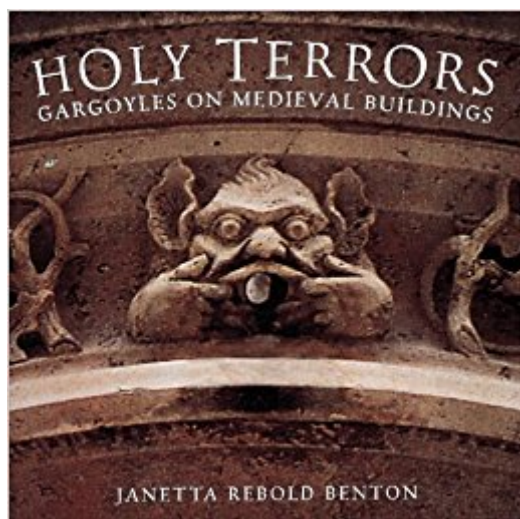


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# Holy Terrors: Gargoyles On Medieval Buildings



## Synopsis

Multitudes of gargoyles haunt the medieval buildings of western Europe, peering down from churches and cathedrals, houses and town halls. *Holy Terrors* offers a fresh and irresistible history of these wildly varied characters; a society of stone creatures perched high above the workaday world. The true gargoyle is a waterspout, an architectural necessity that medieval artisans transformed into functional fantasies. The informative introduction to *Holy Terrors* explains everything that is known or conjectured about the history, the construction, the purposes, and the mysterious meanings of these often rude and rowdy characters. The three chapters that follow are devoted to the gargoyles themselves, imaginatively carved of stone in the form of people, real animals, and fantastic beasts. In clear, lively language, Janetta Rebold Benton puts these personality-filled sculptures into the context of medieval life and art and captures their quirky diversity in her engaging color photographs. Concluding the book is an invaluable guide to gargoyle sites throughout western Europe, as well as suggestions for further reading. This is the first book for adults to provide an intelligent and entertaining overview of medieval gargoyles, and it is bound to increase the already abundant legions of gargoyle admirers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Almost every tourist who has ever climbed to the top of the North Tower of Notre-Dame de Paris has taken a photo of his or her companion leaning over the balustrade between two gargoyles (technically 'chimeras'), and surveying the streets below. It's the ultimate gargoyle photo-op. I'm

surprised this author was able to photograph the gargoyles without a tourist leaning between them. I was only slightly disappointed to learn from this book that much of the stonework on this tower is nineteenth-century restoration by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, "started in 1845 to repair damage done to the cathedral during the Revolution." However, he did attempt to use molds of the originals. Basically gargoyles are waterspouts, but to me they are proof that medieval stonemasons had a lively sense of humor--which they might have inherited from the Etruscans or the Egyptians, who also used animal-shaped stone waterspouts. Strictly speaking, gargoyles that do not spout water are known as 'grotesques' or 'chimeras.' It surprised me to learn that gargoyles used to be brightly colored--oranges, reds, and greens were favored--and sometimes gilded. The author believes that "gargoyles may be survivals of pagan beliefs...incorporated into church decorations for superstitious reasons." I've read many a horror story based on this assumption, most notably "The Cambridge Beast" and "The Sheelagh-na-gig" by Mary Ann Allen. Encounters between gargoyles and people are unique to the Cathedral of Saint John in Den Bosch, the Netherlands: "As a monstrous creature leaps out from the top of the buttress, the people cringe in terror, each one leaning back in an attempt to escape the attack of their horrible assailant."

I would like to suggest that Janetta Rebold Benton has done a great service in furthering thought about the gargoyles on medieval buildings. First of all, the choice of photographs and the way she explains them is exquisite! The book is highly worthwhile on this basis alone. However, this book also has the added benefit of some excellent thoughts on the MEANING of the gargoyles. I think this gives much insight into history and church history. She wisely premises that there may be different meanings in different times and situations. She states that, "the medieval affection for ambiguity allowed for a multiplicity of meanings... Characteristic of the medieval mentality was a willingness to freely interpret reality, as well as fantasy, according to religious symbolism." (Page 21) After her 10 years of research and cogent reasoning, here are some of the things she points out:

1. Medieval people did not have telephoto lenses or even good binoculars. The majority of the gargoyles are set too high to be seen very well with the naked eye. This is also the case with many stained-glass windows. Therefore, the exquisite artwork here was meant to be seen by God, or they just enjoyed doing it. (From this, I surmised that possibly the craftsmen themselves may have competed to do the best stone carving. The author suggests this saying that some of the Masons may have had an ego.)
2. Of the medieval gargoyles (as opposed to modern gargoyles such as the Chrysler building in New York City) no two gargoyles are the same! Wow! This shows the amazing individual craftsmanship that was going on.
3. As the glorious medieval times transitioned from

paganism to Christianity, there could have been some concession given to former paganism especially in Roman culture.

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