



Medieval agricultural scene from the Luttrell Psalter

Æcerbot and Wassail: Blessing the Fields and Orchards

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During the autumn season when imagery of the harvest is all around, it can be easy to forget that the cornucopia of produce yielded is the product of year round effort. Though we, most of whom are removed from the production of our own sustenance, may not be consciously aware of the agricultural calendar, it is something that our ancestors were very much aware of. Until very recently in the grand timeline of human history, the vast majority of human beings participated in agriculture, in one way or another, as well as the age old customs and rituals that went along with it.

We know that ancient spirituality was unequivocally bound with agriculture and the turning of the year. It is thought that one main reason the ancients built Neolithic monuments which monitored movements of the sky (ex. the chamber at Newgrange which is flooded with light at sunrise at the Winter Solstice) was to keep track of the passage of time which mark key agricultural dates of the year. Because spirituality was so inextricably linked

to agriculture, it is not difficult to understand how and why ritual became associated with the sowing of seeds and reaping of the harvest.

The examples we're going to explore here are from the Anglo-Saxon culture. But, as this is a Celtic themed magazine, I just want to point out that Celtic and Germanic cultures shared very much in common. Both language groups are branches in the Indo-European language family. Many scholars have noted similarity in customs and in ancient religion between the two groups. Some academics have stated that it appears that the two cultures were nearly identical at one point in time, and then diverged. Not to mention that the two cultures were not only neighbors, but modern Celtic nations carry much Germanic heritage from not only the Anglo-Saxons, but the Norse as well.

Because the Celts converted so very early, in fact the Irish were the first Europeans to convert to Christianity outside of the Mediterranean, often less is known about ancient Celtic religious practice. The great Celtic historian

J. A. MacCulloch, who penned the popular *Religion of the Ancient Celts*, also thought that there was enough similarity between Celtic and Germanic culture to author an excellent book titled *The Celtic and Scandinavian Religions*.



A political map of Britain in 650AD with names transcribed as they appear in modern English. Image by Wikimedia Commons user Hel-hama.

So, what we're going to explore here likely had a counterpart with some similarity among the Celts. I would venture to say that the Balts and Slavs share in this legacy as well. Indeed, many of us in the English-speaking world don't realize that while Halloween (Samhain) comes from the Celts, Yule comes from the Germanics. Yet, both cultures also had their own counterparts to each holiday, as did the other afore mentioned Indo-European peoples. These were simply holidays marking the turning of the year that virtually all of humanity marked, and there was strong similarity in how it was marked by various Indo-European cultures.

There are a great many folk customs all around Europe which appear to hearken to

ancient pagan origins. However, due to the nature of the history of conversion, oppression of native spirituality by the Church (both Catholic and Protestant, and in many cases even more so by the Protestants), and targeted eradication of ethnic folk practices during Europe's assimilation to Christianity, there isn't always a clear verifiable line of progression to trace modern folk practices to their ancient roots. This is in large extent due to the fact that pre-Christian European cultures were illiterate. That is, in fact, a poor term to use, as it implies a lack of culture. The Germanic people used runes, and the Celts had their ogham. But, they were not used as prolifically as the Latin alphabet was in the Mediterranean.



This Anglo Saxon high cross in Cumbria, England, bears a striking similarity with the Celtic crosses seen across Ireland.

Northern Europeans were primarily an oral culture, relying on patronymic names (sometimes matronymic, though rarely) to demonstrate relationships and lineage, and

memorization of epic poems, tales, charms, and so forth. Theirs was a living religion that evolved with the culture. Their rites and rituals were lived in practice, so there was no need to write them down.



Above and below - artwork from the Anglo-Saxon "Lindisfarne Gospel" - note the similarity with the Irish "Book of Kells."



The Catholic Church moved upward through Europe from the Mediterranean, bringing with it their Latin alphabet and penchant for writing. It is mainly through Church writings, and ancient Roman writers such as Tacitus, that we know anything about the practices of our own ancestors. Sadly though, these writings are sharply skewed by bias, and written during campaigns to oppress these ancient folk customs.



St. Oswald's Priory Anglo-Saxon cross. Knotwork in a fashion similar to the Celtic style was common among Old Germanic art as well. Photo by user Fae on Wikimedia.

It is precisely for this reason that renowned folklorists Jaqueline Simpson and Steve Roud say in their entry for "wassailing" in their dictionary for English folklore:

Amongst all the calendar customs which popular folklore enthusiasts have claimed as remnants of luck-bringing rituals, wassailing is the only one that has a relatively clean and undisputed claim to this lineage (Simpson & Roud, 380).

In my estimation, this does not mean that other folk customs are not derived from ancient ritual necessarily, but rather that it is often difficult to prove that they are (for more on this, please see my article "The Hidden History of Christmas Carols" in Celtic Guide, December 2013). As I often say, history is murky. It is murky for all the reasons mentioned above and then some. Many ancient rituals were altered during the conversion period, and so all we have evidence of is the Christianized version (again, see my article on Christmas Carols), yet we can often speculate with confidence of a pre-Christian origin due to the presence of known pagan elements such as fertility symbols.

