



articles

The Holly Tree

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With a surname like mine, it's not hard to guess that the holly holds a particular fascination for me. It seems that many people down the ages have shared this fascination; the holly tree holds a very special place in our hearts. This is shown by the wealth of customs and superstitions associated with it. In particular, it is, of course, linked to the Winter Solstice celebrations. It has become intrinsic to this period, with the leaves and berries conjuring images of Yule, of Christmas, of Saturnalia. It has decorated our homes and places of worship at this time in countless countries and cultures down the ages.

Pagan tree lore - or more specifically - Celtic tree lore is a very problematic area of study. Like many areas of paganism, what we consider ancient is often relatively modern, and much of our Celtic tree lore, such as the tree calendar, and popular interpretations of the Ogham and tree alphabets, date back only as far as Mr Robert Graves, a writer of great insight, whose poetic musings are too often interpreted as historical fact. So, much as I admire Mr Graves and his contributions to neo-paganism, I'm attempting here to circumnavigate his work, and to delve back further into the misty realms of folklore and heritage.

Firstly, let us take a look at the botanical attributes of the holly. It is one of the easiest trees to recognise, with its trademark dark green spiked leaves and blood-red berries. There are many species of holly, with the most common holly being *Ilex Aquifolium*. This name has an interesting history

- as the prefix 'Ilex' originally belonged to the holm oak. The name Ilex became associated with the holly due to the similarity between the two trees, particularly apparent in the juvenile holm oak. I am unsure whether this is a true case of mistaken identity, or simply an observation of similarity. When the system of scientific names was simplified in 1753, the name of 'Quercus' was given to the oak family, with the holm oak taking the name of 'Quercus Ilex.' The name Ilex was then properly assigned to the holly family. An interesting story when considering the pagan associations between the oak and holly trees, as it suggests that in times past, the oak and holly were perhaps seen as cousins rather than opposites. The second part of the name, aquifolium, was first recorded in the writings of Pliny, and literally means needle-leaved.

Male and female flowers are found on separate trees, the berries being found exclusively on the female tree. Which throws all our folklore into disarray - as we shall see, many of the holly myths centre around its being the male counterpart to the 'female' ivy.

Turner's Herbal of 1568 gives it the name 'Holy Tree', earlier names are the hulver, holen, holme (suggesting again that it was considered to be cousin to the holm oak), in Welsh, celyn, in Gaelic, cuileann. Now, many pagans will be familiar with the name 'Tinne' for holly - and yet this does not appear anywhere as a name for the tree. As Berresford-Ellis has pointed out, tinne translates as a rod of metal, or ingot. In fact, many of the so-called 'tree alphabet' names have nothing to do with trees at all - but that can be discussed another time. The holly is listed in the Crith Gablach, a seventh century CE legal poem from Ireland, which mentions the holly as being one of the Noble trees - the others being Birch, Alder, Willow, Oak, Hazel and Apple. One possible connection with the word 'tinne' is that the holly was used to make charcoal, used in the case hardening process by which steel was produced. Winter solstice association.

Think of the holly, and winter festivities immediately spring to mind. The holly seems to have been used for time immemorial to decorate our homes at the time of the solstice, by pagans and Christians alike. These days, it usually takes the form of a holly wreath, hung on the front door, in times past, bunches were hung around the house, both as decoration and for other reasons which we shall explore later.

So why is the holly so widely associated with this time? The winter solstice has always been the time for the most prolonged and widespread celebrations, whether we are celebrating the Unconquered Sun, the birth of a saviour, or the return of the light. Along with celebrations go decorations. And what is generally to be found for decorations at that time of year? Well, not very much. The holly is your best bet, by far the most attractive plant at that time of year, with its glossy dark leaves and luscious red berries. So simply from a practical point of view, it's likely that the holly would have been chosen for party decorations.

But it goes much deeper than this. The holly has developed a complex set of beliefs, folklore and associations connected with it. If these predate its use as decoration or not is impossible to tell, but is certain is that the holly is now forever entwined with the customs of this season.

So what are the associations of the plant with the Winter Solstice time? The first recorded usage was by the Romans, who used it for decoration at Saturnalia. This festival was held in mid-December, and was a time of intense celebrations. 'Strenae', twigs of evergreens - laurel or holly - to which were fastened sweets, were a popular gift. Holly and other evergreens were also used as general decoration. It is important to be aware though, that Saturnalia, while a winter festival, was possibly not a solstice festival. It began on the 17th of December, originally lasting for three days, although this was later stretched out into a week, thus ending on the 23rd of December.

