

How Pagan Was Medieval Britain?

The Question of Pagan Survival

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The traditional answer: dual religions

- Either, pagan commoners and Christian elite, or both observing the two faiths side by side
- Geoffrey Coulton (1925)- 'cheerful semi-pagans'
- A wealth of supporting data: the Margaret Murray thesis (accepted by Sir Stephen Runciman, Christopher Hill, Sir George Clark)
- Lady Raglan's theory of the 'Green Man' 1939.



The Foliate Heads



The Jack-in-the Green

The Pub Sign



Margaret Murray and the Sheela na Gig



Late Twentieth-Century Acceptance

- Margaret Murray and Wicca
- Anne Ross, and the 'divine hag of the pagan Celts' and *Grotesques and Gargoyles* (1975)- a 'conspiracy of silence'
- Sheela na gig adopted by feminist artists
- Green Man adopted by Green Movement
- So, important, dynamic, modern images

But what is the truth? A need to pool the data, as it is scattered

- Murray thesis collapsed in the 1970s
- The Green Man-
- Foliate heads studied by Kathleen Basford 1978 and Mercia MacDermott 2003- a motif from India, fed into churches via monks' manuscripts
- The Jack-in-the-Green studied by Roy Judge 1979- appeared in London at the end of the 18th century. A custom of chimney sweeps.
- The Green Man sign studied by Brandon Centerwall 1997- comes from the medieval motif of the Wild Man, which based into Tudor and Stuart English pageants, and so to a distillers' brand symbol.

Further research: the Sheela na Gig

- 1977 Jorgen Andersen realised it came from France, and found there and in Spain as much as in British Isles. Part of Romanesque decoration, spread by pilgrimage churches
- 1984 Anthony Weir and James Jerman confirmed this and suggested it was a warning against sins of flesh- intended to repel
- Accepted now- but Ireland may be a different case – found on secular buildings, often invisible, linked to folk tradition that a woman could avert evil

So all those red herrings now removed: what is the picture?

- Direct evidence of paganism?
- Anglo-Saxon law codes and church council decrees- end in 8th century, revive in 10th century (after Vikings), end again in 11th century
- At the other end of the Middle Ages (15th century), church court records- lots of 'Lollards' in some areas, some scoffers. Only 'pagan' one Hertfordshire man who said no gods but sun and moon – but a solitary sceptic. Neighbours very nosy, sense of community vital- example of Margery Northoll at Bristol 1539.

Between these bodies of evidence, three cases (assembled by Margaret Murray)

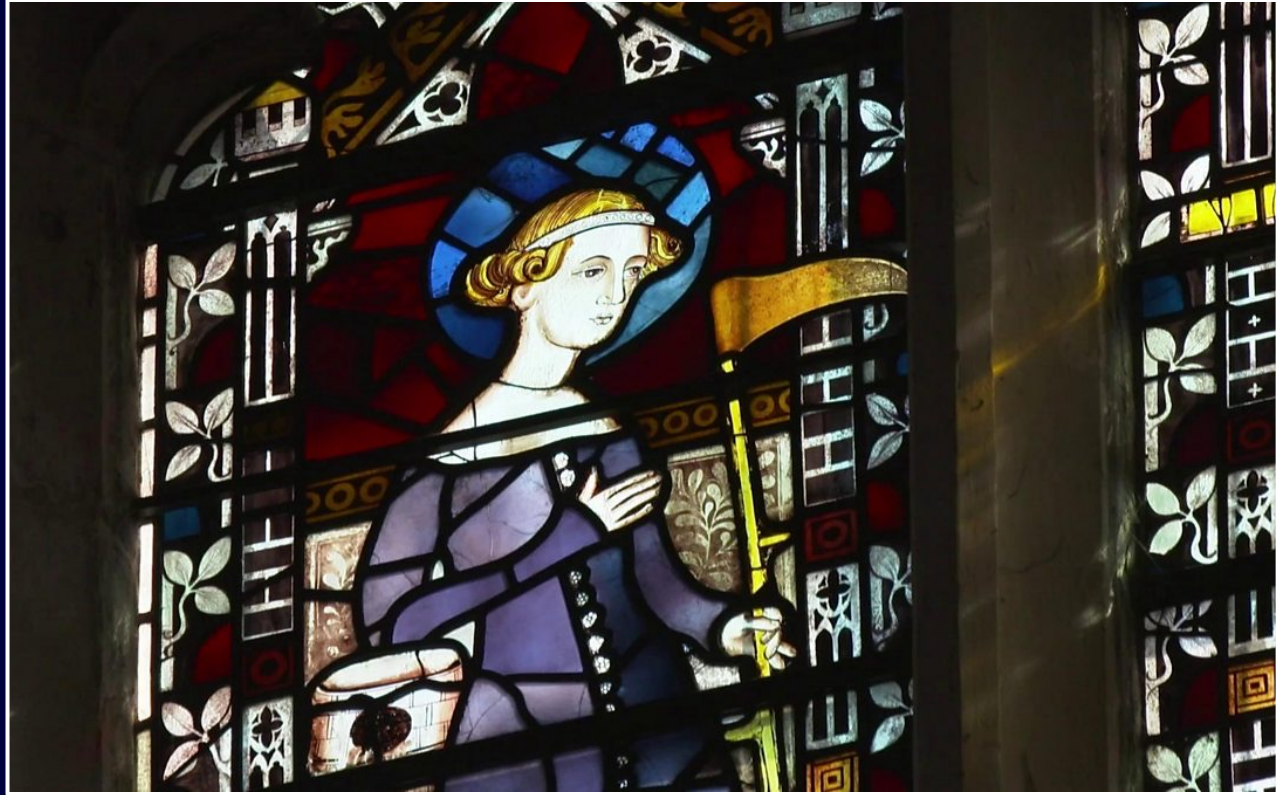
- 1282 the priest of Inverkeithing, Fife, Scotland, who forced girls to dance round human image carrying a carved phallus on a pole, and parishioners to strip and whip each other- murdered by them.
- 1313 Stephen le Pope in Kent, who worshipped images of gods he had made and set up in garden. The same night, murdered his maid.
- 1351 Frithelstock Priory, Devon. The bishop (of Exeter) accused the monks of establishing a fortune-telling racket and an image of 'proud and disobedient Eve or unchaste Diana'. Monks said it was Virgin Mary, and the bishop an evangelical reformer.
- So, no real evidence of paganism in England after 1030.

