four different tiers with four gods on each tier.8 The lower half of the second tier from the top, depicting Cernunnos along with Smertrios, Castor and Pollux, has not survived. The upper half shows him with the antlers of a stag upon which two torcs are hung (figure 12). Presumably Cernunnos’ lower half was shown seated cross-legged because there was not enough space for him to be shown in a standing pose.

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There are in fact a number of Gallo-Roman carvings of Cernunnos in the lands conquered by the Romans that closely resemble the one on the pillar. Most scholars agree that a standing relief figure with horns on a second century or early third century tombstone from Bela Krajina, Slovenia is indeed Cernunnos.\textsuperscript{9}

Similarly, a few of the early Romanesque Green Man images with horns (figure 12) or horns of foliage can be seen across Europe (figure 13). Just like Cernunnos, the Green Man can be both a god of nature and a god of fertility. Not all Green Man carvings have angelic faces, however. Some of the carvings feature a menacing grimace, teeth exposed, signifying Green Man’s capacity to punish those who defiled his realm, the forests.

Whilst there are still many questions regarding the origin of the Green Man and his function, his depiction varies over time. The Green Man from the Greco-Roman period with his leafy face with human eyes, nose and mouth is clearly quite different from carvings in the Romanesque style. Many of the latter often have foliage growing out of their mouths, particularly in France.

In the Gothic era, carved Green Man images became more pervasive and both the leafy face and the head with foliage growing out of his mouth are common. A large number of them appear in England at this time such as this Late Gothic composite Green Man from the Henry VII Chapel in London’s Westminster Abbey, his human features carved to look like vegetation. (figure 14)

The 15th century Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland contains the most Green Man carvings in a single building. The one shown here is a pendent boss on an arch voussoir. (figure 15)

The 16th century painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo painted human portraits that look normal at a distance, but close up their features are revealed to be composed of vegetables, plants and fruits. (figure 16, next page) His paintings were greatly admired by his contemporaries and remain a source of fascination today.

The Cult of the Head...

One interesting aspect of the Green Man is that he is almost always carved as just a head. We must ask why, what is the significance of the head? The fact that the Celts were ‘head hunters’ may have relevance. Several Classical writers describe their head-cutting traditions. According to the Greek author Diodorus:

When their enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them above the necks of their horses, and turning over to their attendants the arms of their opponents, all covered in blood, they carry them off as booty, singing over them and striking up a song of victory, and these first fruits of battle they fasten by nail upon their houses, just as men do in certain kinds of hunting. The heads of the most distinguished enemies they embalm in cedar-oil and carefully preserve in a chest, and these they exhibit to strangers, gravely maintaining that in exchange for this head someone of their ancestors, or their father, or the man himself, they had refused the offer of a great sum of money.10

Another Classical author, Livy, vividly described the head-cutting of a Roman politician Lucius Postumius Albinus (died 216 BC), The [Celtic] Boii looted his remains, decapitated him and bore them in triumph to the most sacred of their temples.11 Clearly the Celts believed the head to be the preeminent part of the body, a repository of the spirit, character and knowledge of the person.

Severing the head from the body of an enemy and keeping it as a trophy symbolized not only the annihilation of that enemy, but control over his spirit.

The heads of certain important Celtic persons, chiefs, etc. were also removed after their deaths, and venerated.

The Celtic cult of the head may have arisen during the Iron Age as evidenced by the excavation of many Iron Age sites across the Celtic world.

The most famous example is Acropolis Roquepertuse (figure 17), a historical religious center of the Celtic culture located north of present-day Marseille. The site was destroyed by the Romans in 124 BC and discovered in 1860, though most of the excavation was done in 1923.12 The pillars in this sanctuary had recesses in which human skulls were placed and statues of two warriors, both sitting cross-legged in strangely Buddha-like postures that make one wonder about influences from farther East. The bowls on their laps are for human heads.

Celtic customs were taken up by the Roman soldiers when they conquered Celtic lands. Following the Gallic Wars a large portion of the Roman army was drawn from these lands—as much as seventy-five per cent of auxiliary cavalrymen, by one account, were of the Celtic ‘persuasion’ which clearly explains the persistence of the head-cutting tradition.

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11 Livy 1905:23.24. Excerpt from Bruce Linnell, ibid
Celtic influence in the Roman military can be seen on Trajan’s Column, a chronicle of the Dacian Wars that stands in Rome. Two Gallo-Roman soldiers are shown presenting heads to Emperor Trajan, there is a scene with heads on spikes at an encampment and a detail showing a soldier fighting with sword in hand and a severed head held by its hair between his teeth. (figure 18)

In the Lancaster City Museum in England there is a large tombstone showing a cavalryman of the Roman Ala Augusta regiment on horseback with a severed head and sword in his right hand. (figure 19) These depictions demonstrate the cross-cultural influence between the Celts and the Romans over centuries.

