**Cut from my article on Cernunnos in *Witches and Pagans* #39.**

The article is coming in the summer of 2021. It was about 5,000 words too long, so this was chopped out of it. You can see some of the artwork mentioned on the Gallery page of this site.

**Cernunnos in Ceremony:**

Several British Isles folkdancers, or Morris dance troupes, have a costumed stag mascot or “beastie” who accompanies the dancers on Mayday / Beltane, or Yule / Christmas / Twelfth Night. Other folk dances and folk plays feature a hooded beast who is not a deer at all, but still a herd animal. The *Mari Lwyd* of Wales, the “Old Horse” or “hoodening” plays of Kent, and dramatizations that incorporate a ram, goat, or bull, might be considered as ritual dances. The “Derby Tup”, a carven wood ram or goat head, or a ram skull complete with horns, is affixed to a pole and decorated with ribbons. “Tupping” is a slang term for the sex act, and the ram’s theme song has to do with mating, which might have the overtones of a fertility rite. The Tup’s operator is covered by a sheet, and the hooded animal is accompanied through town by a devil figure, a cross-dressing “Molly”, and a butcher who ultimately slaughters the ram. The “Broad” of the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire is a bull’s head on a pole, or a facsimile created from rags, fur, or a rutabaga decorated with ribbons. His attendants carry a wassail bowl and a carved turnip or rutabega Jack o’ Lantern. On the Isle of Lewis in the Hebrides of Scotland, a ritual from the past featured a man wearing a bullhide cape who was ejected from the Christmas party at the manor house. In order to get back indoors, the bull had to engage in mock combat, as well as tell puns and jokes.

**Cernunnos Art:**

A relief, or carven stone, of a young, beardless, antlered Cernunnos comes from Vendoeuvres, Indre, France. The deity is flanked by two cherubs who touch his rack of antlers, and stand upon two curled serpents. The Stag God is seated cross-legged, holding a bag on his lap. The icon is believed to date from the second century C.E. A lesser-known stone carving of a bearded Cernunnos was found at Cirencester in Gloucestershire, England, wherein he is seated, and grasping two snakes. Although his antlers have been worn away by time, their outlines still faintly exist. A free-standing bronze statue of a bearded Cernunnos holding two ram-horned snakes under his arms, wearing a torc around his neck and one at his waist, is from Étang-sur-Arroux, Saône-et-Loire, in France. This statue is missing the horns, but there are cavities in the sides of his head that archeologists believe were sockets for real deer’s antlers. Here, the entity appears to be older, with a receding hairline. He is tri-cephalic, meaning having three heads, as the back of the statue has two more sculpted faces. A similar sculpture was recovered at Sommerécourt, Haute-Marne, France, of a seated Cernunnos, with holes for antlers, and two serpents. What is usually referred to as the Reims Altar from Reims, France, shows Cernunnos seated on a dais, holding a bag of coins (or grains, or nuts) on his lap, the small round objects flowing over his knees to the ground. He has the receding hairline of age, but a full beard. The Greco-Roman deities Apollo and Mercury stand beside him. A rat is perched on a shelf above his head, and a bull and stag are posed at his feet. Although most of his antlers are now broken off, their outlines are clearly visible.

One of the most recent artefact discoveries was from 2018, in an excavation at the National Trust’s Wimpole Estate in Cambridgeshire, England. A tiny copper figurine of a seated human holding a torc is believed to be dated from around the second century C.E. Although it is faceless, and lacking horns or antlers, archeologists speculate that the little statuette is indeed Cernunnos, because of his posture and the symbolic neckpiece.

**The Horned Lord in Brit Trad Witchcraft:**

Some non-Wiccan British Traditional Witchcraft rituals may include a male leader who wears the antlers of a buck deer or the horns of a goat, taking on the aspects of an entity who represents the natural world. The folkloric figures of Ol’ Horney, Ol’ Scrat, or Ol’ Crockhern may be a continuation or a revival of hooded animal folkplays. In Norfolk, “Ol’ Harry” or “Ol’ Hairy” is viewed as a representative of sexual pleasure, and can be hardcore about achieving his magickal ends. “Calabar” is a word of power used by East Anglians to invoke Ol’ Horney, in the midst of a three-feet in diameter circle outlined by chalk or soot, called the “Witches’ Compass”. These entities resemble stags or male goats, and can symbolize fertility, ecstatic rites, Shamanic journeys, and underworld deities.