Seems medieval English Christianity made paganism unnecessary- produced a parallel service

- (1) Polytheism- represented by saints, of both sexes.
- Hundreds to choose from, some international and some local. Scores in Cornwall. Other examples:



Walstan of Bawburgh-
twenty parishes in Norfolk



Sidwell- Exeter and East Devon

Relationship often ad-hoc (as in paganism)

- Compare Logère (France) in the 1960s- 5% working class went to mass in parish church, but 49% men and 78% women to saints' shrine
- Saints were patrons of specific trades, age groups, cures for illnesses, genders, nations, regions, farming processes and animals
- Some clearly overworked:

St Clement:
blacksmiths,
anchor-makers,
iron-workers,
carpenters



St Blaise:
woolcombers,
wax-chandlers,
wild animals, sore
throats



Wells and trees
were sacred to
them



No direct transfer from paganism

- Pope Gregory apparently ignored- 33 out of 1500 medieval parish churches in Britain
- No British saints former pagan deities (a few in Ireland and abroad)
- Little overlap with sacred waters- Coventina's Well and Sacred Spring at Bath not Christianised, saints' wells have no ancient offerings
- So a parallel service
- Reflected in church buildings- average 3 to 20 shrines in a parish church by 1500, sometimes 30+, served by guilds (open to all but very poor)

(2) Festivals were the main religious events

- No law compelling church attendance before 1550s. Snapshots show about half did not attend regularly. But churches crowded out for big spectacular feasts-
- Singing in the dawn on Christmas Day
- Blessing of candles (new light) at Candlemas (2 February) to open spring
- Blessing of new foliage on Palm Sunday
- Drama of resurrection of Christ from 'Easter sepulchre'
- Rogationtide processions in May and white dove at Whitsun

Otherwise priests kept the services going for all

- Parishioners provided images, hangings, carvings, gilding, incense and music
- Scriptural meanings imposed on ancient calendar feasts
- Secular revelry converged- May games, village summer feasts, ploughboy collections in January, all came to supply funds to the church. The Devil was cheated.

(3) A place for the feminine

- Female saints (Mary Queen of Heaven, with trappings of Juno, Venus, Diana)
- Churchwardens
- Guild members (equal)
- Nunneries and hermits (Julian of Norwich)
- A thick screen before a patriarchal religion

(4) The central act was sacrifice

- Mass- offered on altar
- Preaching popular but not central- offered by friars, often at crosses or in market places
- Priests local, and ordinary people

Look to the future

- Both Reformation and Counter-Reformation intended to end this, produce better control, better education, better Bible-based piety.
- In British cases, Protestantism drove out saints, mass, decorations, women, festive customs and secular customs. Self-conscious removal of pagan parallels.
- Brought in not new age of faith, but shattering of unity, and secularisation- a modern version of medieval situation, with 1990s, 10% attended church, 62% had sense of personal God, 65% Christian, 90% celebrated Christmas.