

IX.—SOME NORTHERN MISERICORDS.

By MRS. D. R. FYSON.

Misericord seats were a concession to weary monks, who were obliged to stand for the greater part of the long services. The hinged seat was turned up, and a small ledge on the under side gave some slight support to the standing figure. Religious fervour at that period flowed into the embellishment of churches, and the upturned seats became the occasion for decoration. On these plain blocks of wood mediæval craftsmen created a great series of remarkable carvings. Their subjects were taken from contemporary life, from biblical stories, from travellers' tales, legends and symbolism. This last group is well represented in the North, and I have chosen examples in accordance with my own predilection for fabulous creatures.

Francis Bond,¹ who made a comprehensive study of church carvings, wrote, "in respect of excellence of carving the northern misericords surpass all others". It is in admiration of them as works of art that I have made this collection. They reflect, as all art must, something of the prevailing thought of their period.

Among the fabulous creatures dragons take first place because it is evident that they caught the northern imagination, and they are very numerous. Is there perhaps some racial reason for this, a relic of Scandinavian mythology?

A fight between a lion and a dragon is one method of showing the struggle between Good and Evil. The beasts are usually intertwined. An example from Newcastle Cathedral shows the lion uppermost (fig. 1), but sometimes the dragon

¹ *Misericords.*



Misericord Lion and Dragon.

Newcastle Cathedral.

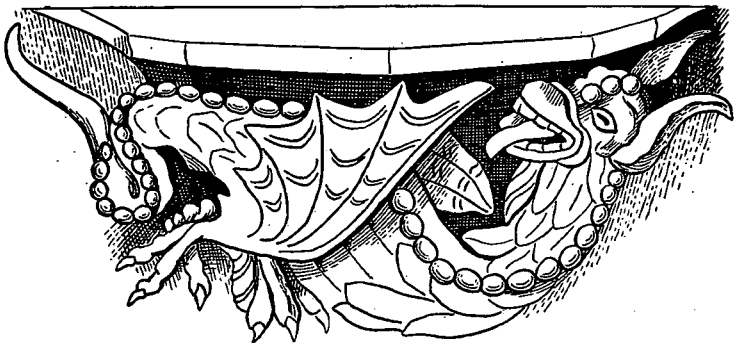
FIG. 1.



Misericord. Lion fighting Dragon.

Ripon Cathedral

FIG. 2.



Misericord. Wyvern.

Carlisle Cathedral.

FIG. 3.

is in that position. (Both forms occur at Carlisle.) When St. Nicholas' Church became a cathedral and was fitted with choir stalls, about 1888, the carving was done by Ralph Hedley of Newcastle. He retained the tradition of the old designs but did not make exact copies. A misericord very similar to this is in Carlisle Cathedral, but details in mane and scales are different.

Carlisle has 39 misericords of which 12 are of dragons or wyverns. Ralph Hedley carved 10 dragons among his 24 seats in St. Nicholas'. He has given this dragon the web feet that occur in several at Carlisle.



FIG. 4.



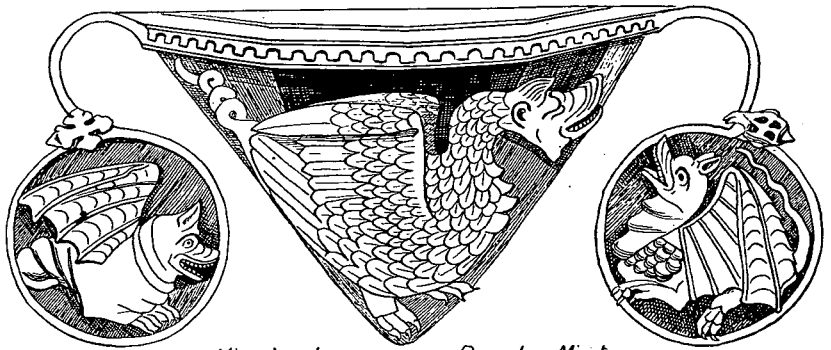
FIG. 5.

A more unusual pose for this lion-dragon fight is at Ripon. The creatures confront each other and bite each other's jaws (fig. 2). The symmetry of the design is well maintained, the dragon's wing balanced by the lion's mane.

In all misericord designs one notes the great skill shown in making use of the available space.

