

THE GROTESQUES

Around the rim of St. Michael's church tower there are eleven grotesques; one at each corner and two equally spaced between. They can be found on each face except the north face, where the stair turret intrudes on the space the second grotesque would have occupied. Other grotesques lurk on the side of the north aisle and descend from the tower walls (see The North Aisle chapter for a discussion of these). Most of these are fairly conventional grotesques, as far as grotesques can ever be said to be conventional. Two, however, do require special mention as they are both unusual and of considerable significance. One hovers above the west entrance to the church and is well known locally, whilst the other is far less well known and is set on the corresponding position of the east face of the tower, above the nave roof.

Local tradition, as many parishioners informed me, suggested that the one over the west door (the more northerly of the two internal grotesques on the western face of the tower) represented Jonah being swallowed by the whale. A closer look rapidly revealed that, if this were so, the whale would be extremely unusual, as it has wings! Far from being a whale, it appears to be a rather vicious looking monster, which is swallowing, or devouring, their victim, though it is unclear whether that victim is a man or a woman. Which may be intentional.

As the monster's mouth obscures much of the head and top half of the human figure, no detail of that part can be seen. However, it is obvious that the person is naked, that their legs are pressed against the tower wall and the torso is set at right angles to the legs. This means that, looking up from below, the most prominent feature of the person being devoured is their posterior, which appears to have a pipe set within it. That suggests that this is one of a subset of grotesques, known as gargoyles.

'Grotesque' is a name covering almost all the creatures found on the external walls of churches, including church towers. 'Gargoyles' are specifically those grotesques which act as drains for the roof, or roofs, behind them. This means that gargoyles are grotesques which have water spouts, carrying water away from the wall (the word derives from the same source as 'gargle,' so is associated with the throat). In the case of the grotesque mentioned above, the positioning of the spout suggests that the medieval carver had a rather ribald sense of humour, though that would not be too unusual. What is more interesting is why the church authorities permitted such crude effigies to be placed on church towers.

Many theories abound concerning the origins and significance of grotesques. Amongst the leading contenders are the following:

Didactic. Coming from a Greek word meaning to teach, this theory supposes that grotesques are a kind of picture book for illiterate parishioners. Medieval churches certainly contained a vast amount of wall paintings and other iconographic material, some of which was removed during the Reformation and a considerable amount during the Victorian era. Which suggests that these grotesques could be related in some way to Biblical stories and texts, possibly also relating to others which appeared within the church. An example of didactic iconography which still remains in St Michael's church, can be seen on the benchends, which relate biblical stories or religious symbolism. Given this interpretation, it would be necessary to seek a Christian story or message for this and some of the other grotesques. However, didactic themes need not be the only source of inspiration. They may well, for instance, be intermixed with any of the following

Apotropaic/Talismanic. This theory would suggest that these creatures have the power to ward off evil spirits or devils, protecting the House of God against the terrors of plague and other devil inspired tragedies. Such icons are well known in many old houses and other venues, where they have had an increasing amount of academic interest in recent years. Examples would include children's shoes found up chimneys and marks such as representations of the Virgin Mary (e.g., "W," which is two interlinked Vs, for Virgin of Virgins, or "AM" for Ave Maria), or symbols such as a hexafoil (like a six-petalled flower in a circle), often referred to as a daisy wheel. Interestingly, many buildings in the far east do have savage creatures, or war-like individuals, on the roofs, or at the entrances to, temples and important houses, which are definitely there to protect the building from evil spirits.

Anthropomorphic. Are grotesques giving a human attribution to gods, animals or other things. Are they intended to endow them with some form of living presence? One of the parables which appears in a number of benchends in this and other churches, is the story of the pious pelican, for instance, which can certainly be referred to as anthropomorphic; as also can the tale of the Fox and Geese.

