

## Cornwall: Land of gods and Christian revival.

### Introduction:

*While only touching briefly on the medieval period of the missionary Celtic saints, the intention here is to unpack something of the early druid paganism that marked the antiquity of life in Cornwall. Alongside the lingering fragments of this dark spirituality and a crude, primitive way of life steeped in superstition and folk-law we note how it contributed to a primitive, brutish Cornish culture and spiritual propensity that became a hot-bed that fed into the changes that came with the revivalism of Methodism*



PAGAN WORSHIP.

### EXPLANATION OF FRONTISPICE

THIS picture is from a rare book written in Latin and printed at Hanover in 1720. In the foreground is the pagan priest in the sacred circle surrounded by the sacred grove. In the centre of the circle is the sacred tree, at the foot of which is the holy hearth on which burns the sacred fire. The horn will be blown to awaken the god. The priest holds the knife with which he is about to immolate the white and holy horse tethered outside the circle. In the distance on the left are seen five worshippers of the rising sun. Between them and the circle are three holed stones, perchance phallic in import. On the right is depicted some of the ritual connected with the worship of the dead. Men are digging trenches for the reception of urns containing cremated remains. One man is carrying an urn and a second urn is ready to be carried for interment. To the rear of these figures is a round Bronze-Age Barrow.

Cornwall is a place of great antiquity but its early paganism is seldom detailed. In his book *"Cornwall the land of the Gods"*, T.F.G. Dexter (A.W.Jordon bookshop Truro 1937) quotes Lathan as saying, *"Of their original paganism all nations retain more than they care to own."* So while it is said we know Cornwall as, The Delectable Dutchy, The Fairies Playground, The Land of Junket and Cream, The Land of Giants, The Land of Saints so what needs to be added is, **The Land of the gods.**

Dexter's booklet is a plea for us to study the old mythology. He says, *"The well-informed Englishman knows something about the gods of Greece and Rome, but he knows little or nothing about the gods of his native land."* Cornwall has 4,000 years of history and Christianity thought to be introduced in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Of the 4,000 years, 2,500 are pagan and only 1,500 Christian yet our knowledge of the past is limited. The expertise of the hagiologist and Celtic philologist are limited indeed but this being so Dexter points out that the past never wholly dies.

*"Many of the gods we have discovered in the guise of Christian Saints. By converting gods into saints the church hoped to destroy them, but the very means she took for their destruction tended to their preservation."*

### The Great Mother goddess

"Researchers have taken us back a long way, to a time when man did not know Paternity, only Motherhood, and when worshipped The Great Mother, the first deity he ever devised, a goddess, be it noted not a god. Ritual ever outlives belief. The ritual of the Great Mother survives in the picking up of those limpet shells when a Cornishman goes a-'trigging' at Easter tide. In the East the cowrie shell represented the goddess of fertility and so the people of Penzance would pick up shell fish on

Shrove Tuesday.” In a similar way the people of Constantine would do the same on Good Friday. “This was not an idle past time but a fragment of a pagan ritual linked to the cult of the Great mother. This belief in the Great Mother has now gone past recall. She did not endure, because she was an importation and not indigenous. The indigenous Cornish goddess was Kerid, whose image still survives in Car Brea coins.”

#### Lunar goddess

Parts of the old lunar calendar still survive today. Our solar calendar still retains parts of the lunar calendar. Sun dates are fixed such as December 25<sup>th</sup>. Moon dates such as Easter Sunday are variable. The Easter Festival and the great Spring festival (a moon date) is older than Christmas (a Sun-date) on which we celebrate the birth of Christ. The mid-winter festival of the sun-god Mithras was kept on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

The Church at the beginning of Christianity could not abolish pagan holidays so it regulated what it could not prevent. Other dates on the Christian calendar such as Lent, and Shrove Tide have pagan origins. A moon goddess was Kerid and a Cornish moon goddess was Tan.

The queer name Mousehole given to the fishing village near Penzance is pronounced Mow-sel, Mo-sul, which means Dear (mo) Sun (sul) or Sun sul) place (mo, ma) indicates sun-worship. Then there were other Sun gods by the name of Hu and Cury.