The Christians were quick to use the holly for their own solstice celebrations, perhaps noting it's popularity at this time of year. For the Christian, the holly represented the crown of thorns that Jesus wore, the berries symbolising the drops of blood. According to a medieval legend, holly sprang up from the places where Christ walked. One of its folk names is 'Christ's Thorn'.

A Swiss myth tells that on Palm Sunday, the people threw the palm leaves about the feet of Jesus. As the shout of 'Crucify him' was heard, the trees from which the palm leaves had been cut grew spikes, and so Holly was created. Another Christian myth states that when the holy family needed protection from Herod's soldiers, the holly grew leaves in order to hide them.

While much of this lore is more closely related to Easter, the associations with the crucifixion meant that holly was an acceptable decoration for churches at Christmas, at which time, the berries are in full glory.

However, the church was not always keen on evergreen decorations. In the 6th century, Bishop Martin of Braga tried to put a stop to the practice, but it seems he was fighting a losing battle, and holly became a major feature of Christmas symbolism and decoration. In the 15th century, evergreens were used widely - Stow's Survey of London comments "every man's house, as also the parish churches decked with holm, ivy, bays and whatever the season of the year afforded to be green." Interesting that again, holm is used to describe holly. Holly is often found paired with ivy for decorations. In 15th century London, wreaths of the two plants were placed upon poles in the streets at Christmas. Again, this is perhaps due to the scarcity of greenery during the winter.

However, this in itself contributed to the lore surrounding the two plants, the relationship of which was celebrated in many songs and poems. It is said that decorations of holly and ivy would be kept up from Christmas to Candlemass. In some cases, the decorations were then burnt - perhaps as they made good kindling - or maybe so that any spirits that had become entangled in the leaves would be destroyed, and not be freed as the leaves rotted away. I will look more closely at customs and lore related to the holly a little further on.

Let us first look at some fairly modern pagan lore, that of the Oak King and Holly King. The myth of the Oak King and the Holly King is well known among modern pagans. The basis of the story is that these two great kings represent the polar forces of the year, and that they are in eternal combat, with the Holly King triumphant in winter and the Oak King in summer. But elsewhere in folklore, we are more likely to find that holly celebrations are connected with the ivy, with holly representing the King and ivy the Queen. The most famous example is to be found in the old carol 'The Holly and the Ivy', which is too well known to need repeating here. The song is an old carol, which has probably been altered over the years. As it stands now, the holly and ivy are used as Christian metaphors for Jesus and Mary.

Perhaps the link between oak and holly comes from their proximity in the forest. Not many trees will survive in an oak forest - except holly, which

gleefully grows up in scrubby clumps around the base of the oaks. Therefore, when the oaks lose their leaves in the autumn, the glory of the holly is revealed, and it appears to flourish as the oak sleeps for the winter. This is a possible explanation for the myth.

There are some customs that link the holly and the oak, though here they are seen as male and female, rather than as battling Kings. One such example is the May Day ceremony of the Basilicata region of Italy. A tall oak tree is cut from the forest, he is named 'Maggia' (May.) His female counterpart, 'Cima' (Top) is cut from the top of a many-branched holly tree. The two are paraded about the town, and their union is celebrated. So unusually, here, the holly represents the female, whereas in Britain, customs focus on the supposed male nature of the tree.

One thing that we can consider in the light of this is the story of Gawain and the Green Knight, which is often given as an old source for the Oak King/Holly King combat. The tale first appears in the 14th century, and concerns Gawain, a knight of King Arthur's Court. The story is well known, but I will provide a quick synopsis here: Arthur and his companions are enjoying their Midwinter festivities at Camelot. These are interrupted by the arrival of the Green Knight, a giant of a man, dressed all in green and carrying a sprig of holly.