Cornish and Welsh traditional Witchcraft reveres an anthropomorphic Bucca or Buca (different than the hobgoblin or sea creature of folkore – the word *Buca* actually means “buck” in the Cymraeg [Welsh] language). This deity has two aspects: the dark, frightsome underworld representation of winter, called the Bucca *Dhu*, vs. the sexually ardent, passionate rutting deer- or goat-headed god of springtime, the Bucca *Gwyddn* or *Widn*. Cornish folklorist William Bottrell equated the Bucca with the “Bugaboo” or “Boogey man”. The entity might also be associated with the Púca, Pwca, Phouka, or Pooka of Ireland and Wales, a phantom horse or goat that can destroy crops and wreak havoc – or alternatively, bring good fortune. Sometimes, the Pooka appeared as an anthropomorph, with a goat’s head and man’s body. On occasion, the Bucca of Cornwall appears as a black goat, called the Wildwood Lord, representing the winter season and death. The Grand Bucca, or Bucca *Gam*, represents life, fertility, and summertime.

The Bucca *Dhu* may have evolved into or merged with the “Man in Black”, of some Traditional British Witchcraft groups, an entity viewed by some as demonic. This being might also have his origin in an Underworld persona called *yr Angau* by the Welsh and Cornish, and *l’Ankou* by the residents of Britany. The psychopomp, whose names simply mean “the Death”, is featured on tombstones as a skull-faced Grim Reaper, or in folklore as a black-clad, scrawny old man driving a death-cart with one squeaky wheel, pulled by a skinny white horse. This legend could be where Gardener and Valiente got their interpretation of Cernunnos as the “dread lord of the shadows”.

Wiccans have long denied that the Craft has anything to do with devil worship. Yet some Brit Trad Witches call the male leader /high priest /magister of their coven /convine /cuveen /coveen or group by names including “The Man in Black” or “The Devil”. While Ol’ Horney or the Bucca are not equated by practitioners with the Christian devil or Satan, it’s possible that bystanders conflated the folkloric horned deities with diabolic beings. Or perhaps, as Dr. Murray suggested, outsiders saw bits of hooded animal rituals, performed outdoors in the woods after dark, and confused these rites with demon worship. Some anthropologists postulate that the Christian devil did not actually have horns, a tail, hooves, and other animalistic qualities, prior to church officials’ encounters with the horned effigies of Pan, Cernunnos or the Bucca.

A tool frequently employed in folkloric magick or Brit Trad Witchcraft is the long wooden staff, topped by a deer or goat skull, or an antler or set of horns. This is called a stang, *gwellen*, *herwydd*, or moonrake, depending on the originating culture and language. The stang is used to connect earth and sky, as a method for drawing and disseminating power, and as a protective implement. It also represented the Bucca in both of his aspects, light and dark. However, the custom of the stang ranges beyond Wales and Cornwall.

In 1255, historians recorded a ceremony that took place in Wessex, in which 13 Anglo-Saxon villagers gathered, cut off the head of a stag, impaled it on a stake, and turned it to face the sun. This ritual was said to be either an insult or curse aimed toward the Norman king Henry III and his appointed forester. The implement was called a *nithing*, *nithling*, or nodding pole, or a *nidstang*. Norse Heathenry had a similar rite involving the *nithing* pole or *nidstang*, using the head of a horse, as a hex or insult toward an enemy. The Teutonic tribes also used a horse skull on a pole for a boundary marker and symbol of ownership, which was called an *ermula*.

However, a stag-pole, which features a stag’s head or skull on a staff, was and is usually a symbol associated with a male ritual leader, and thereby the horned forest entity he represented. There are still several “Stagpole” or “Stackpool” streets in England today. In the 1800s, several taverns in the Highgate region of London required customers to swear an oath of fealty upon a pair of antlers. This custom, called “swearing on the horns”, may have been the remnant of an older hunting fraternity.

