

THE MYTHIC FOREST,
THE GREEN MAN
AND
THE SPIRIT OF NATURE

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The Re-Emergence of the Spirit of Nature from
Ancient Times into Modern Society

Gary R. Varner

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These then are the spirits of the trees, whose very virility is linked with their capacity to destroy. For the tree, like every other important symbol, is a meeting of opposites. On one side it is the place where the dead haunt with hungry spirits, demanding the sacrifice of life, but on the other it is the very essence of life itself. The central meaning of the tree is rebirth. And this rebirth requires also a dying.

- Jyoti Sahi¹

1. *The Child and the Serpent*. Sahi, Jyoti. London: Arkana 1980, p. 153.

For Lady Raglan, Kathleen Basford, and William Anderson, the first to study the Green Man, and to Dione Fortune, who was the first to give him a name in popular literature.

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FOREWORD

Nature. We live with it, in it, around it. Some of us take deep delight in hiking through the woods with others or solitary walks along deserted beaches. Others enjoy weekend bird watching events and some of us are employed to take accurate counts of wildlife and to protect it.

Others see nature in an entirely different way. To them, nature is to be dominated and exploited. Entire species of animal and plant life have been destroyed, and continue to be destroyed, by humans who hunt them to extinction or have obliterated the habitats that allowed them to thrive. If man originally hunted to survive, now the profit motive is often the ultimate reason for these acts of destruction. Others simply seem to derive some satisfaction from the very act of destruction.

Humankind has altered the environment around the globe and has been responsible for both deliberate and unintentional acts of destruction since we first started to stand upright. However, humans have also known that nature, in both its obvious details and the mysterious “laws of nature” that man has always struggled to comprehend, are vital to our survival — as individuals and as a species.

Mankind has given a recognizable face to the awesome and impalpable forces of nature in the image of the Green Man and the nature spirits that this book will explore. The ways in which different societies and different craftsmen have depicted these spirits display the wide creative range of the human imagination, but their persistence suggests that in all their many facets these “spirits” represent a deep, primordial sense that humans have shared since civilization

began. For the very origin and message of these images have remained the same, even if somewhat altered over time. The message of all the “sacrificial” gods throughout time is one of hope, rebirth, renewal and life ever after.

The Green Man is a paradox and filled with many meanings. I think my friend David Catherine sums it up best: “the face staring out from *behind* the foliate Green-Man sculptures, whether smiling or distorted, might just represent (or offer reflection on) the very leaf-fresh nature staring or dwelling *within* oneself: the very *Breath* this suffocating and dehydrated society is either denying or reaching out for.”¹

Kathleen Basford, who wrote the first scholarly analysis of the Green Man, said, “the secular use of the foliate head ha[s] not yet been extensively studied.”² This book is the start of that study.

I have been interested in the Green Man for several years; but only when I discovered images of the Green Man in American architecture that rivaled those in England and the Old World did I embark on this study. However, the Green Man is more than just a carved image. The image of this mysterious creature is an ancient one, tied directly to ancient gods and goddesses and to the original concept of life, death and the rebirth of spirit. I have searched out the Green Man from Great Britain to Oregon — finding his image in many unexpected locations, created in many different times, but carrying the same message.

It is hoped that this book will instill a sense of wonder and a desire in the reader to search for the Green Man and his at times obscure meaning. This work touches on history and philosophy, folklore and religion. It is written in two parts. The first, *The Spirit of Nature*, deals with our perceptions of nature over time, how the Christian Church has influenced contemporary thought, and various aspects of the folklore and mythology associated with nature — trees in particular. The second part is about the Green Man specifically, the origins and the mythic symbolism of the Green Man, how he appears in American culture, and how this archetypal figure together with other ancient symbols can serve to keep contemporary humankind in balance and in touch with the spirit of the earth. In addition, several previously unpublished photographs of Green Men in England, Wales, Ireland, New York, Iowa, California, and Oregon are presented.

1. Catherine, David. “The Green Fingerprint: Exploring a critical signature in the quest for the authentic self”. Unpublished paper copyright 2004 by Ufudu Medicinal Arts, South Africa, 1.

2. Basford, Kathleen. *The Green Man*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 1978, 21.

Special thanks to David Catherine of Natal, South Africa, for providing a copy of his unpublished paper *The Green Fingerprint: Exploring a critical signature in the quest for the authentic self*. Thanks also to Ellen Lissard for the photos of the Green Men and Green Dragon of Manhattan. Unless otherwise noted, all other photographs were taken by the author.

— Gary R. Varner
South Beach, Oregon

INTRODUCTION

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

The “problem” is the very question of just “what is the Green Man?” Is the foliate head a result of contemporary creation? Alternatively, is it a relic of an age long past?