Satiric. It has frequently been suggested that the carvers of grotesques were given licence to carve whatever they pleased. The remote positioning of many of the grotesques, where they are very difficult to see with the naked eye (and they are sometimes positioned in hidden alcoves, etc), is quoted as indicating that they were of no particular interest to the clergy. This, it is suggested, is why so many grotesques do contain what can only be described as quite crude rustic humour. Against this, it is possible to argue that the themes found in grotesques across many churches and many countries, contain very similar themes, even though the design and interpretation implemented may differ. Which suggests that the themes arise from intentional design, probably influenced by the local clergy, but that the carver may have a certain independence in interpretation. That would also be true concerning interior paintings, benchends and other iconic features in churches.

Purgative. Were grotesques a reminder of demons which have been released from possessed people? It has been suggested that it was common to have an open door close to the font in a church, so that when a child was christened any devils lurking within the child could be released and escape from the sanctified space. Many medieval pictures do relate how a sick person is cured by a saint or other revered church dignitary releasing an evil demon from them.

Oneiric. Instead of rustic humour it has been suggested that the carvers were depicting daydreams, or even hallucinations (oneiric means 'relating to dreams'). Were grotesques on the Nave and tower the result of a little too much imbibing? Or, did the carvers suffer from hallucinations, due to rotten food, and use the grotesques to portray the evils they witnessed? This recalls the arguments concerning rustic humour in interpretation. It does seem unlikely that such individual themes would recur across so many religious buildings, particularly if they did not accord with the teaching of the church in some way.

Survival. This is not about the survival of people, but the survival of myths and legends and, possibly, of Paganism incorporated into Christianity. One popular figure is that of what is now known as 'the Green Man.' Some people have interpreted the Green Man as a pagan symbol or god, helping to substantiate this concept. Whilst it can be shown today that many Christian stories did exist prior to the earliest known versions of their

biblical text, what is important is to understand the mind of the medieval church authorities and what they believed the imagery depicted. It would seem very unlikely that anyone in a medieval village would dare propose that their church should be decorated with pagan symbolism unless it received the sanction of both the local vicar and the episcopal hierarchy.

Anagogical. This is a special interpretation of the highest spiritual meaning behind a literal interpretation. It is designed to alter consciousness concerning the ultimate destiny of humanity. So, grotesques would represent some esoteric interpretation of biblical stories, possibly defining the destiny of life at the apocalypse. Although it seems certain that most rural churches borrowed themes from cathedrals and abbeys, where more intellectual discourse may take place, it appears unlikely that this would have any meaning for a peasant community who would supposedly be the beneficiaries of the message.

Liminal. ‘Limen’ translates as threshold. So, this theory identifies boundaries of space, or of knowledge, or even of the threshold between the earthly life and the heavenly afterlife, or between the physical earth and realm of heaven (often shown at that time as being above the sky). As church towers were normally the tallest structures around, it would be easy to identify them with the threshold between heaven and earth. Yet the figures appearing at this threshold surely do not represent heavenly figures. They are more like figures from hell, which traditionally seems to be associated with the depths rather than the heights. However, Revelations does include a red dragon emerging from heaven with his hoard of angels, but then being cast out onto the earth after St. Michael and his angels prevailed, so it is possible that this is what is depicted.

However, it may well be that a number of these categories have some relevance to an understanding of the objectives of grotesques. Given that church authorities, across many areas and even countries, appear to have accepted a similar range of grotesques as acceptable imagery for the adornment of the exterior of the churches, it is highly likely that, though some may portray biblical stories, others do not illustrate any specific story, but do portray some biblical, or other religious, concept as understood in the medieval church. There may be additional figures which do only have a local significance as well, perhaps related to local people, rather than concepts, but they are more likely to be internal, so that they are more easily visible. So, which of these is relevant in relation to the grotesque discussed here?

