



In Search of the Mystic Past

Callanish - Ancient Wonder of the North

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During the summer of 1995 I was working on the Isle of Skye, off the north western part of Scotland - itself home of numerous sites and legends. While I was there I had the fortune of visiting Callanish on the Isle of Lewis for the summer solstice. This was something I had dreamed about - being within a stone circle during this time of the year. I had visited the site before but the Summer Solstice at Callanish is magical time for it was when the "Shining One", according to legend, walks along the stone avenues heralded by a cuckoo's song - the cuckoo being the bird of the Tir-nan-og (the Celtic land of youth).

A friend had loaned me the use of his car for public transport on the outer isles is almost non-existent, even in summer time. With impatient anticipation I hung over the rails of the ferry as it made the island crossing, watching to catch sight of the lower part of the island known as Harris. The island is extremely poor, yet extremely beautiful, and one of contrast - the rocky mountains and Mediterranean bays in the south (Harris), and the mist engulfed boglands of the north (Lewis). A land where only the tough will survive. But a warning to the intended traveller - the signs are mainly in Scottish Gaelic so any English worded map is virtually useless.

Feeling charitable of the impending festival, I gave a New Age traveller a ride to the stones. This lad was too eager to celebrate the solstice, "to communicate with the spirits", he said. But as his swag roll clinked after him as he made his way to join his fellow travellers, I wondered what spirits he would actually be communicating with.

Clustered near the coast at the head of Loch Roag, in isolated moorland, are actually a number of groups of standing stones. On the promontory to the west and dominating the view is Callanish I, the main stone circle, their focus and inspiration. Callanish is impressive. It has baffled those who have tried to prove the purpose behind the building of such a monument and still continues to do so.

Like the island mists, legend and folklore cling to the stones. They are said to have been giant inhabitants turned to stone by St Kieran after not letting him build a church on the island nor letting themselves be baptised, thus giving the Gaelic name "na Fir Bhreign" ("the False Men"). Or that a priest king came to the island, bringing with him not only the stones but black men to erect them. He was attended by other priests wearing robes of bird skins and feathers. Another legend is of a sea cow which fed the villages during the famine, and recently marriages which were consummated within the circle were said to be truly happy. One of the most interesting legends relates to the lunar, solar and stellar aspect of Callanish.



The north avenue (actually NNE) has only 19 of the original 39 stones still standing. Due to their thinness and elongated shape, they can look like sentinels on duty, which give a very distinctive feel to the site. The avenue narrows as it approaches the stone circle, presumably concentrating the forces upon the circle, and is roughly in line with the setting of southern moon. The eastern axis (ENE) leads to the Pleiades star cluster and the western to the equinox sunset. (The southern avenue seems to be an exact north-south line with no other fixed focus).

This lunar, solar and stellar aspect of Callanish is provided by an unusual source - Greek historian Siculus, in approximately 55 BCE, described an elliptical site in Britain. Writing about a "spherical temple", he said "[the moon] dances continuously the night through from the vernal equinox until the rising of the Pleiades". Many earlier historians thought this site was Stonehenge but the alignments did not add up - they do however with Callanish. The lunar cycle seems to have been of great importance with dramatic events taking place every 18.5 years when the moon passes low over the horizon and appears to be among the stones. This last happened in 1987 and will not occur again until 2008.

I spent the sunset at the desolated top of the island, the Butt of Lewis. Just a few sea birds and I watching the full force of the North Sea upon the rocks. The lighthouse keeper had showed no interest in this lone woman sitting among the rocks. Maybe he thought that I was mad - he was not the first.

Unbeknown to me near the Butt is said to be the ruins of a temple to the local god Shoni. Legend has it that the wisewomen would collect a quantity of grain in the spring that they made into malt. When this was dried, they went to the ruined chapel where it was brewed into ale. This was then taken to the seashore where the women would wade in knee deep, pouring the ale into the water, and shouting "Shoni, Shoni! Send us please of seaware this year and we will give thee more ale next year."

Another similar legend dedicates the chapel to St Mulvan's where late at night on Hallowtide the inhabitants of the island would come to the rocky shrine, bringing an offering of malt, which was used to brew the ale and poured into the sea as a libation. The people then went to the church where a single candle was burning. Then, according to Martin Martin (writing in 1703), "standing silent for a little time one of them gave a signal, at which the candle was pout out and immediately all of them went into the fields where they drank ale and spend the remainder of the night dancing and singing". No reflection on the Scottish drinking habits I am sure.

Sunrise was to be at 4.30 am but this far north the sun hardly seemed to set at all. The sky seemed to hold that twilight glow all through the night. Upon returning to Callanish, the stillness was carrying the beating drums, the barking of dogs and the roar of laughter from the party of travellers on the other side of the hill.

By 4.00 am I could wait any longer. With very little sleep I made my way towards the sleeping giants, feeling their power. The stones seem to mirror the land in both their shape and the quartz lines, some say this is to channel or utilise natural energies. And maybe it was the early morning cloud that seemed to hinder the rising sun that I did not catch a glimpse of the Shining One.

To my dismay a group of youths had decided to hold their own private party in the passage grave to the centre of the stones. I felt outrages that they could do this to this sacred site, but I invested in my visualisation powers and ignored them - they ignored me.

North and South, East and West. Was I walking the power line? Who knows. I continued down the southern avenue and through the gate to the large stone at the head that is known to some as

"Grandmother Turtle". My intent was to sit and quietly meditate on the stone while the sun was rising. A gain this was not to be due to my fellow travellers. Empty bottles, sprawled bodies and people whose stomachs had decided to rebel against the amounts of alcohol were everywhere.

Disheartened I returned to my car and decided to head to a lesser known stone circle at Steinacleit that I had passed the previous night. In total privacy, with no barking dogs or retching sounds, I danced, I praised and I gave thanks in my own little way for the wonders of this island and for having the opportunity to experience the Summer Solstice within a real ancient stone circle.



The sun had now broken the horizon and was pushing the clouds away. Bleary eyed I found my way to an artist friend's gallery and after refreshments, was able to view her amazing paintings of the Callanish stones from her 10 years of studying them.

Since visiting the site in 1995, an information centre has been built on the Loch hillside. Many locals and visitors disagree with this, probably with the fear of Callanish being turned into another Stonehenge. But with the site attracting 40,000 visitors (1995 figures) per year, the need was felt. However, the growing popularity of these sites it is getting extremely difficult to visit these places to celebrate the year's turning points without tripping over others. I only hope that should I get the opportunity to visit this site again that it will be basically unchanged, and hopefully without any New Age youths who use sacred festivals and sites as another excuse for a party. (Maybe I am just showing my age!)

References:

- "New Light on the Stones of Callanish"* - G and M Ponting
- "Ancient Mysteries of Britain"* - Janet and Colin Bord
- "A Guide to Britain's Pagan Heritage"* - David Clarke