

ARE HARPIES SIRENS?

This article is an extension of my other “Notes & Queries” on this site :

http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a_green_man_variant.pdf

and http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/some_varieties_of_griffin.pdf

Inevitably, there is a certain amount of repetition and overlap.

According to the notice, the tomb of Kybernis in the British Museum dating from about 480 BC, “has long been known as the ‘Harpy tomb’ after the four female-headed birds on the four corners.”



Fig 1 : Tomb of Kybernis, Harpy bearing dead person, British Museum, 480 BC

Tomb of Kybernis: south side

Sirens, female-headed birds, hold small figures which may be the souls of the deceased. Between them is a male figure seated on a throne holding a pomegranate in his left hand and an indeterminable object in his right. In front of him a woman carries a bird while raising her hand in a gesture of reverence.

About 480 BC

Kybernis is perhaps the seated man on the north side of the tomb chamber, being offered a shield and helmet by a standing figure. His body was placed inside the tomb through a small opening in the west face. He may have lain beside other members of his family: the whole tomb was probably a shrine to him and his ancestors.

This has long been known as the 'Harpy Tomb', after the four female-headed birds at the corners.

So the British Museum uses the terms "Harpy" and "Siren" interchangeably, as though they were the same thing.



Fig 2 : Harpy with dragon-headed tail, tail, Islamic, late 11thc, Venice



Fig 2a : Harpy with dragon-headed tail, mosaic from S Benedetto Polirone near Mantua, early 11thc

The Harpy with a dragon-headed snake tail is Islamic work of a period approximating to the Romanesque period. The design decorates a box made by a Moorish craftsman and must have been copied from an Italian work like the mosaic in S Benedetto. It is now in Venice but was shown at a recent exhibition in the Musée du Monde Arabe, Paris.

Like sirens, harpies tend to be female. In fact, the earliest sirens in Greek Art were not fish-tailed mermaids but birds with women's heads and breasts just like the ones on Kybernis's tomb.



Fig 3 : Sketches of harpies from Attic vases, 5thc BC

These sketches are based on paintings on Attic vases from the 5th century BC. The one on the left is marked “Siren eimi” (“I am a siren”) while that on the right is labeled “Harpy”. Note the mirror and beads : emblems of vanity which are still seen on pictures of more modern mermaids with fish tails, though the beads are usually replaced by a comb.

Harpies appear frequently in Romanesque Art as part of the vast range of monstrous beasts beloved of medieval sculptors. At Loches, Tourraine, there are harpy capitals to the left of the entrance. A young male harpy perches left of the angle and a bearded older harpy on his right, but to the left of both harpies is a Green Man.



Fig 4 : Harpies and Green Man, Loches

These twin harpies from the cloister of Gerona Cathedral look a little like the Hellenic young men called “Atlantes” at Mozac :



Fig 5 : Harpies and Carpenters, Gerona Cathedral, detail



Fig 6 : Atlante, Mozac

But at Gerona they are rather sad young men, I think. The carpenters may be Noah and one of his sons : they are planing planks to build his Ark. Are the harpies saddened because they know they will be left out of the Ark? Is this an Allegory of the Saved and the Cursed? Or is it their task to bear off the souls of the sinners who will soon be drowned in the Flood?

Here is a fuller view of the capital :