It is notable that many medieval drawings, paintings, book illustrations and stained-glass windows show the entrance to hell as the gaping mouth of a large monster. Such eminent works as the “*Winchester Psalter*”, from the mid twelfth century, and “*Les Très Riche Heures’ du duc de Berry*”, from the mid fifteenth century, contain explicit examples. Sinners are shown falling into the huge mouth of hell. As this depiction of hell was so prevalent at the time when the tower was built, it seems reasonable to suppose that it could bear some relationship to the iconography of grotesques. Is the monster swallowing a human representing the mouth of hell into which a sinner is being sucked? Are some of the other grotesques around the tower, which mainly show various creatures with sharp teeth and wide-open mouths, often smiling and enticing sinners into the mouth of hell? This would be very appropriate for the exterior of a church, demonstrating that those who wish to avoid the temptations of the Devil and his cohorts should enter the protection of the church, where God would protect them from the blandishments of the ungodly. It also demonstrates that devils are everywhere, except, that is, inside holy places, such as the church, and that temptation is all around us. Notably, Revelations reports, “*Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.*”

A very similar grotesque to the St. Michael’s monster can be found in Aulnay in France, showing a body being devoured. Other examples of a large mouth with sinners being thrust into it occur in Lincoln Cathedral, at Freckenham in Norfolk, at Poughell in Cornwall, at Conques in Aveyron, France, and a bench end at Horning in Norfolk shows a devil pressing a protesting figure into a mouth. These are just a few examples; there are undoubtedly many more.

Some of these other grotesques also have water spouts, so should also be classified as gargoyles. The potential relevance of this will be discussed further after analysing a grotesque on the east face which truly lives up to its name. It can be found over the roof of the nave and is the northernmost of the two central grotesques on

the east face. To appreciate it properly it is necessary to view it first from the southern side of the church, then, additionally, from the northern side.

Viewing it from the south, it is possible to make out a pair of legs, waving in the air, though only the lower half of the body is visible, with the legs protruding from the pleated hem of a skirt, which disappears into the wall of the tower. Whilst the skirt hem suggests that this is a woman, further evidence makes this explicit. The woman lies on her back, her legs spread wide apart and, from between her legs, the small head and shoulders of an infant emerges. She is giving birth. Representations of birth in this context are rare but not unique to St. Michael's in Brent Knoll. What makes this grotesque particularly bizarre though is an additional figure, which is almost invisible, viewing the grotesque from the south, but clearly identifiable viewed from the northern side. Between the calves and heels of the woman's legs the head of a rather vicious looking monster can be seen. Even more horrifying is the realisation that it has been caught in the act of attempting to devour the new born child!!

When the first edition of this book was published, to commemorate the millennium, I did not understand the true significance of this imagery. However, Peter Dallosso, a resident of Brent Knoll at the time, kindly suggested that the description resembled a particular passage from the Bible which had been the subject of his recent reading assignment. On checking this it became obvious that, though the grotesque had been simplified somewhat, the essence of what was in the biblical passage was clearly the inspiration for this image. The passage is taken from the Book of Revelations, Chapter 12:

“And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars; and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed here there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.”

Although the dramatic appearance of the red dragon on the grotesque does not support seven heads and ten horns, the idea that he is attempting to devour the new born child is obvious and the basic story is exactly what is depicted there. A closer look at the baby being born here does not entirely resonate as one *“who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron,”* but the passage from Revelations goes on to add further reasons why this church, in particular, has such an object. *“And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”*

As Brent Knoll church is dedicated to St. Michael, this story has a particular significance. Here he is fighting and beating the Devil, a highly appropriate message for the parishioners. It is also interesting that the Devil was cast out into the earth along with his angels. It does not sound unreasonable to suggest that the other grotesques around the tower are those cast out angels threatening mankind. A further passage adds another aspect to this. *“And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth.”* This suggests that the gargoyles around the tower may well represent the flood issuing from the mouth of the dragon. It is, traditionally, then swallowed up by the earth below. This chapter then ends with a warning as, *“the dragon was wroth with the woman and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”* A modern translation of that passage, in *“The Good News Bible,”* states *“The dragon was*

furious with the woman and went off to fight against the rest of her descendants, all those who obey God's commandments and are faithful to the truth revealed by Jesus." That is a clear message to the congregation to beware of the Devil and his cohorts as they are now roaming the earth seeking to tempt or defeat true believers.

