

To what extent was the iconography of the Christian Devil based upon the Egyptian God Bes and Greek God Pan?

Introduction

The Christian devil had his roots based upon the iconography of ancient deities. There were particular deities who lent their characteristics to the devil, with two of the most prominent being Bes and Pan. It is widely accepted today that much of Christianity's stories and iconography has borrowed from religions that preceded it, to appeal to followers of these religions. Other aspects of other religious deities were assigned them to the devil to demonise their deities and establish itself as the dominant religion. Though other deities shaped the devil's image, Bes and Pan appear to be the most heavily used.

Bes

Bes, who was associated with drinking, sex and revelry, sported a beard, horns and a forked tail, and may have served as the inspiration for depictions of the devil in Western art (1). The horns, one of the most recognisable symbols of the devil, may have been taken from Bes, since they would have been a recognisable element of Bes and thus enabled his demonization. As can be seen in data set 1 the face of Bes shares similarities with the devil in the Florence Baptistery. In it, snakes emerge from the ears of the Devil in the largest image of Satan in Europe. (2) The association of snakes was taken from Bes and given to the devil to further Bes' association with evil. (2).

Pan

The Greek deity Pan was one of the more popular gods of the Greeks, and was therefore a powerful competitor to the fledgling Christianity for the hearts of the people (3). This made Pan a target to be demonised in the Christian religion in order to become a dominant religion. The half man, half goat appearance of the god of the wild was appropriated into the devil's iconography, the basis of which can be seen in data set 2, and due to Pan's association with sexuality this proved to be successful, since with Christianity's harsh stance on sexuality and changing attitudes Pan was no longer seen as a god to be worshipped. Pan was depicted as a half man half goat in his iconography, which would have made it easy to identify the deity.

Conclusion

The Christian Devil clearly borrows elements from both Bes and Pan, being depicted as both a man with serpents and horns, and as a half goat. Since they were two of the more popular deities, successfully demonizing them allowed Christianity to gain new followers. Since iconography played a large role in the ancient world, using recognisable symbols was of vital importance. The fact that the gods Christianity chose to incorporate into the devil's iconography represented sexuality, sex, drinking and revelry suggests that early Christians knew what aspects of society to portray as immoral in order to promote Christianity as the prominent religion.

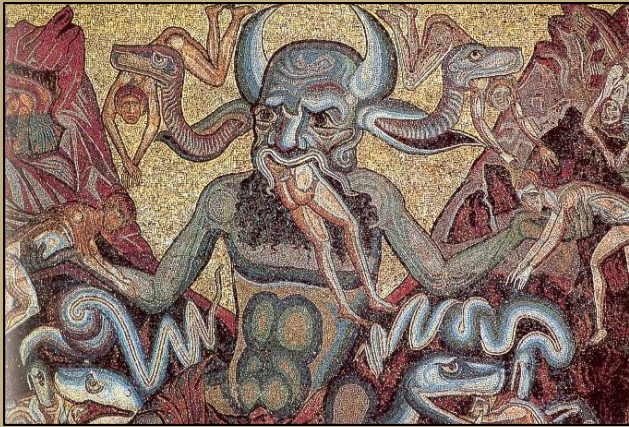


Image of the Devil, Florence Baptistery.

Data set 1: Relief of Bes from the temple of Dendera.



Data set 2: Roman statue of Pan, copy of a Greek original

References

- 1 Kieger. P. 2016: *The devil: understanding the root of evil*. National Geographic
- 2 Sooke. A. 2014: *How Egyptian god Bes gave the Christian Devil his looks*. BBC
- 3 Hearne. K. 1998: *The demonization of Pan*.
Image of Bes: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130619-how-the-devil-got-his-looks>
Florence baptistery: <https://eurotrayhist.wordpress.com/2010/01/26/metz-cath/>
Image of Pan: <http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/S22.2.html>