#### Sun and Tree worship.

In East Cornwall the Monday evening before Shrove Tuesday ball games ,originally sun-games were popular. Shrove Tuesday was known in Cornwall as Col Perran’s Day and both ‘Col’ and ‘Perra’ probably point to Sun gods. The cock was a cult bird connected with the sun and on Shrove Tuesday the sport of throwing at cocks took place. On Hall Monday boys prowled the streets representing imps of darkness. These were probably folk memories of pagan deities. **Sul**, of British origin was also goddess of the setting Sun. The memory of a sun god named **Cury** still lives in the Lizard parish.

Hurling (**heul**=‘**sun**’) is a ball game in Cornwall played shortly before Shrove tide. Palm Sunday long before Christianity seems to have been a time of pagan tree and sun worship.

#### The Well goddess

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Carew a Christian priest still retained the reception of the offerings made to the divinity of the well. The name of this divinity, Our Lady Nant’s Well! The name of the pagan goddess seems enshrined in the word Nant, for *Nanto-svelta* was a pagan goddess, a water –nymph. The goddess Nant presided over the well at Colan long before Our Lady took her place.

#### The Horse goddess.

There is evidence of this in Cornwall. Before time measurement these pagan feasts of fertility and horse worship took place in late spring ,early summer. On Whit Monday at Gwennap in memory of Saint Wenep.. The Celtic Wenep is resolvable into ‘Wen-ep’ and may mean ‘white horse.’ In its origin it is the festival of the white Horse. Thus, Saint Wenep is really the pagan white horse masquerading as a Christian Saint.

#### The Sea god

Cornwall has an extensive sea-board and there is a sea god who has the name of ‘Endellion’. The feast of St Endelienta, the patron saint of Endellion, a sea-sea-board parish in North Cornwall is on Ascension day.

#### Horse worship

Whit Sunday seems to have links with Whitsuntide that was a time of worship of the horse and fertility. Gwennap shows evidence of horse worship.

#### The Corn goddess.

Ith , a corn-goddess seems to have been introduced by the Mediterranean race. St Teath gives indication of a goddess of fertility.Ith or Etha was a corn deity and usually a goddess.

#### The Apple tree god.

In Cornish, *aval* is apple: *avallen*, “apple tree”

On Rogation Sunday a saint named Allen, the patron of St Allen ( a tiny Parish not far from Truro) was celebrated. Like St Wenep it appears he was a name and nothing more. Quite near St Allen there is a *Nans-avallan*, ‘Vale of the apple Tree.’ It was on Rogation Sunday the apple tree cult invoked the fertility of the apple tree and the tree god was sanctified with the words , “*Stand fast root; bear well top: Every twig, apple big: Every bough, apple enow.*”

Dexter concludes that these old gods are worthy of study because in the main they are not European but,

*“they are the gods of our(Cornish) wondrous sun-rises and sunsets. The sea; our sea, gives up to us her gods and goddesses. We are a “horsey” race, and our hope deities show that we have been horse lovers from time immemorial. Added to all these*

*are the gods of our own wild storms; the gods of our bleak moors, of our hills and dales, of our fertile fields; the gods of our bubbling springs, of our babbling brooks and placid rivers; the gods of rowan and the British oak."*

### **Christianity reaches England/Cornwall.**

Christianity reached the British Isles in the **2<sup>nd</sup> century**. By about 600 AD, its position had become secure. Lewannick in the east and Phillack in the west were among the first Christian focal points in Cornwall.

Early forms of the *chi-rho* monograms were carved into stone at Phillack Cornwall. In 1843 one of the earliest known Christian burial sites in Cornwall dating from the **5<sup>th</sup> century** was discovered at Carnsew near Hayle.

Christianity was proclaimed the official religion of Britain early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a hundred years before the Romans left., but it was many years before the hold of the Christian church over the people was as strong as its supporters desired. As has been mentioned above some pagan gods and goddesses were canonized as Christian Saints. The god **Brid** became St Bridget, and the god **Ma--** Matrna became Mary and there were doubts about the origins of other saints. Many Christian churches were also built on pagan sites.