The language of heraldry distinguishes between the dragon, that must have four feet, and the wyvern, that has only two. Wyverns occur very often on misericords. One in Carlisle has a curious recumbent position (fig. 3), and the head turned back like that of an Anglian beast in an earlier style.

The example from Beverley Minster (fig. 6) shows an interesting use of "supporters". Supporters are small designs flanking the main subject. At Beverley they are



Misericord.

Beverley Minster.

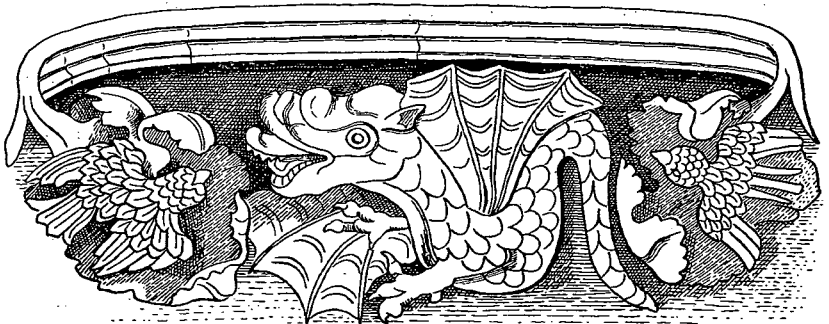
FIG. 6.



Misericord. Shell-child & Dragon.

Manchester Cathedral.

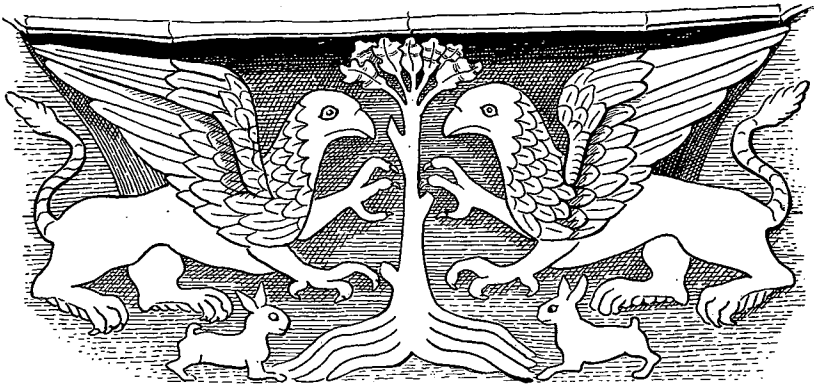
FIG. 7.



Misericord. The Tree of Life.

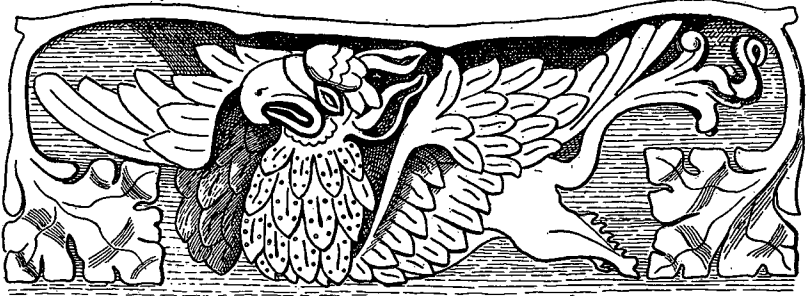
Ripon Cathedral.

FIG. 8.



Misericord. Griffins and Tree of Life St. Mary's, Beverley.

FIG. 9.



Misericord. Griffin. St. Cuthbert's Church, Darlington.

FIG. 10.



Misericord. Alexander's Flight with Griffins. St. Cuthbert's Church, Darlington.

FIG. 11.

enclosed in a neat circular frame, combining with the centre in a complete design, a family party of wyverns.

Supporters are said to be an English invention.² They are often mere added decoration of foliage or flower, or even a grotesque, and are sometimes omitted, but they can be charming little pictures in their own right, like these from Beverley (figs. 4 & 5).

A child issuing from a shell is said to symbolize Innocence, or Virtue confronting Evil (fig. 7). On the misericord at Manchester, Virtue's weapon seems quite inadequate for the conflict, and her chance of survival small!

I pass now to another favourite symbol, the Tree of Life. It is found in many settings and in varied conventions of form. The illustration is from Ripon (fig. 8). The Tree is represented only by the large leaves forming the supporters, and on each leaf is a bird. If birds remain in the shelter of the Tree they are safe from attack by the dragon. So human souls are safe in the shadow of the Almighty, but if they forsake His Church they will perish.