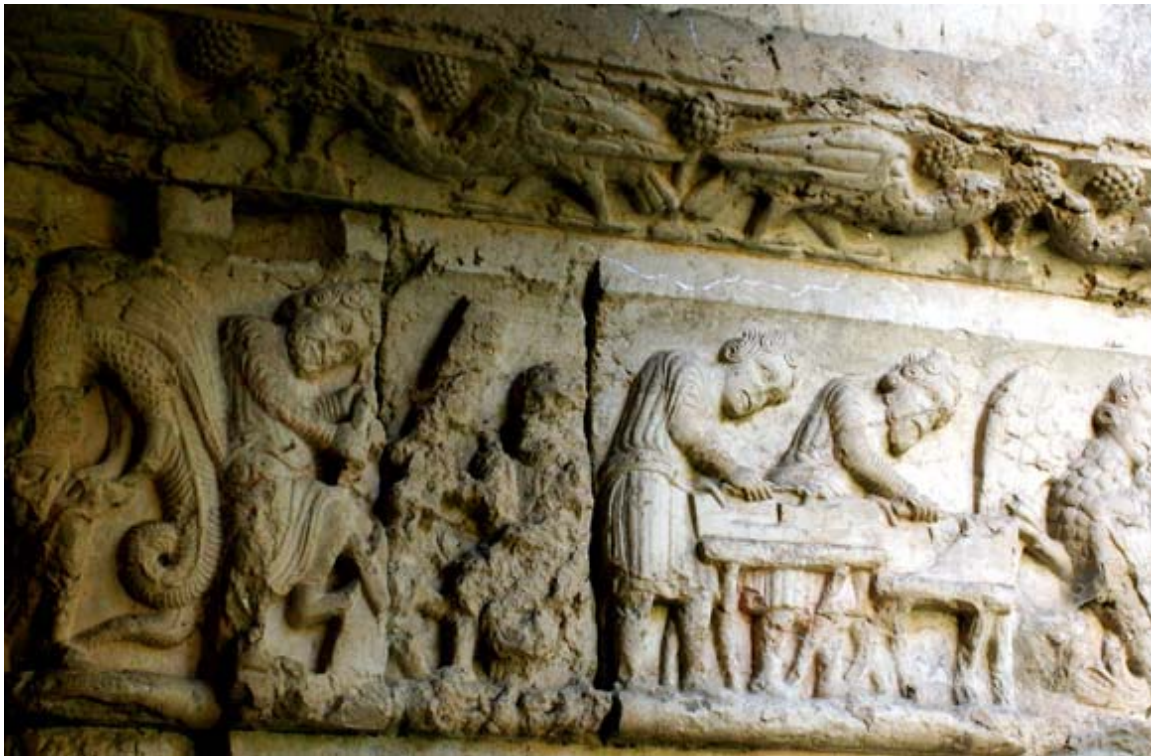


Fig 7 : Harpies and Carpenters, Gerona Cathedral

What is the monster on Noah's left? A dragon? A Wyvern? A Senmurv? He, too, will be left out of the Ark to become an antideluvian creature of nightmare, like a Brontosaurus.

A pair of old male harpies is seen on this capital from Paulnay, in the Berry.



Fig 8 : Harpy and Manticore, perhaps, Paulnay

The human-headed monsters on the right have tails like senmurvs but may be manticores though these are normally characterized by three rows of teeth, one above the other.



Fig 9 : Harpy on Greek plate, Tanagra, 6thc BC, Louvre

The distant ancestor of the image on fig 8 must surely be the great-grandfather harpy on this plate from Tanagra, 6thc BC, now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

More typical of the Romanesque Harpy are these human-headed but eagle-like creatures from Chadenac (left) and Retaud (right), in the Saintonge :



Fig 10 : Harpies at Chadenac



Fig 11 : Harpies at Retaud

And



Fig 12 : Harpies at Espira d'Agly, Roussillon

And at Espira de l'Agly, Roussillon, where there are harpy capitals to the right of the entrance flanked by eagles on one side and hippogriffs on the other. Note the

Green Beast on the left and the bird and snake kissing each other – or exchanging information? - above the harpies.



Fig 13 : Harpies at St Hilaire la Croix, Auvergne

St Hilaire la Croix, Auvergne, cockatrice-style harpies. It is worth observing that the story of the cockatrice is a late Romanesque invention from the end of the twelfth century. Note the Column Swallower on the left of the knot of harpies.

(The Column Swallower is known as a “Grand’Goule” in French, and is found in many churches from Brittany to the Loire Valley and beyond, but is particularly at home in Poitou-Saintonge. He is seen as the head of a dragon conquered by the Merovingian Queen Saint Radegonde.)



Fig14 : Civray, double-bodied bird siren Fig 15 : Civray, double-bodied harpy

At Civray we have a depiction of a human-headed bird – more siren than harpy, and another of a human-headed eagle – more harpy than siren. This one also has a curious plumed helmet.

Civray also has several varieties of Griffin and of fish-tailed sirens (see my other “Notes and Queries”).

At Sutterton, in Lincolnshire, a harpy and a Green Man are sharing a twig (or are they fighting over it?) :



Fig 16 : Harpy and Green Man, Sutterton, Lincolnshire



Fig 17 : Centaur and Harpy or Siren, Franco-Flemish (Therouanne?) about 1270, Paul Getty Museum

This manuscript is Franco-Flemish (Therouanne?) about 1270, and now in the Paul Getty museum. She differs from most harpies by having a woman's body as far as the navel instead of just a woman's head and neck – but so do some of the early Greek examples like the ones on figs 1 and 3.



Fig 18 : Centaur and Harpy or Siren, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse

Toulouse, Musée des Augustins : the mythological creatures in the interlaced foliage on this capital are, again, a centaur and a female harpy (or perhaps an early Greek siren). He appears to be shooting at her with bow and arrow. This is probably a metaphor for his sexual intentions towards her; both creatures are entangled in sin and lost in a maze of their erring. Compare the harpy (or Siren) to these Greek representations from the 5th-6th centuries BC, from the Louvre, Paris :



Fig 19 : Harpies on Greek plate, and pot, Tanagra, 5th-6th BC, Louvre

My illustrations in this article are based on images corresponding to our received idea of “Harpy”. To see sirens with human upper halves ending in fishy tails, see :

<http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/green men and sirens.pdf>

and

<http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/a green man variant.pdf>

(To be continued)

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