It does seem, therefore, that the grotesques around the top of the tower on St. Michael's church appear to be inspired by this story from Revelations; but are they unique. An old work colleague of mine was visiting St. Michael's church one day when we happened to meet. When I discussed the grotesques with him, he told me of another grotesque very similar to the one where the woman is giving birth and the Devil is trying to devour the baby. It was located in Lower Ansford, near Castle Cary, on a gate post, he said. When I was next in that area, I set out to find it and experienced a rather weird coincidence. After searching for it for some while and being unable to locate it, I saw a car pull into the drive of a house and thought fit to ask them, as they were obviously residents of the area. Amazingly, it turned out that the woman in the car was the daughter of the man who had originally placed the grotesque on the post. She led me to the spot, some distance from where I had been looking, and told me that her father had a shop in Glastonbury at one time and that their garden backed on to the Abbey grounds. They had found the grotesque in their garden and her father had bought it with him when he moved to Lower Ansford. It had been attached to a couple of other objects on the post but was clearly exactly what I was looking for and must have been the original from which the grotesque at St. Michael's in Brent Knoll had been copied. As the Abbot of Glastonbury was the landlord for the inhabitants of South Brent (as it was then), it is hardly surprising that they went to the Abbey to pay their rent and would have seen and, presumably, arrange to have copied, the grotesque found there.

So, the next question was, how rare is this grotesque? Although there is not a definitive catalogue of these, some additional candidates have been discovered which are very similar. Amongst these are grotesques found in Denton, Lincolnshire, in Mere in Wiltshire, in Melbourne in Derbyshire, in Swine in the East Riding of Yorkshire, in Claypole in Lincolnshire, in Devizes in Wiltshire and in Chauvigny in France. Many of these only show the legs and the monster with his head between them, presumably still waiting for the advent of the birth. Some have had a part damaged or removed, which in at least one case may well have been the child. Nearly all have been described as exhibitionists, contortionists, homosexuals or some other fanciful designation. Yet, once the story mentioned above has been appreciated, it does seem obvious that they most likely represent the woman and the devil as revealed in Revelations. Those mentioned above are, of course, merely the grotesques which have been easily found without an in-depth search; there are almost certainly quite a few more, some of which constitute one of the great mysteries often quoted with respect to grotesques.

These are the carvings generally known as '*Sheela na gigs*.' Both the origin of the name and the significance of these carvings, which show a woman displaying an exaggerated vulva, have been a matter of contention for many years. Some suggest they are apotropaic symbols; some believe they are fertility symbols; some hypothesise they are a warning against lust and some have proposed that they are a pagan goddess which has survived and been absorbed into Christian culture. I have not seen that anyone previously proposed they represent a biblical story, yet the enlarged vulva is exactly what a woman would have after the birth of a child and the expression on many of the faces of these figures would suggest that they are bewildered by the sudden disappearance of their new born child.

An introduction to "The Revelation to John" in The Good News Bible states that it "*consists of several series of revelations and visions presented in symbolic language that would have been understood by Christians of that day, but would have remained a mystery to all others.*" It then goes on to say that "*there are differences of opinion regarding the details of interpretation of the book.*" Today that may be true, but in the medieval period it was taken much more literally and the concept embodied in the story of the woman and the Devil does appear to fit in well with many grotesques whose origins and significance have previously been problematic. It also fits in well with the remainder of the grotesques adorning the top of the tower of St. Michael's church. Whilst the Devil is attempting to devour the new-born infant his followers tempt sinners into the mouth of hell, or swallow the unworthy or emulate the Devil's tactics with the water issuing from his mouth. As these are not isolated examples it does seem likely that those designing the iconography around the medieval church would have included examples of both the mouth of hell, as a warning to those who do not

worship within the safety of God's church, and the story of the woman who is giving birth whilst the Devil attempts to devour the child, as an example of the way that God and his angels would eventually overpower the Devil and his angels. Given that this church is dedicated to St. Michael, it is entirely appropriate that such iconography should appear in some detail here.