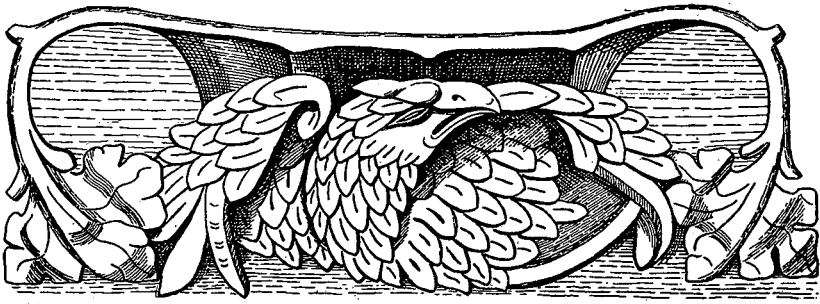
The Tree of Life needs guardians. Griffins are chosen because they combine the qualities of the noblest animal, the lion, and the noblest bird, the eagle. They are shown in St. Mary's, Beverley (fig. 9), in a particularly fine design. Evidently the monks knew the menace of rabbits to their precious trees. Griffins are sometimes shown in the act of killing the troublesome rabbits. Newcastle has an instance of this.

There is a Griffin at Darlington (fig. 10). Perhaps the conventional foliage supporters carry the symbolism of the Tree of Life. This griffin has peculiar feet and a foliage-tipped tail. The attitude may be compared with the eagle (fig. 12) suggesting that they are the work of the same carver.

There are handsome griffins, not here shown, at Ripon and Cartmel.

The Ascent of Alexander is often represented. When Alexander had reached the furthest edge of his conquests he

² A. Maskell, *Wood Sculpture*.



Misericord. Eagle, bathing to renew his strength:

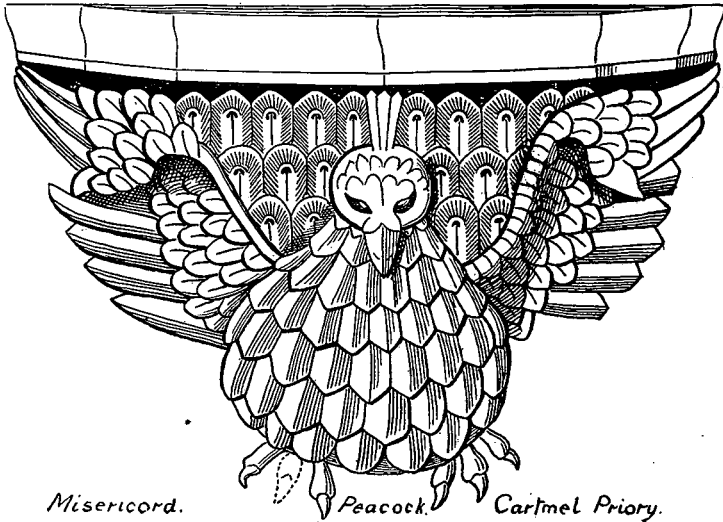
St. Cuthbert's Church, Darlington.

FIG. 12.



Misericord. Peacock. Durham Cathedral.

FIG. 13.



Misericord.

Peacock.

Cartmel Priory.

FIG. 14.

harnessed great birds that he found there, or dragons, or griffins, to a chair, and tempted them with baits of meat to fly him into the air that he might see the uttermost edge of the world.

At Darlington (fig. 11) he has griffins. The large shin-bones³ as bait have sometimes been mistaken for sceptres and the carving given a different interpretation. There is richly ornamented harness round the necks of the griffins. At Cartmel Alexander has dragons.

The Eagle is king of birds. He was the sacred bird of Jupiter, but was soon adopted into Christian teaching. He could fly to great heights, and, it was said, gaze unwinking at the sun. It was believed that eagles renewed their strength by flying up into the sun and then plunging into a spring of water. This legend is, I think, represented at Darlington (fig. 12).

Christians can be restored by flying on the wings of the spirit to the Sun of Righteousness and being immersed in the water of baptism. This slipped easily into early Christian teaching because the simile of the eagle was familiar to readers of the Old Testament.

There is an eagle in St. Nicholas'; and at Cartmel an eagle carries a bunch of grapes in its beak, another way of showing renewal of strength by the Sacraments.