Carving stone heads for ritual or religious purposes was practiced throughout the Celtic world. More than 2,000 stone heads from the Iron Age have been found in Britain alone, most of them small enough to be portable. (figure 20)

As Christianity became the official religion under the reign of Constantine, these heads were incorporated into buildings. By the Romanesque period the custom of carving heads on doorways and windows had become common; the tympanum over the portal of Clonfert Cathedral in County Galway, Ireland is a good example. (figure 21) The medieval stone carvers became more sophisticated in their skills over time. Their tools and techniques improved significantly, and their carvings became more elaborate and decorative. The early Romanesque carvers drew from their Celtic heritage, creating frivolous carvings around the Christian statues, like the playful marginalia encircling the written texts in illuminated manuscripts.

Over time the meaning of the carvings were forgotten but the forms continued to be expressed. With the conversion of the Celtic people to Christianity the old pagan gods were discarded; nevertheless Cernunnos’ carved disembodied head continued to appear on the walls of the new ‘temples’—affirming the affection that carvers had for the form...and the spirit it expressed.

Though we have many carved examples of Green Man throughout Europe, there are few in writing, drawing or painting that have survived. One exception is a 13th century sketchbook by French medieval artist Villard de Honnecourt. It contains a few interesting Green Man drawings. (figure 22, next page)
The Green Man appears not only as the foliate head of a man carved in stone, there are a few rather feminine versions although they are commonly referred to as Green Man carvings. One exception is a carving at Southwell Minster which, because it wears a wimple, an article of women’s clothing, is said to be a Green Woman. (figure 23)

There are also rare appearances of a full-figured Green Man such as the one carved in a spandrel on the choir stalls at Winchester Cathedral (figure 24) depicting the Green Knight from the fourteenth century Arthurian poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The poem begins with a beheading ‘game.’ At a New Year’s feast at King Arthur’s court, a mysterious knight clad in green appears and challenges Arthur, or anyone present, to strike him with his axe on the condition that he receive a blow in return from the knight one year later to the day. Sir Gawain accepts the Green Knight’s challenge and with one blow decapitates him. The Green Knight picks up his severed head (figure 25) and declares that Gawain and he shall meet in one year at the Green Chapel and on that day he shall strike Gawain with his axe. The following autumn Sir Gawain begins his journey to his dreaded rendezvous with the Green Knight. On Christmas day he is welcomed as a guest at a castle not far from the Green Chapel. His host Lord Bertilak and his Lady test Gawain’s chivalry and honour. He passes these tests admirably, though imperfectly—the Lady gives him a green belt for protection, a gift he does not disclose to his host. Nevertheless the Green Knight spares him.

The Green Man is an ancient archetypal being that probably existed long before the first images known to us were created. He has transcended time, reappearing with stylistic variations throughout more than 2,000 years of human history.

He has been transformed to merge with various traditions and beliefs, but regardless of who he is, or was—Cernunnos, Dionysus/Bacchus or other, earlier entities—his message is consistent. As an expression of wild nature and the spirit of sacrifice, fertility and inspiration, the Green Man serves as a symbol of vitality, death and rebirth.

He has come alive on the walls of cathedrals, churches and other buildings thanks to generations of creative stone-carvers. The mysterious Green Man has endured over the centuries and his disembodied head continues to flourish.
CHRIS BOOTH, SCULPTOR and LAND ARTIST

Chris Booth, born and raised on the North Island of New Zealand, has been at the forefront of environmental sculpture for more than four decades.

He is known for the creative language he has developed which involves deep and meaningful relationships with landforms, flora and fauna.

Social history and engagement with community, in particular New Zealand’s indigenous community, are paramount to his art practice and he has a strong interest in communicating a sense of responsibility for our living planet.

Over the past three decades Chris has produced large to very large public art commissions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, UK, Denmark, Italy, France and Germany. Several of these are portrayed in the following pages.
CHRIS BOOTH, Sculptor, Land Artist  
Visit https://www.chrisbooth.co.nz/works/ for more detailed descriptions of the pictured installations.

WAIRAU STRATA, 2000 Seresin Estate, Marlborough, NZ
The schist slabs come from the layered ranges they overlook, a major continental plate faultline. These ranges were once part of Fiordland. The 100-ton sculpture stands on the edge of a horizontal Wairau River Valley terrace which occurred as a result of plate movement.

WAKA & WAVE, 1998—2006, Whangarei, NZ
Waka: Maori watercraft, ranging in size from small, unornamented canoes (waka tiwai) used for fishing and river travel, to large, decorated war canoes (waka tawa) up to 40 metres (130 ft) long.
The sculpture is a comment on colonisation. It was done in collaboration with Te Warihi Hetaraka a Maori artist who designed the waka. Chris designed the stone waves which invade the shore, partially submerging the waka and finally, like a tsunami wave, dispersing over the land.

TE WHIRINGA O MANOKO 1978—2009, Kerikeri, NZ
Te Whiringa o Monoko: The interweaving of the cultures of Kerikeri.
This sculpture draws upon the artist's upbringing in Kerikeri, the horticultural centre of Northland, New Zealand. Its design was influenced by the town's boulder-strewn river and the tall columnar gum trees and giant Kauri trees of Puketi Forest. The shell forms are derived from shells found in the forest (pupurangi/kauri snail) and shells found in the bay.

