

Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross, *Gargoyles & Grotesques: Paganism in the Medieval Church* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975); ISBN: 0-8212-0644-3; 127 pp.; (hbk).

This richly illustrated book is a collaboration between photographer Ronald Sheridan and Celtic Studies archaeologist Anne Ross. Its subject matter is fascinating; the lavish variety of monsters and mysterious creatures found carved in medieval churches. In the 2020s it is controversial to view these images, depictions of beings, as “Paganism” (as Sheridan and Ross’s title confidently asserts). Yet, *Gargoyles & Grotesques: Paganism in the Medieval Church* was published fifty years ago and the caution that follows from deconstructive and sceptical scholarship was not in evidence. Ross considers Bernard of Clairvaux’s objection to grotesque ornament in churches, dismissing the interpretation that the grotesques are to be taken as Satan and his minions, preferring to view them as survivals of pre-Christian religion. For the book’s purposes, a grotesque carving is “one representing something abnormal or normally impossible, such as a Centaur, half-horse half-man” (p. 9).

The “Introduction” covers the Celtic cultures of Europe, Classical Greek. And Roman deities and magical beings, Scandinavian Pagan monsters, and examples from Mexico and China for comparative impact. The content proper begins with “Giants” (p. 25), which opens with the Cerne Abbas hill figure, and representations of him on the local parish church and in other places, including Sherborne Abbey. The second grotesque considered is the Green Man; he is depicted in carvings from Britain and Italy. Next are Foliate Heads, including Austrian, French, German, and British examples. The photographs of humanoid figures with horns identified as the Celtic god “Cernunnos” (p. 44) are especially fine, and the reader is carried through the material by it being organised in subtle ways to highlight commonalities and relationships between the creatures depicted in ecclesiastical contexts

“Creatures Devouring Heads” (p. 50) contain some of this reader’s favourites, the French monsters called “tarasques,” and unsurprisingly the next category is severed heads (they are unnatural as they continue to live after severance). The heads are followed by bodily parts that are exaggerated (tongues, protruding eyes, and biting teeth). Monstrous beings representing fertility include Irish sheela-na-gigs and phallic creatures, with hermaphrodites being another deviant sexual form. Nightmares, lunar and solar heads, and heads that are double or beaked, are succeeded by mer-people, serpents and dragons, and centaurs. The sanctuary knocker or “hagoday” (p. 105) features a lovely photograph of an example from Dubrovnik. The collection is rounded out by depictions of the Mallet God (Celtic Sucellos), what Ross term “Nobodies” (p. 113), column figures and miscellaneous others including the sphinx. The extraordinarily decorated church of St Mary and St David, Kilpeck Herefordshire has an entry of its own due to its distinctive character. The modern reader is disappointed by the black and white photographs, reflecting the expense of producing a fully illustrated study prior to digital photography and desktop publishing. Still, this is a delightful book that I am pleased to have acquired.

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