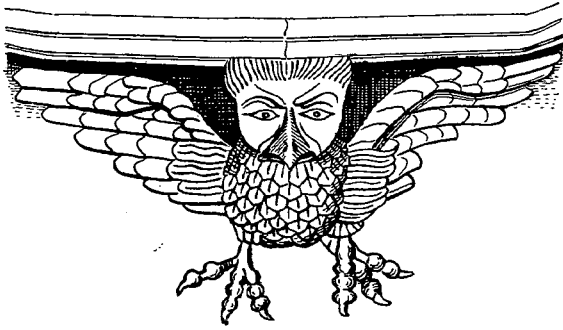
Some other birds had both symbolic meaning and decorative appearance.

The Peacock was the sacred bird of Juno, as the eagle was of Jupiter. When Emperors of Rome, and their consorts, died, they were ranked as deities. The peacock therefore became associated with teachings of immortality.

A peacock is shown in profile, boldly carved, in Durham Cathedral (fig. 13), but the finest I have seen is at Cartmel (fig. 14). The "eyes" on the outspread tail are ingeniously indicated.

The Owl is often carved. It is said to typify the Jews, because it prefers darkness to light. But it was the bird

³ W. H. D. Longstaffe, *History of Darlington*.

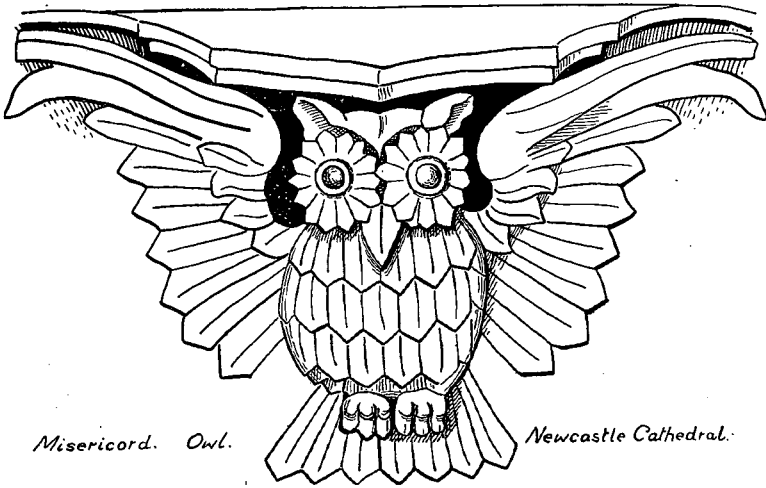


Misericord.

Owl.

Ripon Cathedral

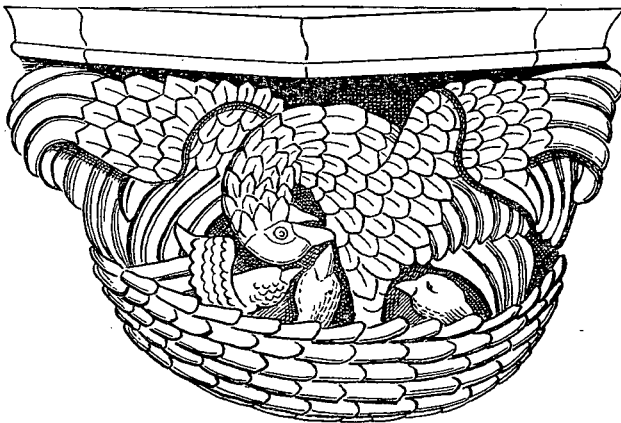
FIG. 15.



Misericord. Owl.

Newcastle Cathedral.

FIG. 16.



Misericord.

Pelican.

Carlmei Priory

FIG. 17.

attached to Pallas Athene and symbolized Wisdom, with which meaning it could well pass into Christian use. Carvings of the owl are usually somewhat grotesque or quaint, as at Ripon (fig. 15), and the more modern version in Newcastle (fig. 16).