**Cernunnos Conundrums:**

Our beloved Stag King, the Lord of the Beasts, Master of the Wilderness is the subject of many a mystery. He is a God of fertility and sexuality… and death. He is a wild, untamed hunter and warrior… and an entity associated with commerce. We’ve explored a few conundrums about Cernunnos, but just wait, there are more:

*Enigmas of Sexuality and Mortality:*

The well-endowed “Sorcerer” cave painting in the Cavern of Les Trois-Frères has a clearly defined phallus, as does the petroglyph in Val Camonica. The horned snake found on many artifacts featuring the Horned One may represent sexual energy, and a man’s organ, but also wisdom. Ram-headed snakes are not only found on the Gundestrup Cauldron, but also on the Cernunnos statue in Cirencester, twined around the entity’s legs, and the bronze image at Sommerécourt, where a Cernunnos figure is encircled by serpents, who eat from a bowl in his lap. Some philosophers have associated the snake with the Kundalini energy, or life force. Others believe the ram-headed serpent is actually a dragon, symbolic of both sexuality and destruction.

While Cernunnos is best known for his place in the Wiccan duality as a consort of the Great Goddess, splendid in his masculine prowess… he is also an icon for Gay culture. Many modern artists have portrayed him as a lover of men, an archetype of unbridled sexuality. Hairy, bearded, and ardent as a rutting stag, Cernunnos appeals to guys who are excited by the “bear” body type and disposition. Likewise, the Greek deity Pan is often shown in congress with a young male paramour. The Lord of the Forest is also appealing to the Transsexual community, as he can transmogrify at will.

Symbols indicating the Horned Lord is an entity with the attributes of death include the rat, a burrowing animal known to feast on corpses, symbolic of the Underworld. The rat is quite prominent on the Reims alter piece. Likewise, the snake and boar often dig into the earth. The snake might be identified with the Hindu naga, an entity of wisdom and death – or Shamanic trance. Snakes might also symbolize regeneration. The bag of coins or nuts, such as the one depicted with Cernunnos on the Reims altar, are understood to symbolize prosperity, but are also associated with underworld deities, mining and buried treasure. As the Romans called him “dis Pater”, the wealthy father, it might indicate a connection with the afterlife, as that Italic entity is sometimes allied with Pluto or Hades. The name could also indicate abundance and riches.

*Civilization vs. Wilderness Enigma:*

The Cernunnos seated in the lotus position in the Romano-Gaulish statues and bas-relief carvings, and the famous Master of the Beasts sitting cross-legged with his torque on the Gundestrup Cauldron, suggest a meditative, reflective Shamanic being, at peace in the woodlands. Animals such as pigs, cattle and dogs imply domestication. These images are in contrast to the Mesolithic cave paintings and bone carvings, which depict a dancing bearded tangle-haired huntsman with a bow and arrow, poised to shoot his quarry, or a powerful horned beast-man. As mainland Europe became more “civilized”, it is likely that Cernunnos did, as well. Even Pan is depicted as serene, hanging out with sheep, and cute shepherds, rather than slaughtering animals. The Horned Lord may have undergone a transformation from a wildly animalistic forest entity and fearsome deadly deity, to the more dignified figure of Roman statuary, when the Celtic territories were conquered, or even earlier, when nomadic hunter-gatherer or herding societies began to settle down and became agrarian. The praxes collectively called “the deer cult” declined in civilizations which switched from hunting to agriculture, thus domesticating animals as a food source.

However, then a throwback occurred: The fearsome ragged-horned Herne the Hunter in William Shakespeare’s play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* who walks abroad at midnight through Windsor Forest, rattling his chains and blasting trees, forcing cattle to give blood instead of milk, is a more dramatic, vengeful deity than the sedate Romanized Cernunnos. Sir Walter Scott portrayed Herne as a ghostly suicide victim, haunting his tormentors, which may have to do with ancestral memories of the Saxon and Norman conquests. Folklorist Jacob Grimm connected Herne to his position as a chthonic entity, and the leader of the Wild Hunt. This version of the Horned One may have come from the Teutonic tribes’ stories of Wotan, whom the Norse revere as Oðinn. Herne also became somehow conflated with the Welsh Gwynn ap Nudd, a lord of the netherworld, King of the Fairies, and a psychopomp, or conductor on the road to the land of the dead.