St Michael's Mount Cornwall is fabled as a holy place of Celtic saints who are said to have lived there and a hermit once saw a vision of St Michael. (*It is part of the lost legendary land of Lyonesse between Penzance and Marazion that was once dry land covered with thick forest where the legend says Cormoran and his wife Cormelian lived but that is now sub merged under the sea as the result of some great catastrophe of the distant past.*)

In "*Mysterious Britain*," Janet and Colin Bard, (Acorn Typesetting & Litho services, Middlesex. 1972, p111) point out that Pope Gregory around 601 AD, wrote about action needed in order to **wean the British from paganism to Christianity**. The British people were still practising the old religions in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as can be seen from the following law passed by King Canute at that time..

*"We earnestly forbid every heathenism; heathenism is that men worship idols, that is, that they worship heathen gods; and the sun or moon, fire or rivers, water wells or stones, or forests trees of any kind, or love witchcraft or promote morthwork."* (morth=Norman for secret killings)

### **The Missionary Celtic Church.**

The Celts brought their own form of paganism that included sky-gods, sun gods, spirits of trees and woodlands. History has left us with 375 Celtic gods. They venerated sacred animals, including the horse goddess Epona and also found supernatural significance in the human head. They also brought a form of Celtic Christianity. Paul's letter to the Galatians was directed to one of the first Celtic churches. "***Christianity and the Celts***", Ted Olsen, A Lion Publishing, 2003.

Cornwall has honoured something like 170 Saints and has been called the 'Land of the Saints' because of the missionary enterprise largely undertaken during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries by Celtic Christians from Ireland and Wales. Andy Phillips in "***An Forth Keltek***", Mid Cornwall Printing, Truro, 2009 is helpful in describing this period.

The early Christian church in Cornwall was monastic in structure and a list of religious houses representing the early Christian communities established in the 6<sup>th</sup> century can be found recorded in the Domesday Book. While not detailing the impact of the Celtic church here in this paper, we note here that by the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the invasion of the Anglo-Saxon/ Germanic tribes was pushing the Celts to the extremes of the British Isles.

The early Celtic church had a mixed relationship with the pagan druids. The church was influenced by pre-Christian Celtic religious beliefs which would have held that the divine was to be experienced in all creation. Such a belief led to a natural reverence of nature and respect for it. (pantheism=God in creation itself). Some saints seem to have had no trouble converting the pagan people to the new Christian faith. The exception were the saints killed by King Tewdrig near Hayle. They seem to have been the victims of a misunderstanding. The transition between Druidism and Christianity was relatively smooth and free of violence---The new religion was grafted on to old. "*It might be said that Christianity was seen by the Druids as a fulfilment of pre-Christian paganism---not its enemy. The Church may well have reciprocated by treating pre-Christian belief and customs and holy places with deference and respect.*"

The first missionaries of Christianity must have found the devotion to the old religions stronger and more difficult to eradicate than they expected because there is much evidence that they had to make compromises which often involved absorbing old rites and beliefs into the new religion. As has been mentioned above some pagan gods and goddesses were canonized as Christian Saints. **Brid** became St Bridget, **Ma** and Matrna became Mary and there were doubts about the origins of other saints. Underlying conformity was a deep sense of superstition, half wondering, half afraid, a reliance on the old magic that had never died away.

In his book, *“Journey on the Edges”*, Thomas O’Loughlin, Orbis Books, 2000, p23. notes Christianity has mingled with pagan ideas from Greece, Rome, Gaul, and Ireland and he says this mingling can be viewed indulgently so that the gospel message could reach the ‘simple people’ who were attached to ‘rude’ customs of the day. Another view is that in a lust for power, influence and converts, the church failed to recognise that Christ’s teaching conflicted with every other notion. Thus one held to a ‘pure Christianity.’ O’Loughlin ends up assuming that **“one cannot isolate Christianity from cultures in which its adherents live.”** This broad assumption while half true, tends to suggest a syncretism that depreciates the Scriptures as a unique, inspired revelation and those who have faithfully pointed to Christ alone as Saviour, the distinct values of the Kingdom and a Christianity with a personal and social power that is transformative.