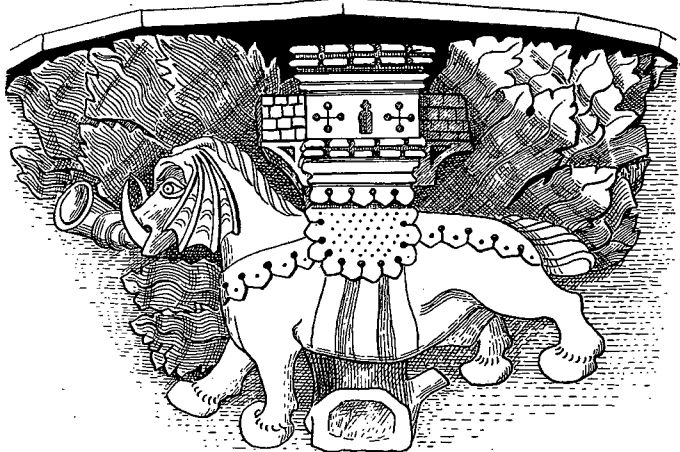
The Pelican is a great favourite. My drawing was made in Cartmel (fig. 17), but it is carved in the same style at Carlisle, and on three elbow-rests at Hexham.

The conventional form used in carving has little resemblance to the real bird. Certain established conventions ruled the designs, though craftsmen made their own variations. The designs and their legendary or symbolic meanings came largely from the *Bestiaries*⁴—those strange moral tales of animals that were so popular in the Middle Ages.

The Elephant is an instance of this mixture of fact and fancy. Probably the carver had never seen a living elephant, but travellers' tales would help his imagination. He made the "howdah" of normal Indian use like a mediaeval castle (hence the phrase "Elephant and Castle"), well shown at Cartmel (fig. 18). He had heard that the elephant trumpets, so he shaped the trunk like a trumpet. He knew it was an animal of dignity and importance so he gave it the plaited mane and tail of a Shire horse in the show ring. Incidentally this suggests the long history of that custom.

The large hoofed feet seem to have fringes of hair like a cart-horse. The elephant is standing by a fallen tree. Notice the skill in representing a whole tree in this small space. The tale is that an elephant could not lie down: therefore it sleeps leaning against a tree. A hunter desiring to capture it cuts down the tree and the elephant falls. Moralists embroidered this and related how twelve elephants came to assist the fallen one, but could not raise it. Then a little elephant came, knelt down and thrust its trunk under the fallen animal and raised it. Christ humbled Himself to raise fallen man, so the little elephant typifies Christ.

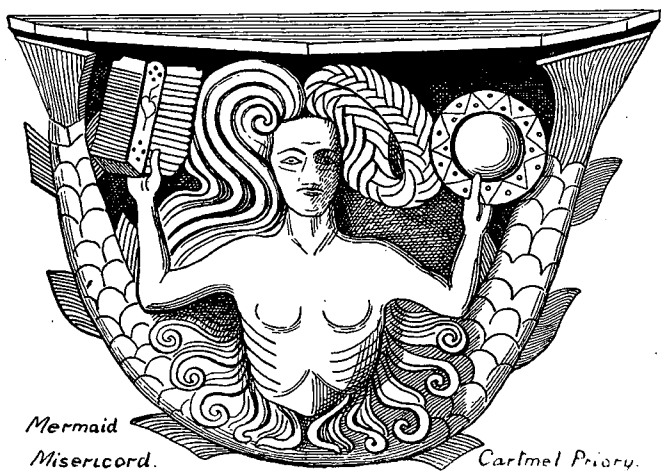
⁴ J. Romilly Allen, *Early Christian Symbols*.



Misericord. Elephant and Castle Cartmel Priory.
FIG. 18.



Misericord. Unicorn and Virgin. Greystoke.
FIG. 19.



Mermaid Misericord. Cartmel Priory.
FIG. 21.

Another tale is that elephants were very cold blooded, and that dragons living in a hot climate were consumed with thirst. A dragon would try to strangle an elephant to obtain a drink of his cold blood, and the elephant tried to crush the dragon. I have not found this conflict on a misericord, but it is vividly portrayed in an illuminated manuscript.⁵ An elephant at Beverley St. Mary's is standing quietly under trees. His trunk is apparently jointed, and his mane is again plaited like a horse's, but his feet and the tip of the trunk are true to life.

The Unicorn has given rise to even stranger tales. A long book⁶ has been written about this animal, which for many centuries was thought to be a real wild beast, living in remote places. It was so rare that when caught it was a gift for a king. Its horn was valued as an antidote to poison. Any liquid drunk from it would be harmless, and even a little powdered horn added to food or drink would counteract poison. The horns sold as unicorns' at exorbitant prices must of course have come from other sources. One was the sea unicorn, the narwhal, a species of whale found in arctic regions. Fraud was not suspected by the eager buyers till scientific investigation began in the seventeenth century. Even as late as the reign of Elizabeth I naturalists were writing descriptions of the unicorn and other fabulous creatures as if they were living animals.

