

Glastonbury Symbolism

[Some analytic reflections on the 'Avalonian Quest' by Geoffrey Ashe, published by Book Club Associates, London, 1983]

"Over the past few decades, Glastonbury in Somerset - England's 'ancient Avalon' - has attracted ever-increasing interest. Tourists pour in to visit its ruined Abbey, rich in Christian and Arthurian legend, and to climb the Tor, the strange hill above the town. Thousands assemble here for the annual church-sponsored pilgrimages. But many others come for mystical or occult reasons, seeing Glastonbury as a focus of spiritual power.

"In his second book on the theme, Geoffrey Ashe ... considered how Glastonbury ought now to be regarded. He ... shows its real and surprising importance in the religion, politics, culture and literature of England. A new scrutiny of its best-known legends ... proves that these remain mysterious and the explanations favoured by scholars need radical re-thinking.

"[He reviews) the speculations of modern mystics ... presents the results of his own field-work, disclosing the likely truth: that a huge ritual maze once encircled the Tor ... [he offers] fresh clues to the far off background of Glastonbury's mythology." [from the dust cover]

A close scrutiny of the book leaves the reader aware of several issues which are comparatively unexplored by Ashe. They form the framework of this brief note which attempts to point the way to a deeper analytic understanding of the symbolism of the historic Tor.

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The first issue is that in addition to his tracing cults, symbols and myths back into the mists of antiquity and relating them to distant origins of intercontinental cultus, there must also be an exploration in depth. What is it about the symbolism of Glastonbury that speaks not simply to some atavistic dim memory, but to the depth of intrapersonal unconscious in the contemporary generation throughout history? What are the images, the associations and the emotions evoked in the symbolic Tor and its hill complex? Are these images sufficiently related to common elements of contemporary unconscious material as to generate common projection onto the symbol, so continuously energising the mythologisation of the Tor complex? I would suggest that they are, but that they need analysing in primal terms rather than in terms of Jungian mandala association. Jung never dealt with the Psychodynamic at this level and it is to the psychodynamics of birth as fixated in the neonatal unconscious, not simply as represented by the fertility cultus of the mother, that we must look for the energising of this material. To be sure the symbol of the breast is one primal object, but the myths of the hollow hill, the entrance to the underworld, the point of entrance to the mother, describing it as the place of birth, and so on, all point to the Tor as matrix, not simply as breast. The penetration of the maze is not to suckle, but to mate and in this the fertility cultus of the ancient high gods, the cult prostitutes and the temple of the Moon Goddess on the peak of the ziggurats of Babylon does indeed link up in cultic terms.

So this sense of returning to the centre of the world, of getting to the point of origin holds in some sense a primal myth for every-man, not simply an historic myth of the civilisation. I would suggest it is the correspondence of these two strands, one out of the depth of history, the other out of the depth of the contemporary unconscious which intersect in Glastonbury and perpetuate its mystique.

Next, and following on from that first point, is the issue of orientation. For the author the female symbolism of Glastonbury is supine. This is in a sense dictated by his own projection of breast symbolism onto the dome shaped hill. However, such an orientation is at odds with everything else he has written, particularly the material on the ancient hill or mountain cultus, the idea of the seven-tiered temple hill with a shaft running vertically through it and so forth. In this case the orientation is shifted from the horizontal to the vertical. If we pay attention not to the silhouette of the Tor but to its aerial view a very different kind of symbolism emerges and it is a symbolism reinforced by the sense of continuous seven-fold circulation of the hill, providing as it were a seven layered contour map, a three-dimensional model of the hill around its vertical axis quite distinct from the profile as perceived from the distance.

Here two forms of female symbolism interact. The cult goddess is frequently referred to as the Queen of Heaven and in that sense the hill represents the sexual orifice of the sky, to penetrate which is to come into ultimate unity and union with the Great Mother herself. There is an ambivalence between the phallus and the foetus in this material, mirroring ambivalence between creativity and regression in the union. One can imagine the great procession on the terraces, winding backwards and forwards, round and round, making the hill into some kind of living, converging, corporate penetration of the Queen of Heaven, climaxed in a symbolic, representative, coital ritual. Perhaps it is this mating with the Spring Full Moon that guarantees the birth of the next new year.

Yet underlying the sexuality of the symbolism is also its regressive counterpart, linking birth and death. The return to the womb of the Great Mother represents regression to the place of ultimate safety, to be born from which into the world of work is to suffer the Fall from Paradise. The primitive inter-relationship between burial and birth is well-known. Burial chambers were primal parallels. The dead, particularly the most significant dead, were placed back in the bowels of Mother Earth as if to await rebirth into the world beyond. So here we have this ambivalent mirroring as to whether the Womb is the Womb of Heaven penetrated by the Hill Maze, or whether the Womb is the Hollow Hill, entered through some tunnel to a mythical chamber as some kind of primitive return to the place of origin, which is itself the place of final rest. Life and death, birth and burial, womb and tomb, alpha and omega, are one and the same point.

That brings me to the third and final area, and that is the somewhat strange eliding of reference to the remains of the church of St. Michael on the top of the mount, the Tower of which has been so carefully preserved. There is a suppression of phallic symbolism throughout this book, which is in parallel to the suppression of the female sexuality of the symbolism as distinct from its breast imagery. If the symbolism of the Tor is female, then the worship or cultus must essentially be male. If the Mother stands for the Matrix of the place, then Michael and his Tower associated with his penetrating spear or lance, plunged into the belly of the dragon, sustains all the mythical phallic symbolism of the cultus. If Mary Christianised the matrix, then St. Michael Christianised the coitus. The two are frequently

related in other ancient hill shrines. It is St. Michael, slayer of the dragon of the underworld, whose phallic tower stands guard at the matrix of the Queen of Heaven, gateway to Hades, protecting all Christian people from the demonic dangers of the unconscious, split off, denied and projected into the realms of darkness.

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So to Ashe's survey I would want to add:

- to the remoteness of historic regression, the depth of contemporary psychological regression
- to the female symbolism of the breast, the female symbolism of the matrix
- to the rather antiseptic worship rituals of maze threading, the full-blooded sexual symbolism of the fertility cultus
- to the supine female symbolism, the vertical element
- to the associations of sexuality and penetration by the part, the associations of primal birth and death regression, or penetration by the whole,
- to the essentially female symbolism, the phallic elements of the cultus.

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February 1984

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Hosted by: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)

(Charity Registration No: 284542)

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