An example of one such ritual is the old Anglo-Saxon *Æcerbot*, also known as “field remedy.” It is an early medieval, through probably with roots that go back much further, “luck-bringing” agricultural ritual that is now extinct. In her short book on Anglo-Saxon spiritual culture, *Looking for the Lost Gods of England*, scholar Kathleen Herbert explains that historical documents only record the Christianized version of this custom. Although at the time the account was written this ritual was being practiced with the cooperation of the local parish priests, it contained many pagan elements. The gist of the ritual was the notion that the fields were of Mother Earth, and she may be barren and in need of virile fertilization. So Father God up above (inserted as a replacement for a previous male sky god) was invoked to impregnate the fields. Herbert describes the ritual thusly:

Mother Earth, in this particular field, was weak and sick, unable to bear. Perhaps she had been deliberately injured by hostile magic.

The healer cut a turf from each of the four quarters: east, south, west, and north, noting carefully exactly where each had lain. These turfs for the time being represented – were the whole field. A mixture was made of vegetable matter from every tree and shrub that grew locally... and all known herbs... These were blended with oil, honey, holy water and milk from all the cattle on the farm. This mixture was dropped three times on the underside of the turfs. Mother Earth was being given healing herbs, mixed with a nourishing porridge to strengthen her. (Herbert, 13-14)

Herbert goes on to explain the rest of the ritual involving the turfs being blessed in the parish church before being re-deposited in their original locations with yet more ritual and ceremony. The entire ordeal took the better part of a day to complete. Herbert speculates

that the church building replaced an earlier site which may have been a sacred grove. Part of the Christianized version was to mark the turfs with the cross. Again, Herbert says this may have replaced an earlier Indo-European symbol such as the sun-wheel (swastika), or a Germanic runic symbol (Herbert, 14).

Karen Louise Jolly actually uses the *Æcerbot* ritual transcribed word for word to open the first chapter of her book *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England*. She uses it as an illustration of the fusion between Anglo-Saxon native religion and Christianity. I would argue that her observations can also be applied to Celts and other Indo-European groups as well, as their own early versions of Christianity accommodated local folk practices of the common people. She says:

In order to understand popular religious practices of this period [900-1050 A.D.], we need to place them in the context of this gradual process of cultural conversion, in which Germanic folklore and Christian belief bled into each other as much or more than they sought to destroy each other (Jolly, 10).

Jolly reaffirms that the early Catholic Church was often accommodating of local beliefs. People were allowed to keep their customs providing the old switcheroo took place, whereby indigenous deities were replaced by the Christian pantheon of the God Head and Saints. In the case of the Anglo-Saxons, Jolly says it is:

... evidence of the dynamic interaction that takes place between a native culture and an introduced religion. This is Christianity succeeding by way of acculturation and Germanic culture triumphing in transformation. Neither is the passive victim of the other (Jolly, 11).

It should be emphasized, however, that this tolerance applied much more so to the early medieval Church. The Anglo-Saxons

in England shared another similarity with the Celts of Ireland in that they were both converted in this gradual and organic way, as opposed to the later conversion campaigns which ravaged the Germanic people on the continent and Scandinavia, as well as the Balts and Slavs (look up the Saxon Wars, Wendish Crusades, and Northern Crusades). The Church simply did not have that type of muscle in the very early days in the non-Romanized parts of Europe.

The temperament of the Church in England would change sharply with the Norman Conquest of 1066, marking an end of Anglo-Saxon England, and the beginning of the oppressive Norman regime which brought with it a stricter interpretation of Christianity; along with their castles and fortresses which sprung up all over Britain and Ireland to keep the native people under the new iron grip of feudalism.

Yet, it seems in many cases of the cultures mentioned above, the initial conversions of each group incorporated their native folkways into their new Christian practices, and then subsequent waves of religious reform in later generations took issue with customs containing clear pagan connotations.

Historian and historical fiction author Carol McGrath uses the *Æcerbot* to illustrate this point in her novel set in England in 1066, *The Handfasted Wife*. She opens chapter four with a quote by the afore mentioned Karen Louise Jolly, and proceeds to describe a scene wherein King Harold's first wife, Edith Swan-neck, is asked by local villagers to perform the customary Field Remedy ritual. McGrath highlights that this was a time of abrupt cultural change for the people of England. There was a strong "Normanization" of the English Church prior to the Conquest. The author depicts this period as the cusp when the afore mentioned leniency of the Church began to wither as it grew in strength and began to exert political pressure on European ruling classes.

