

corpses; the men are so enchanted they do not even notice their predecessors and they too eventually die. When Odysseus sails past he has his men bind him to the mast and he has their ears plugged with wax and he is able to hear the songs but not succumb to them. In a later epic, Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, another ship full of heroes, the Argo with the bard Orpheus aboard, sails past the Sirens. Orpheus saves his comrades by playing his lyre loudly enough and sweetly enough to drown out the Sirens' song and the Argonauts thus escape

### Sirens in Spain

by L.L. Neuru

Three lovely Sirens appeared as complete surprise on a hot dusty July afternoon almost out of nowhere in the remote highlands of central Spain. The lovely creatures were actually sculpted on column capitals so they were in fact somewhere. But we, who were wandering about in a very remote area most dating to the medieval period, never expected to meet characters from the Bronze Age.

How did they fly from the Bronze Age to Medieval Spain? The story of their voyage is not so very strange when one looks closely at their story.

The Sirens first appear in Homer's *Odyssey*. There are two of them and they live on an island near Scylla and Charybdis. With songs so beautiful they can calm the winds they charm the sailors who sail past, enticing them onto their island which is covered with rotting

The Sirens are sometimes said to be the daughters of Gaia, Achelous or one of the Muses. In Homer they are two in number, but later and more generally they are depicted as a threesome: so they are in medieval Spain. According to Ovid and Apollonius Rhodius the Sirens began as the girlish companions of Persephone; when she was

kidnapped by Hades they went in search of her and were turned into birds, still retaining their girlish faces. The mythographer Hyginus adds that their metamorphosis to birds was a punishment for the Sirens' failure to guard Persephone.

The Sirens were early on associated with music and death, although not always both at once and not always with negative connotations. Plato, for example, had Sirens producing the music of the spheres in his *Republic*. The Sirens had cults, that is, they were worshipped as goddesses in southwestern Italy, from the Naples region to Sicily. They are frequently found perched as sculpted birds on tombs and even more frequently depicted with musical instruments or associated in some way with music. They were sometimes said to play sweet music which drew souls up to heaven. On the definitely negative side they came to symbolize the delights of the flesh, to symbolize an excessive desire for knowledge, and to symbolize the danger of flattery. The early episode in Homer, where Odysseus was tied to the mast, came to symbolize Christ on the cross, beset with all the temptations of the earth, symbolized by the Sirens.

And now we may return to our Sirens in Spain. They sit atop a column, about eight feet from the floor of a colonnaded porch. The Sirens are not two or three, but encircle the entire column in procession, and seem to pause and look out at the viewer with curiosity; some are leaning to one side or the other, or cocking their heads slightly, to get a better look at the viewer, very much as a real bird in a tree. They have their wings folded tightly about them as if against the cold. The porch runs the length of one side and around the back of a Romanesque church. The colonnaded porch is largely open to the elements and although it was comfortable and cool on the hot day we visited it must have been bitterly cold in the winter when persons down on their luck in one way or another sought sanctuary within its walls.

Other figures adorn the column capitals on this porch besides the Sirens. Knights in armour ride around one column, on yet another is a very medieval looking queen with a baby in her lap, a medieval king kneeling in front of them: this is a version of the Three Kings episode in medieval dress. A slightly more *classical* nativity scene, with Mary

and Joseph in dress more typical of the date of Christ's birth adorns another capital, although the hovering angels seem very medieval. Other capitals are alive with kings and philosophers, beggars, farmers, monsters and small representations of buildings, doorways, arches, trees and other vegetation. Outside the porch the main church building has a series of sculpted corbels which are ends of roof beams showing along the underside of the roof, and a series of metopes also with sculpture. The entire medieval world may be seen here, real and imaginary: drunks and thieves, farmers, shepherds, weavers, cobblers and carpenters, housewives and merchants, animals, monsters and the whole range of virtues and vices. The church, rather plain in the distance, becomes suddenly alive up close and if one lets the mind wander just a bit while slowly walking around it, it is not difficult to imagine the lively market day always found near a church, with residents of town and country turned out. Many sinful temptations would have been there in that noisy marketplace and here they are on the church, hovering over the crowds below their perches on the church: these are represented by the monsters, left-overs from pagan antiquity, embellished by the medieval sculptors or new monsters invented by them, or graphic portrayals of persons indulging in sins.

How do Homer's Sirens fit into the scheme of this medieval Romanesque church built in the 13th century in Duraton, Spain, 2000 years or more after the Sirens appeared in the *Odyssey*? The story of the Sirens may be even be far older in oral tradition. The Sirens were a natural! They were seen as sexy temptresses who enticed men to come hither and when they did the result was an ugly death, one without burial and the necessary religious rites the dead needed to be comfortable after death.