The unicorn was said to be white, and so fleet that no man could catch it. Hunters adopted a strange ruse. A pure virgin was set in a forest and her beauty and virtue so attracted the wild unicorn that he came up to her and gently laid his head in her lap. Then the hunter could step in with his spear. The church in the little village of Greystoke, Cumberland, shows this scene (fig. 19).

An allegorical interpretation likens the unicorn to Christ. Its one horn signifies the unity of Christ and the Father, its strength the power and its small size the humility

⁵ G. C. Druce, *Journ. Arch. Ass.*, Vol. 25. 1919. Harl. MS. 4751 (B.M.).

⁶ Odell Shepherd, *The Lore of the Unicorn*.

of Christ. Even the treacherous capture of the unicorn was twisted to symbolize the Incarnation.

The unicorn could also be caught by another trick. If a hunter could dodge behind a tree when a unicorn charged him it would imbed its horn in the trunk of the tree and be held fast there (fig. 20). All these tales of the power and virtue of the unicorn, and the elegant shape it had assumed in the hands of artists made it a fitting emblem

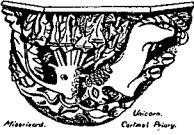


FIG: 20.

for use in heraldry and so it reached its honourable position in the royal arms.

The Lion and the Unicorn are shown as guardians, holding banners, on either side of the Lady, in a fine French Tapestry, woven c. 1510, called *La Dame à la Licorne*, which was exhibited in London in 1947. The device of the Lion and the Unicorn fighting for the Crown goes back to some 2000 B.C. It was found in the royal tomb at Ur and on other ancient monuments.⁷ It may symbolize the victory of a patriarchal sun worshipping race over a matriarchal moon worshipping race. Repeated in the *Bestiaries*, these legends must have been familiar throughout the Middle Ages.

The unicorn of the Bible⁸ was probably the wild ox which was described by Julius Caesar as alive in his day, but it became extinct soon after. It was very powerful and very fleet and could not be tamed.

There was also a white antelope with long horns, which still inhabits regions near Palestine and is called in Arabic "rîm", which recalls the Hebrew "reêm" translated in our Bible as unicorn.

Assyrian art made much use of the profile position in depicting people and animals. The myth of one horn may have originated in this way.

The Mermaid was a favourite subject for misericords.

⁷ Humphrey Humphreys, *Horn of the Unicorn*. Antiquity, No. 105. 1953.

⁸ H. B. Tristram, *Natural History of the Bible*.

Mermaids were the mediæval representation of the Classical Sirens. Sirens lived on rocky islets and lured sailors to destruction by their sweet singing. So the Christian's soul may be destroyed if he listens to the wiles of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The mediæval mind was able to accept all kinds of marvels that our scientific age would reject. A mermaid was one of "the wonders in the deep" seen by those who go down to the sea in ships. Long hair was one of her feminine charms and she was usually portrayed with a comb and a mirror. There is one at Ripon with the usual single tail, and braided hair; one at Carlisle with web feet and seaweed supporters; and one at Cartmel (fig. 21) with two tails and an astonishing hair style. Her comb is like the wooden comb of St. Cuthbert, preserved now in Durham Cathedral Library.

S. Baring Gould⁹ recounts mediæval legends of mermaids, some of whom could take human form and live for a period as human beings. He thinks they descend from ancient myths of Sun and Moon deities who at their setting plunged into the sea.

A Vampire is another female myth, winged like a bat,



FIG. 22.



FIG. 23.

and distinguished for malignance instead of charm. The malignancy is plain to see in this carving from Hexham Abbey (fig. 22). Hexham provides also a Wild Man, or Satyr (fig. 23), part man, part animal. Such creatures were said to live in the desert where the first Christian hermits,¹⁰ sought for solitude. They also inhabited wild mountain

⁹ *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages.*

¹⁰ Charles Kingsley, *The Hermits.*

regions. Pliny records (book VII, chapter 2)¹¹ "In the mountainous districts of the eastern parts of India . . . we find the satyr, an animal of extraordinary swiftness. These go sometimes on four feet, and sometimes walk erect; they have also the features of a human being." Aelian¹² (book XVI, chapter 21) is even more explicit: "When you have crossed the farthest mountains of India, you come to a place of deep valleys where live animals having the appearance and form of satyrs, with bodies all hairy and said to be furnished with tails like horses. When they are undisturbed by hunters they live in the thickets and woods and live on leaves and fruit; but when they hear the sound of hunters and barking of dogs, they run up to the tops of the hills with incredible swiftness, and fight those who follow them by rolling down rocks upon them." This seems like the "abominable snowman" described by the Everest explorers. Perhaps a satyr is not so fabulous as we supposed. The Hexham carver has given him a hooded cloak.