The research and writings of many of the early folklorists such as Sir James Frazer and Margaret Murray have been discredited as Victorian and Romantic recreations of something that never was. Their writings espoused the vision of a wonderful albeit violent world of spirits, talking trees and Faeries, and sought to show that our contemporary traditions are rooted in ancient paganism and nature worship. There is substantial evidence that Murray distorted her information to support her theories of an organized Witch Cult — leaving out any data that ran counter to the conclusions she wished to prove. “Murray,” write Jones and Pennick, “was driven simply by a deep personal need to believe in the continuation of pagan religion...and so created ‘evidence to prove [her] case.’”³ “But in fact,” they continue, “no more evidence was needed to prove the continuation of pagan customs and attitudes. The work of Sir James Frazer...had already provided that.”⁴

I am probably one of few contemporary writers who regard Frazer, at least, as a researcher to be respected and, while I may disagree with some of his conclusions, I find little fault in the majority of his voluminous research. His docu-

3. Jone, Prudence & Nigel Pennick. *A History of pagan Europe*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 1999, 207.

4. Ibid.

mentation of ancient pagan traditions continuing into the modern age is priceless.⁵ It is true that many of the customs and rituals we may believe to be of ancient origin are quite frankly relatively “new” creations. They fill a need that modern humans have to link their troubled *present* with a past that is both mystical and meaningful — even though that *past* may be an invented one.

The Green Man has taken many forms over the years and has been viewed by some as simply a decorative motif rather than a symbol of the spirit of nature.⁶ At the same time, the attraction that people have toward the foliate figure seems to express a human need. What is the link between our existence and the mysterious hybrid human-plant creature that can be found on both ecclesiastical buildings and secular ones? What is this attraction?

I think each of us may answer the question in our own way. However, it is clear that humans feel a necessity to link themselves to the natural and supernatural world in many ways. In modern times, some of these ways are simply recreated folkways; but folklore is a fluid and evolving body of cultural representations and it is not frozen at any particular time, place or event. Folklore continues to evolve and unfold in our contemporary society and it is as meaningful as the lore and traditions that are as old as time itself. The Green Man and all of the other creatures that inhabit our minds and souls exist because we create them, and we create them because we need them. There is nothing wrong with this and the process should not be discredited. We create the image of our gods for our own understanding. It is important to create and establish our own relationships with both the natural and supernatural world, as well as the other things that we find meaningful.

Some have claimed that all of the vegetation gods of humankind are the Green Man. While these deities represent many common elements, such as fertility, renewal, rebirth and the continuation of life after death, it is incorrect to equate or amalgamate all the vegetation gods into one. At the same time, it would be fair to say that all of the elements they represent are aspects of the

5. Derided as an “armchair anthropologist,” Frazer must be acknowledged as one of the first to explain the development of religion and the universality of many of the myths, rituals and traditions found around the world. He also must be credited for his explorations into the hidden psyche of the human spirit and the previously unexplored worlds of metaphor and psychic image.

6. “Decorative motifs” are normally representative of ancient symbols. Be they spirals, zigzags, vegetable or animal images they are derived from symbols that were important in earlier cultures. To dismiss the Green Man image as simply a “decorative motif” suggests a shallow concept and understanding of the history of religion and humankind.

character of “god” in the broadest sense; the first god of humankind was perhaps nature itself. The Green Man includes all of the individual characteristics of these gods and more. The Green Man is an embodiment of the heart and soul of the mystery of nature, the cyclical character of life and death, and where we as individuals fit within this cycle.

I have written about many nature gods and spirits of nature in this book. While others may disagree, I believe that the Green Man is an ancient symbol but one that is molded by the human psyche to fit within the structure of each society and time it resides in. The meanings change over time — as they should. He is at once a symbol of lust and evil as illustrated by his images in Christian churches as well as an ancient woodland spirit watchful of human trespassers. He is what we make of him. To say that the Green Man is no more than a bit of decoration to fill in a blank spot on a wall is the same as saying that the ankh is symbolic of an Egyptian death-cult. There is much more to be told.

The foliate head has a long history around the world and it was created for specific reasons. The image appears to flourish in a cyclical manner, and there would appear to be some reason for its periodic boost in popularity among the “common folk.”

In this book, we will explore the various vegetation deities throughout time and space in a broader context. We will also examine how they culminated in the mysterious and mystical motif still found around the world. I have examined the Green Man from various angles to show his history, his travels to other nations and continents, and his various possible meanings. Ultimately, the real meaning of this fascinating image is up to the reader to determine.