In Celtic areas where the Romans and Saxons had less influence, the Stag God remained more of a Nature deity – as the terror of the wilderness lies cheek-by-jowl with the splendor of the Natural world. The dual aspect of the Welsh and Cornish Bucca *Dhu* /Bucca *Gwyddn* speaks to the dichotomy of darkness and light, winter and summer, death and life. Neither Bucca is much like the gentle Cernunnos of Wicca, consort of the Goddess and woodland steward. This could be in part due to Gardner’s romanticization of the Forest Lord – Grandpa Gerald was a member of English polite society, while the devotees of the Bucca were rustic farmers, skilled tradesfolk and hunters, (and crafty poachers, when hunting was made illegal) who actually lived close to the earth. Welsh and Cornish practitioners of folk magic were more likely to have to slaughter their own food, propitiate the beings dwelling in unseen realms, and pray for the fertility of their animals in spring, and thus they were closer to the natural cycles of life and death.

We see a similar sanitization of a woodland being in the romantic image of the “Woodwose”, or “wild man of the woods”, who seems like a cross between our modern legends of Bigfoot and the fairy-tale hermits or aging woodcutters who adopted lost orphans. Woodwoses appeared on heraldic symbols of the Anglo-Saxons and Normans, to the carvings in Canterbury Cathedral, to charming storybooks of the Victorian era. While the Woodwose was wild, he was usually portrayed as harmless, even benevolent. Thus, he was much like the Wiccan view of Cernunnos. The English middle-classes and petty gentry who rediscovered Witchcraft in the 20th century seemed to have wanted to get in touch with Nature, but perhaps they needed a safer version of the God of the natural world. They seem to have preferred parklike gardens and manicured lawns rather than the tanglewood forests and dark, fecund swamps, and thus, they likely felt more comfortable with Cernunnos as a father, consort, lover and fertility figure.

*The Enigma of Youth /Father /Sage:*

Many historians have tried to debunk the modern Wiccan belief in a triplicate Goddess who has aspects as Maiden, Mother, and Crone, and the parallel of Youth, Father / Warrior and Sage for a male deity. However, Cernunnos does appear as a beardless youth on the Gundestrop Cauldron and in the bas relief of Vendoeuvres, with the twin cherubs. He is portrayed as a bearded hunter and father figure everywhere from Roman statues, frescoes and mosaics to an Irish dolmen to the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic carvings and paintings. To the Celts, a beard was a symbol of manhood and paternity. On the Pillar of the Boatmen in Paris, with the only inscription of the name Cernunnos, the antlered god has the receding hairline and jowls of old age. Likewise, he seems to be an elder on the Reims altar vessel, and on the bronze statue of Étang-sur-Arroux. The entity depicted in all of the artefacts is connected by his accessories, the torc (neckpiece) signifying rulership, the animals, the horned snake, the eight-spoked wheel and bag of coins, as well as his antlers or horns. Not only is Cernunnos shown in the three stages of life, he is also sometimes portrayed as a triplicate entity, along with Mercury /Hermes and Jupiter, or with Mercury and Apollo. On the Étang-sur-Arroux statue, Cernunnos is also tri-cephalic.

**From Wild to Wealthy:**

While many of us envision the Horned Lord as a symbol of male virility, he also brings plentitude and abundance. Along with the civilizing Roman influence on Cernunnos comes capitalism. The presence of one or more torcs signifies wealth and importance. Mercury and Cernunnos together could mean that he was a patron of merchants, as Mercury was also a god of commerce. The Horned Lord is portrayed on some Romano-Gaulish reliefs with a cornucopia, or horn of plenty, and on several statues or carvings with a bag of grain, nuts, or coins, such as on the Reims altar. Hazelnuts are traditionally viewed as a symbol of prosperity. In Cirencester in Gloucestershire, England, a stone carving portrays Cernunnos with a bowl of what is believed to be grain, used to feed two ram-headed snakes, and bags of goodies to either side. Images of bulls and boars (male pigs) indicated that the Horned One is associated with agricultural fecundity. In an image found in what is now Luxembourg, a horned entity pours out hazelnuts or coins from a sack. In fact, Cernunnos or a similar antlered, bearded figure is actually portrayed *on* some Iron Age coins, as the obverse face or portrait on ancient money.