### **A Lingering past feeds Methodist revival.**

In the book, *“A Cornish Revival”*, Tim Shenton, Evangelical Press 2003, has a chapter entitled ‘A ‘County of lawless Barbarians.’ While some may think this a harsh description of Cornwall, Shenton uses this graphic title to describe the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century Cornwall. While he does not directly link it to the early pagan roots of the county never-the-less all the marks of its antiquity were still clearly evident. He says, *“The church in Cornwall was an example of the gross darkness that had invaded the church throughout the land.—The English regarded Cornishmen as ‘lawless barbarians’ and the tanners as little more than savages whom no one could control.”* p23.

The gentry, educated, affluent—were well content with the new order of things but superstition remained rife in the country side. *“The cowman’s wife was closer to nature than the squire’s lady. The cure for whooping cough was to pass a child under the belly of a piebald horse, which animal, being rare enough, might live in a district several miles away. ---The Hare and later the rabbit were held in abhorrence by fishermen that to mention either when at sea brought spoiled lines and nets or a dearth of fish.”* **“Vanishing Cornwall”**, Daphne du Maurier, Penguin Books 1972. p116.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century trades such as smuggling were rife. A huge inflow of cheap spirits entered Cornwall. The coasts swarmed with smugglers at Mousehole and especially from Lands End to the Lizard. The Cornish were notorious for looting vessels that founded on rocks and the tanners of Breage and Germoe were the most barbarous of all the wreckers luring ships to their doom. (p21) Households in all classes of society were characterised by heavy drinking. The working classes were particularly vulnerable.

Folklore and superstition like the veneration of holy wells and their ability to heal and protect lived on along with numerous other practises like traditional wrestling ‘hurling’ and bull bating etc. Up-country travellers indicated that the Cornish were generally thought of as uncouth barbarians, steeped in superstition and more pagan than Christian. One suggested view of a Londoner was that in Cornwall, ---“the underground inhabitants (piskeys) are the most numerous---the above ground gentlemen are called smugglers---those who are not are stone-eaters and cannibals.” **“A History of Cornwall”** Ian Soulsby, 1986. p102.

Methodism was able to remedy social abuses which legislation was powerless to touch. Smuggling was regarded by Wesley as an ‘abomination’. His, pamphlet, ‘Word to a Smuggler’ reduced evil considerably and he was hard on local habits like wrecking, and he had a dim view on riots. **“A Charge to Keep,”** Frank Barker, The Epworth Press, 1954, p 161.

Daphne du Maurier sums it up in , **“Vanishing Cornwall”**, Penguin Books 1972.p 118.

*“The religious Cornishman needed an outlet for his emotions. He did not find it in the Established church. Vicars of Parishes were too often relatives of the local landowner or squires. Church services were tedious, sermons repetitive and dull and people living on a fugal diet in crowded cottages, found little to do on the drawn-out Sabbath day.--- So when John Wesley travelled west in 1743 he hit Cornwall like a tornado, upsetting values, scattering the supposedly faithful, shocking parsons, disturbing landowners, shaking the bewildered people into a lively sense not only of their own short comings but also of their worth, should they repent of their sins, to an ever-present and living God. Angry at first, then curious, then avid for his teaching, they flocked to listen to this thundering preacher with a fiery message, yet so small that he had to stand on a rock to make himself heard. Here was a man who knew no distinction of persons, who reached out for the soul of fisherman or miner with total disregard for status who called upon them in their homes, who blessed the children, and, more exciting and more devastating still brought back to their dulling hearts all the terrors of hell fire.---for the men women and children who put away sin, confessed their iniquities, there would be mercy, forgiveness and the everlasting arms. This was what the Cornish people needed. Here was the out-let they desired—tears, lamentations, beatings of the breast, a falling upon the knees, the relief of confession, followed by the joys of salvation and a bursting into song. The great Revival had begun.”*