WALJIN BEELA, 2017
The Farm, Margaret River, SW Australia
An installation designed to preserve a sinkhole, a valley's only source of pure water that was being defiled by cattle. Chris saw this valley as a female form and envisioned the sinkhole as a navel or belly-button. 19 tons of local limestone shards were used to build a spiraling dome seven meters in diameter atop 12 cubic meters of reclaimed hardwood. The wood will decompose and the stones will sink and lock in place providing lasting protection for the spring.

NOTE: photos of installations not attributed to other photographers were taken by Chris Booth himself.

KAITIAKI 2010—2011
Rotoroa Island, Hauraki Gulf, NZ
Kaitiaki: Guardian.
This sculpture was inspired by the wind-bent branches of a nearby pohutukawa tree. It celebrates the life of an old entity who had lifelong connections with the island and the Hauraki Gulf. The island has been transformed into a wildlife sanctuary to which the public are freely invited.

ECHO VAN DE VELUWE, 2004-2005
Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands
Research into the geomorphology and social history of the sculpture park and surrounding Hoge Veluwe area became the basis for the sculpture's concept. A five man team labored for ten months in an open work site adjacent to the sculpture site, weaving 32 tons of erratic boulders—310 of them—together. When asked, Chris was kind enough to supply the work in progress photos shown on the following pages.

TAURANGA KOTUKU, Kauri Cliffs, Northland NZ
Tauranga: safe anchorage or resting place
Kotuku: White Heron, a rarely seen, venerated bird.
Located on a dramatic coastline at the entranceway to a luxury hotel and golf course high on a ridge overlooking the ocean. The sculpture was designed to honour the land it emerges from, the nearby forest and the distant Pacific Ocean. It is a balanced cantilevered structural/sculptural composition of three huge slabs of crystalline sandstone each weighing 20-25 tons and several local boulders.

STEINBERGEN STRATA, 2000 Steinbergen, near Hanover, Germany
The German place name Steinbergen derives from the German words for stone and hill. Part of the hill is in the process of being quarried; the rest is a nature reserve containing a small abandoned overgrown quarry. It was decided to reference the tilted strata of hard limestone that had been quarried out, creating a habitat for all the various creatures that were re-inhabiting the quarry. The stones on top will be blanketed by leaves over time.
Placing rock in makeshift workshop in the KMM Gardens.

Chris Booth making calculations.

Preparations for the penultimate layer.

Fixing post-tension stainless steel cable into the penultimate layer.

Fixing the top and the bottom steel frames together, preparing to lift off.

The lift begins from the horizontal...
Chris Booth’s *Echo van de Veluwe* project at the Kröller-Müller Museum Gardens in the Netherlands—the work in progress.

...to the vertical.

Shedding some of the weight (the stone alone weighs over 30 tonnes).

The flight over the trees to the site.

“*A skin of stone that weaves its way between two oak trees like sand particles blowing in the wind.*”

Centre of the helically-constructed sculpture—where the stonework started.
AN ANNOUNCEMENT TO ALL STONE FOUNDATION MEMBERS
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Stone wall detail, Fukian Province, China  photo: T L
Cyclopean ruins in Segni, Italy.  photo: ?
Bridges over the inner moat, Forbidden City, Beijing, People’s Republic of China. photo: Ken Douglas, via Flickr
Conwy Castle, Gwynned, North Wales. The lintel over the opening of this fireplace has failed, but the bonded stonework over it has formed a structural, corbeled ‘relieving arch’ that serves to support the mass of masonry above.  photo: ?
A nice little retaining wall...
. . .well, maybe not so little.

Gavin Rose, trailwork, Australia. (That's him.)
right:
dry stone wall, Shetland mainland, Scotland. 
photo: T L

below:
Chris Drury, stone ‘Cloud-Chamber.’ This UK artist is known for building such structures. Many function as pin-hole cameras. This one is in a gallery so it may or may not be one. photo: ?

below, right:
stone fence, the Burren, Co Clare Ireland. 
photo: ?
Wall detail, Cuzco, Peru. photo: ?
Wall, skillfully constructed using recycled fragments, Osaka Castle precincts, Japan. photo: T L
View of the famous rock garden at Ryoan-ji Temple, Kyoto, Japan. Old, unattributed photo.
Dry stone wall, Stone Foundation workshop project, 1986, Lama Foundation, Northern New Mexico. photo (2004): T L
Dry stone wall, Stone Foundation workshop project, 1986, Lama Foundation, Northern New Mexico.  photo (2004): T L
Dry stone wall, Stone Foundation workshop project, 1986, Lama Foundation, Northern New Mexico.  photo (2004): T L
Cornish lass, Charlestown Cemetery, Cornwall, UK
photo: Self-D, via Flickr