The Catalaunii tribe of southern Britain stamped images of an antlered, bearded entity on their golden or silver coins prior to the Roman conquest. Several of the coins are believed to be dated as far back as 60 to 30 B.C.E. These objects of trade also featured eight-spoked wheels, horses, and sunwheels. The horned being is sometimes outfitted in a helmet, with braided hair and a torc. Found at Petersfield in Hampshire, England was a Celtic silver coin from around the year 20 C.E., featuring an antlered deity with a solar wheel. These are similar to coins bearing the visage of Alexander the Great wearing ram’s horns, attesting to his virility, power and wealth. Numismatic catalogs assure collectors that the British coins feature the images of Cernunnos, or possibly a Shaman portraying the deity.

**Cernunnos as Consort:**

Although Wiccans revere Cernunnos as the consort of the Great Goddess, there are only two known portrayals of the Horned Lord with any feminine figure. One is from the sculpture of Sommerécourt, and the other is on a monument at Saintes, France, where a headless Cernunnos is seated cross-legged to the right of a woman. We can be reasonably sure that it is Himself, as he holds a torc. Some archeologists think the female might be related to the horned women, possibly Goddesses, on small bronze figurines discovered at Clermont-Ferrand, in Puy de Dôme, France, and at Besançon, Doubs, France. Other Goddesses related to hunting, or who wear horns, include the Greek Artemis, the Roman Diana, the Egyptian Hathor, but also a ceramic bust found at Richborough, Kent, England, and a statuette currently held by the British Museum. The legends of Flidas of Ireland imply that she is a woodland Goddess of deer, or of cattle. One of female horned beings in Clermont-Ferrand is depicted holding a cornucopia.

Yet where did this notion of Cernunnos as consort to the Great Goddess come from? Likely the story was one of the imaginings of poet Robert Graves, who wrote *The White Goddess*, or of Sir James Frazer, who authored *The Golden Bough*. Both writers had romantic images of the Horned God as a sacrificial entity, who died in autumn and was reborn in the spring. Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente brought the notions of the sacrificial God and the consort of the Great Goddess to the liturgy of Wicca and neo-Paganism, where they’re likely to stay. They also reimaged the Horned God as father, lover, and son. All things considered about the enigmatic, charismatic Cernunnos, that is not an unpleasant image to revere.

**Cernunnos and Christianity:**

As in the Yaqui *Pahkolam*, Christianity and Paganism are likewise melded by modern people with links to a mystical Master of the Beasts. In Britany (now the Northeastern coast of France) in the region surrounding Carnac (Karnag in the Breton language) and the town of Rennes, there is a sacred healing well and over 10,000 Neolithic megaliths (dolmens, standing stones) which have an interesting folk history. A small bronze figurine of a cow was discovered by an amateur archeologist within the holy well, now on display in the Carnac museum, leading some modern writers to believe that a “cult of cattle” led by a horned entity was once prevalent in the region. St. Cornelly, a Breton folk saint uncanonized by the Catholic church, was said to be able to heal cattle who were sick. His shrine portrays him standing with a cow on either side. He is named in the “Benediction of the Beasts”, where Catholic priests bless the cattle. Cornelly supposedly turned his herd into dolmens to avoid pursuit by angry Pagans. Or perhaps, instead, a Roman legion was transformed into stone by the Pope-turned-saint called St. Cornelius. In real life, Cornelius allowed Pagans to join the Catholic church and thus avoid persecution. He could be similar to the “de Corneli” of Wales, St. Kentigern of Ireland, and the Cornelly of Cornwall, the patron of wild animals. All of these names: Carnac, Karnag, Cornelly, Cornelius, and Corneli have a root in the proto-Celtic “carn” or Latin “cornu”, associated with antlers or horns. Could this be a vestige of the veneration of Cernunnos?

In a sacred text called the Stuttgart Psalter, which likely originated in Paris and dates from the nineth century C.E., there is an image entitled “Descent into Limbo”. In it, an antlered entity with a serpent is seated cross-legged in a niche with the deity, Hades. Some have considered this to be the link between Cernunnos and the Christian entity called Satan, who wasn’t really a horned, hoofed being before artists began to associate him with Pagan deities, such as Pan.

In the cathedral at Parma, a Cernunnos figure is shown between two animals, seemingly a benevolent figure. In a miniature in a manuscript from the fifteenth century, with subject matter about the Holy Grail, a triple-headed “Satan” figure appears with antlers and deer’s ears. All of these images suggest that Cernunnos crossed paths with Christianity.