

Universal ancient sacredness of Holly

One of the most striking features of Holly is its universal sacredness to all developed pre-Christian cultures throughout the world, especially with its properties for prophetic dreams, hallucinations and magic. It is arguably the most sacred plant of human history considering its association to hero, myth and ritual.

Throughout Europe holly was believed to repel evil, & this belief lingers to the modern day. An old tradition of bringing holly boughs into one's house in winter, as a place for good fairies to play, is echoed down to our own era, when holly wreaths are brought indoors for Christmas, to await the arrival of the winter elf king Santa.

It was long regarded as unlucky to leave these holly wreaths up after Twelfth Night, so it was consigned to the fireplace on New Year's Eve. Others felt that good luck could be obtained by keeping a sprig from a holly wreath that had been used as a Yuletide decoration within a church, hence the wreaths would be cut to pieces to divide among church members.

The Celts of the British Isles & Gaul believed the Holly King ruled over death & winter, whereas the Oak King ruled life & summer. This ancient (conceivably originally Druidic) belief was preserved into medieval times in mummers' plays, & has modernly been adapted to the Druidic revival & other pagan systems of faith. The Holly King was a warlike giant who bore a great wooden club made of a thick holly branch. He found his way into Arthurian Legend as the Green Knight, who challenged Sir Gawain during a Yuletide feast, baring as his weapon "a solitary branch of holly."

In Scandinavian mythology the Holly belonged to Thor & Freya. Holly's association with Thor's lightning meant that it could protect people from being struck by bolts. Norsemen & Celts would plant a holly tree near their homes specifically to take lightning strikes & protect a house & its inhabitants. The

crooked lines of the holly leaves probably gave rise to the association with lightning, as well as the fact that hollies do conduct lightning into the ground better than most trees, with the least injury to the tree.

So too Freya or Frigga had authority over weather, & if Thor was the lightning, Freya was the thunder. The Grimms' Fairy Tale of "Mother Holly" (or "Frau Holda") is a recollection of Frigga compounded with an even more ancient Earthmother named Hulta ("Elderberry") involved with a rich Mythology of the Elderberry Tree.

In the charming tale of Mother Holly, her troublemaking cat sets off all sorts of bad weather by getting into Mother Holly's things. He then eats Mother Holly's corn. When Mother Holly discovers the mischief the cat has done, she doesn't punish the cat, because the corn caused the kitty's stomach to rumble as with thunder, a sound that pleased her.

Although Mother Holly of the Grimms' tale is a winter hag or witch associated with the holly because it is a winter fruit-bearing tree, she also had a maidenly spring & summer aspect, when she was associated with the Elderberry Tree which flowers in spring & fruits in summer. As Frau Holda, then, she is identifiable not just with Teutonic Frigga, but with the Scandinavian goddess Hulda or Hulta. Much of Freya's holly mythology at a more archaic level regarded Hulda's two aspects of maidenly life-giving (with the edible summer-fruited Elderberry) & crone death-bringing (with the poisonous winter-fruited Holly).

In Shinto mythology the Japanese holly (*I. crenata*) held a similar position as that of the holly in Europe. When the Sun-goddess Amaterasu withdrew into her cavern & refused to come out, the erotic clown-goddess Uzume hung a sacred jewel & a sacred mirror in the branches of a holly, & began to dance about the black-fruited holly tree in a humorously sexy manner to attract the attention of Amaterasu & draw her out of the cavern so that Spring would begin. A luck-charm is down to the present day sold in Japan, consisting of a glass ball etched with holly leaves, symbolic of Amaterasu's mirror, jewel, & tree. As an aside, it cannot be coincidental that when Demeter withdrew into hiding & winter fell upon the land, it was a similar Clown-goddess, Baubo, who while

dancing in an effort to cheer up Demeter, suddenly mooned the Goddess with her buttocks, on which a face had been painted, winning from Demeter her only laughter of the season.

In another Japanese legend, Prince Yamato, one of the greatest of the doomed heroes of history & myth, was said to have done battle with a spear the handle of which was made of holly wood, a symbol of divine authority.

