



In Search of the Mystic Past

The Cerne Abbas Giant

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In the south of England loams a chalk figure from a hill slope known as "Giant Hill". He stands some 55 metres tall and is 44 metres wide across the shoulders. Although brandishing a 37 metre long knobbed club, it is the prominently erect phallus from which he seems to epitomise energy, vitality and fertility. He is known as the Cerne Abbas giant and it was towards the end of one English winter that I hired a car and headed towards the A352 Sherborne-Dorchester Road in Dorset. My destination was nearly nine kilometres from Dorchester and dwarfs a small village of the same name.

No one knows when he was made nor by whom. A survey of Cerne in 1617 had no mention of the giant, yet there was reference to this gigantic chalk figure in 1694 being a payment in the Cerne Abbas church warden's accounts of three shillings towards the re-cutting of the giant. The first written reference is by John Hutchins' *Guide to Dorset* in 1751, and recently historian Ronald Hutton stated that the giant was cut in the 17th century by the servants of the landowner Lord Holles when the estate was mismanaged by his steward. Hutton also notes that it is unusual for unlike the Uffington White Horse, there is no reference to the Cerne Abbas Giant in any medieval documents.¹

As to whom, the earliest record in 1637 is of a giant named of Helith. Other theories indicate that he was a Pagan God, cut by the Saxons, which would indicate a figure

¹ Source: www.stonepages.com/england/cerneabbas.html

being pre-13th century. The most popular belief is that the Cerne Abbas giant is a representation of Hercules with theories stating the figure has been cut at the end of the second century CE when the Emperor Commodus (who believed himself to be a reincarnation of Hercules) revived the worship to this god. If this is the case, then one wonders why nothing had been mentioned earlier of the chalk figure.

As Hercules, in some places, was also known as all-purpose God invoked for fertility, this train of thought seems to strength. Even more so when we take into account that when the Celts of Gaul encountered Hercules, they identified him as "Ogmios", another strong man, a divine champion with a club. The Cerne Abbas giant with his knobbly club therefore may have been the British version of "Ogmios". Soil samples show that the giant was originally carrying an animal skin, supporting again the association with Hercules. But there is also the belief that the giant is the Celtic God Belinus, or that of a Saxon prince. But whoever he is supposed to represent does not seem to really matter. It is seems almost too obvious what his important feature is - a 7.2 metre long penis that, interestingly enough, aligns true East with the summer sun as it rises above the hills.

The Cerne Abbas giant is the most detailed of all the ancient hill figures with eyes, nose, mouth, ribs, breast, genitalia and notches on his club, all strongly rendered by a trench about half a metre wide and just as deep. He resembles a muscular male figure brandishing his huge club and striding across the hillside. For the local people, he has long been known as a promoter of fertility, as suggested by his large phallus and testicles. It is believed that a woman who sleeps for a night on the giant will bear many children. Unmarried girls would pray at his feet that they would not die old maids, and newlyweds and engaged couples consummate their relationship between the massive chalk thighs. Even today it is said that couples walk around him hand in hand and pass comment on his manifest virility, and that married women, fearing desertion by the spouses, have been known to climb the hillside and ask the giant to bless their union. Could this also be the reason why the medieval abbey was built so close to the giant - as a way of exorcising his power of fertility or perhaps sanctifying it?

I started to ponder on the secrets of the Cerne Abbas giant as I made my way through the mud at the base of the hill. The giant, pinned down a bit like Gulliver, is enclosed with a small wire fence. A bit pointless really as I climbed it with ease and made way up the 30 degree slope, which is really too gentle to appreciate the giant from the ground. Then holding the associations with fertility firmly in mind, I carefully walked around his markings, being careful to avoid one part of his anatomy. Not sure whether to believe the

folklore and local superstitions about his fertility, I was not really prepared to find out the truth. Well, not at this stage in my life anyway.

And as to strengthen the association with fertility, the custom of May Day maypole dancing occurred up until the 19th century on a small Iron Age earthwork called "The Trendle" or the "Frying Pan" above the giant's head. The maypole itself being a phallic symbol. Very little evidence of the earthwork is left today but the view of the surrounding countryside was breath-taking.

More local folklore is abound with his proximity to the St Augustine Abbey at Cerne leading to an account that the giant was actually cut by local monks as a joke against their abbot. Although this is unlikely, the respect for the figure and its maintenance by the local people, before being placed in the care of the National Trust, has been tolerated by the local church, suggesting an understanding and sympathy for the figure's essential meaning and significance.

There is even the belief that the Cerne Abbas giant was actually a real giant, who, in the 18th century, had devoured some sheep in Blackmoor and then lay down to sleep off his feast. Enraged country folk caught him napping, killed him on the spot, and traced out his shaped as a memorial.

Postcards of the Cerne Abbas giant are said to be the only pornographic material the British post office is willing to handle. It is this view of the giant and in particularly, the great interest of his penis, that in 1978 it was noted that the navel has grassed over in comparison to drawings of 1764. A year later it was observed that the navel had merged with the phallus, and this phenomenon was investigated by Leslie Grinsell, archaeologist and folklorist. After analysing various scourings, he focused on the 1868 renovation, opposed by the local vicar, believing it might corrupt local morals.

Questions arose. Did the scourers deliberately contrive the enlargement of the penis in order to scandalise the cleric? This was a possibility but Grinsell considered, on the basis of pictorial evidence, that the likely omission of the navel and the extension of the private parts dated from 1887 when the figure was renewed. The circular trench outlining the navel had become faint and was mistakenly identified as the tip of the penis. Rodney Castleden, in 1996, pointed out that the navel can be picked out in late Victorian or early Edwardian postcards; therefore the most probable date of its loss is the 1908 scouring,

after a 21 year break in scouring as opposed to the seven year time frame ascribed to upkeep the chalk figure.

The best view of the Cerne Abbas giant is across the valley from Weam Hill but most view him from the car park from which angle he resembles a squashed ogre rather than the virile club-wielder which is beloved by locals. It is only from the air however that one can really appreciate the giant's relationship with the surrounding landscape. The Trendle arises above his head, a delicate, undramatic earthwork; Eastfield Drove, one of the three great open fields of medieval Cerne, runs past his feet; and then dotted around are the chalkpits, animal tracks and clumps of tree which characterise this part of the world.

Like so many of the unusual reminders of an ancient past that dot this countryside, despite today's technology, the answers to how, who and more than often why, remain unanswered. For this particular traveller, it is these unanswered questions that draws me back, feeds my imagination and enhances my dreams of a mystic past. Its secrets long descended into the mists of time and that is the way I prefer to leave them.]

References

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