

*The Marvellous and the Monstrous in the Sculpture of Twelfth-Century Europe.* (Boydell Studies in Medieval Art and Architecture). By Kirk Ambrose. 18 × 25 cm. xiii + 187 pp, 40 b&w pls. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-84383-831-9 (ISSN 2045-4902). Price: £50.00 hb.

Kirk Ambrose's recent volume on Romanesque sculpture is a theoretically complex, art historical approach to the concept of 'the monstrous' in the medieval European mindset and its evocation in 12th-century continental sculptural programmes. The introductory chapter sets out his argument that the monsters of Romanesque art were not necessarily an embodiment of medieval fears and superstitions, but may have helped patrons, artists and audiences envision and articulate a variety of social meanings and goals. Thematic chapters follow on the spiritual and corporeal ideals embodied in monsters, and the ways they were used to define political, social and sacred boundaries. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey of monsters in sculpture, Ambrose concentrates on close readings of selected case studies, primarily in major French churches. Although he acknowledges that the scope is anecdotal, it does allow him to explore each sculpture in its very specific cultural, intellectual and artistic contexts via a range of visual and textual evidence. The volume is handsomely produced and well supported by monochrome plates; however, there is not a single floor plan or large-scale image to place the various capitals, tympana and panels within their buildings. Readers unfamiliar with the churches will thus be none the wiser of how the sculpture fits into its wider architectural programme or building fabric. The book is a specialist text rather than a broad-based introduction and its dense theoretical voice restricts it to a firmly academic audience. The emphasis on close formal analysis and literary correlates mean that there is little crossover with archaeological agendas. Nonetheless, a buildings or church specialist looking for non-traditional interpretations of the meanings behind the many Romanesque grotesques they encounter should find it worth a look.

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*Of Sirens and Centaurs. Medieval Sculpture at Exeter Cathedral.* By Alex Woodcock. 21 × 22 cm. xiv + 146 pp, 78 colour and b&w pls and figs. Exeter: Impress Books, 2013. ISBN 978-1-907605-43-7. Price: £9.99 pb.

This is a really welcome book. Published by Exeter University Press, it is good to see that they not only support publications on their local significant heritage, but also work by local authors: Alex Woodcock is a member of the Cathedral Works department, himself a stonemason, but having also authored a doctoral study on medieval sculpture. Here he concentrates on the lesser known minor sculptures in Exeter Cathedral — the bosses, misericords, corbels, head-stops, relief details — hence the book's title, which signals that he is looking to the edges of monuments, the margins of the building, and not necessarily the main façade or the bigger impact material. The book starts with a useful scene-setting chapter outlining the chronological and stylistic development of the Cathedral, detailing its main building campaigns and listing the key works, the significant monuments, furnishings both major and minor. This chapter also summarises aspects of the character of medieval sculpture and, broadly, how it may be interpreted in such a setting. The chapter on masons, carvers and sculptors draws from the rich sources of the Cathedral's fabric rolls to list Exeter's unique instances of named masters. Subsequent chapters run thematically through the main subject matter of the minor sculpture, ranging from plants and dragons; animals and insects; to monsters and the grotesque, angels, biblical figures and saints. This gives a really good idea of the richness of what are supposedly the minor themes and underlines the author's point made early in the book that this imagery has much greater importance than has previously been given credit. It is clearly written, takes an accessible popular approach and gives a good current overview of the subject; the range of references and bibliography is up to date. If there is a fault, it is that Alex Woodcock has missed a real opportunity to use his skills as a stonemason to better effect. Besides summarising existing scholarship, he could have told us more about practicalities such as: how soon after quarrying was the stone carved? How large were the stone beds? How long would it take to carve a boss? Discussions of these would have brought the skills of the medieval sculptors even more to life.

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