This is demonstrated in McGrath's telling of the historical story of Harold's first wife who

had to be "set aside" so that he could take a new wife that was approved by the Church. The reason given was that they were married under the old Anglo-Saxon marriage custom of "hand-fasting," which had its roots in pre-Christian practice.

The Church insisted that this was unacceptable for a King of England, so when he inherited the crown he was pressured to make a new political marriage with a suitable woman, and the ceremony would be conducted under the new Church protocol. McGrath drives home this cultural shift by depicting a scene of tension between an old local parish priest, who was intended to carry out the *Æcerbot* ritual with Edith, and a new, younger priest, who is adamantly against it. In her story, he is later revealed to be in league with the Normans.

With this historical backdrop, it is no wonder that most of these practices died out. And, it is more astonishing still that any have survived into modern times. And so, now we circle back to wassailing.

The word "wassail" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *was hæl*, which means "be healthy" or "good health to you." It was initially used as a greeting or toast, but came to be associated with other meanings as well. The meanings most known by modern readers are the alcoholic beverage and the custom of going door to door "a-wassailing," which was basically caroling while imbibing wassail, the beverage (again, more on this in my article on Christmas Carols). However, there is a third meaning which is lesser known among audiences outside of England: wassailing the apple trees.

Like the other versions of wassail and wassailing, this custom was primarily associated with the Yuletide season. It is speculated that wassailing the orchards occurred widely in Britain, but dwindled until it survived mainly in the cider-making regions of southwest England; and it seems that this custom varied by location. Tristram P. Coffin, in his *The Book of Christmas Folklore*, says that wassailing was

mainly focused on apple orchards (p34). But, Simpson and Roud explain in their “dictionary” entry that this particular “field-visiting custom” was performed to “usually fruit trees, but also sometimes to other farm crops, animals, and so on” (Simpson & Roud, 380). The general gist of the ritual goes as follows:

In some cases it is performed by the farmer who owns the orchard, along with his wife, family, and others (presumably neighbors or field hands), and in other cases it was performed by a large number of villagers in a day-long procession guided by the local priest who lead them around the major orchards of the parish – not unlike the Field Remedy ritual.



Above: British Stamp depicting an image of sowing and reaping, from the Domesday Book which was written shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Below: “The Orchard,” a tapestry designed by William Morris and John Henry Dearle in 1890



In some locales the wassailing was performed on a particular date, such as Christmas Eve or Twelfth Night. In others it could occur any time during the Christmas and New Year’s season.

In any case, the group of people performing the ceremony would enter the orchard and circle about a favored tree. Usually songs were sung, which seems to hearken back to the notion of charms which would be spoken or sung often in old Anglo-Saxon tradition. There was a strong element of magic in the spoken word in Anglo-Saxon culture.

The group brings with them cider, or a related alcoholic beverage such as wassail made with cider, or ale infused with apples. They bring also bread or cakes, shotguns, sticks, and lanterns, as this is usually performed at nightfall. The trees are whacked with sticks to awaken the good spirits of the trees, while shotguns are fired through the branches to scare off the malicious spirits that would interfere with the upcoming crop. Songs are sung to request the aid of the good spirits and beseech them to do their best to ensure a good crop. In return for their help, offerings are given to the spirits. The beverage is poured about the tree roots, and the bread is soaked in the alcoholic drink and left in the branches. The unnamed author/editor of the website PIEreligion.org (PIE standing for Proto-Indo-European), which I have found to be scholarly and very well researched, has this to say about this practice:

There are parallels among all the northern Europeans, described as a group in the Golden Bough which gives examples in Germany, Scandinavia and the Slavic countries, and with many additional descriptions in folk lore literature in various countries. The performance of apple tree wassails is perfectly in accord with the Indo-European ritual of offering to a Goddess, in a symbolic way, a small portion of what she has given as an acknowledgment of her gifts and as thanks. Offering cakes and ale, or in this case, cake dipped in cider, for thanks and for future prosperity is exactly typical of the Indo-European ritual of offering (<http://piereligion.org>).

So, it seems that we can definitely see parallels between the Field Remedy and Wassailing the Orchards. Both contain elements of pre-Christian origin that continued on into the Christian era. Both have connections to the fertility and spirituality of the Earth. Both harken back to an Anglo-Saxon heritage, as well as to a broader Indo-European origin that connects with neighboring cultures as well.

Bear in mind that when scholars discuss Celts, Germanics, and so forth, what they are actually referring to is language speakers more than any other affiliation. So, I would argue that if English is your native tongue, you are an heir of Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage, regardless of other ethnic identifiers. There really is a unity among *all* people, and especially so among interrelated cultures. As we in the West have learned to embrace foreign cultures, it may be time that we look to our own cultural heritage and find unity in our shared past. Indeed, Christianity was a foreign belief system that replaced our indigenous spirituality. But, there

is a fervent renewal of interest in our ancestral folkways today. Perhaps we can look to our past to inspire our present and pave the way toward our future.

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