There is also a Green Man in Hexham (fig. 24). The



Misericord, Jack-in-the-Green, Hexham

FIG. 24.

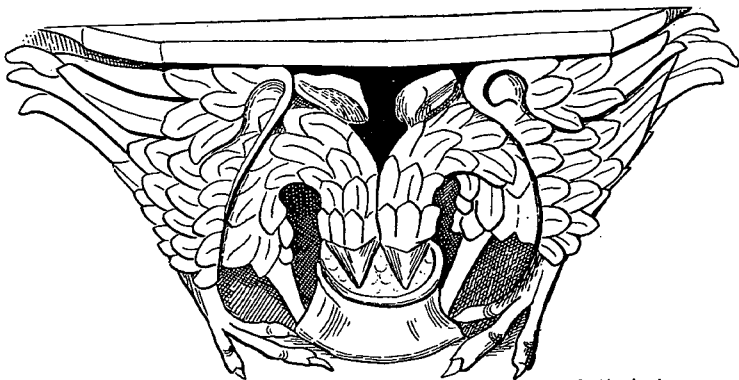
head only is shown, sprouting foliage from mouth or nose. This harks back to the ancient rituals of Tree worship, but the idea still lives. "Jack-in-the-Green" still plays his part in folk-dances. I have seen him also in a Hindu festival. Like the unicorn and the mermaid he has a long and widespread history.

I have left to the end a few examples of naturalism, the carver's artistic expression of creatures he knew in life. The two fowls eating from a sack are completely realistic in treatment, though said to bear a sacramental meaning. The drawing is from Carlisle (fig. 25) but they occur also at Cartmel and in Newcastle with but slight variations.

The misericords at Durham are of later date than most, being part of the restored woodwork put in by Bishop

¹¹ G. C. Druce, *Arch. Journ.*, LXXII.

¹² *Ibid.*



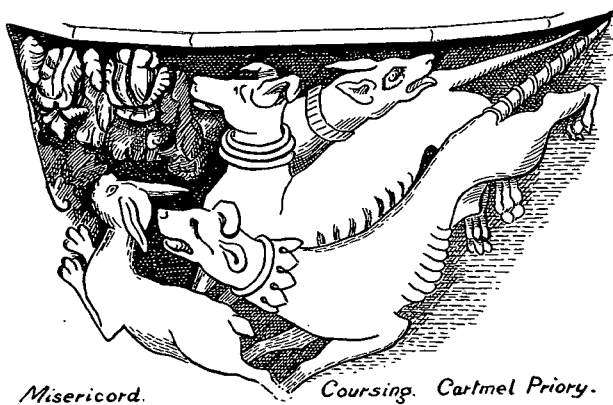
Misericord. Two Fowls eating from Sack. Carlisle Cathedral.

FIG. 25.



Misericord. Squirrel. Durham Cathedral.

FIG. 26.



Misericord.

Coursing. Cartmel Priory.

FIG. 27.

Cosin (1660-72) and of bolder style. The squirrel (fig. 26) was probably a familiar sight among the trees along the banks of the Wear. The Church did not frown on the pleasures of the chase, and hunting-scenes are not uncommon on misericords. Coursing at Cartmel (fig. 27) has a hedgehog as a supporter (fig. 28).



FIG. 28.

In conclusion I wish to thank all those who have kindly allowed me to draw in their churches. I also acknowledge my debt to many authors,¹³ whose work has enriched my study; and to E. R. Leach, of Cambridge, for a broadcast on St. George, and for additional information.

¹³ P. Ansell Robin, *Animal Lore in English Literature*. Oxford History of English Art. R. B. Onions, *Origins of European Thought*. Since this paper was written two relevant books have been published: *The Book of Beasts*, by T. H. White; and a King Penguin, *Misericords*, by M. D. Anderson.