A New Years charm popular in Japan consists of a holly leaf & skewer. This represents the Buddhist monk-god Daikoku. Once when he was about to be attacked by an oni devil, the rat that dwelt with Daikoku as a friendly companion hurried into the garden to fetch the monk a holly branch, bringing it to him in the nick of time, since an oni devil will not go near holly. To this day, there lingers a rustic Japanese tradition of hanging a holly sprig on the door to the house to keep away devils, not at all unlike numerous holly-related beliefs in Europe.

In the American southeast & southwest, yaupon holly (*I. vomitoria*) was used in mystic cultic practices, overimbibed to induce vomiting & hallucination as a purification ritual. Archeologists have found ritual shell-cups with the evaporated holly residue dating to 1,200 BCE. There are only intimations of what the yaupon holly myths within this ancient cult may have been, but it was sacred to the Cherokee & Creek at least into the 1930s.

In South America, the Guarada people tell the tale of the bearded god Pa-i-shume who taught many things to mortals, including how to make the stimulating & health-giving mate beverage from the leaves of the Paraguay holly tree (*I. paraguayensis*).

Considering how widespread holly mythology is, the Romans may have independently regarded the holly as sacred, but it is more likely they coopted its ritualistic use from the Celts, hanging winter sprigs upon images of Saturn during winter's violently erotic Saturnalia.

The (Solstice) Yule Tree

Yule marks the longest night of the year -- the triumph of the dark half of the year. Night and darkness have reached their apex and the Wheel turns to restore balance. The dawn heralds the return of the sun, bringer of light, warmth, and growth. In the days following Yule, the sun's power grows steadily, encroaching upon the night, pushing back the darkness.

The Yule tree, the Holy Tree ("Holly Tree") (recognized in modern times as the "Christmas tree") is an ancient symbol of life, fertility and vitality. In the ancient German Saxon culture, the Holly Tree, the Yule Tree just outside Marburg was considered the most sacred because it had been planted by a descendent of the cuileann (Holy 'men').

The Yule Tree (Holy Tree) itself was equivalent to Stonehenge to the ancient Germans in that the arrival of the Holy men represented the saving of the ancient hunter gatherer tribes from hell, cannibalism, human sacrifice and starvation to organized society. To them, it represented the start of the Earth and the source of all life.

On coming to the throne in 768, the Christian Emperor Charlemagne launched a vicious campaign of evangelism against the Saxons of Germany. The first thing he did was cut down the Holly Tree, effecting desecrating the most sacred living icon of all Saxons.

Holly and Christianity

In spite of Charlemagne best efforts, no other plant is more sacred to Christian history than the Holly, in spite of the fact that it is not native to any part of the Middle East or North Africa.

Holly as the wood of the cross

Holly is one of the trees said to be the tree of Christ's cross. Legend tells us that the trees of the forests refused the defilement of the cross, splintering into tiny fragments at the touch of the ax. Only the holly behaved like an ordinary tree, allowing itself to be cut and formed into a cross. It is as a Passion symbol that holly is found in pictures of various saints. Its presence indicates that the saint is either reflecting upon Christ's Passion or foretelling it.

Holly as the crown of thorns

In Germany, holly is called Christdorn in memory of Christ's crown of thorns. According to legend, the holly's branches were woven into a painful crown and placed on Christ's head while the soldiers mocked him saying, "Hail, King of the Jews." The holly's berries used to be white but Christ's blood left them with a permanent crimson stain. German tradition still call Holly by the name "Christ's Thorn"

Holly and the birth of Jesus

Another legend about this Christmas plant says that a little orphan boy was living with the shepherds when the angels came to announce the birth of the newborn king. Having no gift for the baby, the child wove a crown of holly branches for its head. But when he lay it before Christ, he became ashamed of its poverty and began to cry. Miraculously, Jesus touched the crown and it began to sparkle while the orphan's tears turned into beautiful scarlet berries.

Holly protecting the "holy" family from Herod

Holly was believed formerly to have been deciduous, until Herod's soldiers came to slay the baby Jesus. At Mary's request, the holly tree regained its leaves in winter so that her infant could be hidden in the foliage.

Fact and fiction

While many other plants and often weeds (such as Mistletoe) have been deliberately or ignorantly raised up as having ancient significance to our ancestors, no other plant or more universally sacred, more universally mysterious than the Holy Tree, the "Holly".