"Yet he had on no hauberk, nor a helmet for his head, neither neck-guard nor breastplate to break heavy blows, neither shaft nor shield for the shock of combat. But he held in one hand a sprig of holly that bursts out greenest when branches are bare; and his other hand hefted a huge and awful ax, a broad battleax with a bit to tell (take it who can) with a large head four feet long:"

The Green Knight states that the branch he bears signifies his peaceful intentions. However, he has come to the court to play a rather strange game. He challenges any of the knights to cut off his head - with the proviso that in a year and a day, the Green Knight in turn can take the head of his beheader. Gawain rises to the challenge, and takes the head of the Knight. The Green Knight picks up his severed head, and rides from the court. At the end of the year, after a long time spent seeking the home of the Green Knight, Gawain arrives to take the return blow, but the Green Knight does not take his head, instead declaring him to be a knight of

great virtue and honour.

This beheading game is seen by many as a pagan theme, stretching back into the mists of time. Perhaps it is, or perhaps this theme, which feels pagan in nature, has itself influenced us as modern Pagans, and has fed into our modern pagan mythos, so influenced by the likes of Frazer and Graves. It feels like it should be pagan, [so] it has now become pagan.

We must note that, while the Oak King/Holly King myth is bound up in the cycles of the year, so is this myth - but here, all the action takes place during Midwinter, traditionally a time of revelry, strange games and ritual mayhem. Some however, have linked the Green Knight to the Holly King, with Gawain taking the role of the Oak King. I don't think that we can claim that the beheading game in this context and the green knight himself are pagan survivals, despite the temptation. We can say that the author of the story was influenced by older elements, much in the same way as a writer of historical fiction might be today. However, the story here takes place in a Christian context, and was written by a man who seems to have spent the rest of his time writing religious works.

So what part does the holly play in this? Can we link the Green Knight to the Holly King and to a memory of Pagan myth? Unfortunately, no. I believe that the holly branch is used simply as a symbol of the time of year and of peaceful intention - a nod perhaps to the traditional olive branch - though it is peaceful intention with a twist - or a spike. The green colour of the knight represents his magical nature, his wildness, but this is not intended to refer back to pagan belief. He represents the power of nature, which is pitted against the sophisticated civility of Arthur's court. Robert Graves saw these two characters as the Oak and Holly Kings, and many modern Pagans have followed suit.

So if this is not a genuine survival of holly lore, then what is? I will look now at some of the folk songs that concern the holly, often in pairing with the ivy.

As has already been mentioned, the most famous instance of these two trees in folklore, comes from the well known carol 'The Holly and the Ivy.' But there are many more surviving folk songs that speak of the traditional one-upmanship between the two trees, which read like a battle of the sexes. The 'Holly and the Ivy' can be read like this too, in each verse, the

various properties of the trees are extolled, perhaps the carol we have now was adapted from an older song in which the trees competed. The version we have now dates from around 1700.

Stepping back a little earlier, we have a lovely old verse from the 15th century, which reads thus:

Holly and Ivy made a great party
Who should have the mastery
In landes where they go.

Then spoke holly "I am free and jolly,
I will have the mastery
In landes where we go.

Then spake Ivy, "I am lov'd and prov'd,
And I will have the mastery
In landes where we go.

Then spake Holly, and set him down on his knee,
I pray thee gentle Ivy,
Say me no villainy,
In landes where we go.

There is a similar example in these verses here, part of an early carol. Note that an almost identical wording is used - who shall have the 'mastery'. I would speculate that either one song is based upon the other, or upon an unknown original - or that both these songs originate from a specific folk custom. This may have taken the form of a dance that was performed by young men and women, perhaps with local song variations. The carol, a French tradition that was popular in England from the mid twelfth century, was originally a dance song.

Holy with his mery men they can daunce in hall;
Ivy & her ientyll women can not daunce at all,
But lyke a meyny of bullokes in a water fall,
Or on a whot somer's day whan they be mad all.
Nay, nay, ive, it may not be iwis;

For holy must haue the mastery, as the maner is.

Holy & his merry men sytt in cheyres of gold;

Ivy & her ientyll women sytt withowt in ffold,

With a payre of kybid helis cawght with cold.

So wold I that euery man had, that with yvy will hold.

Nay, nay, ive, it may not be iwis;

For holy must haue the mastery, as the maner is.

Let us now take a look at the many superstitions associated with the holly. Perhaps the most famous of these superstitions is that to cut down a holly tree is extremely unlucky. Hence, you will often find a neat hedgerow with an immense holly tree growing up in the middle of it. Why this should be so is uncertain. It might be that the name 'Holly' is a corruption of 'Holy', signifying a sacred tree, but there is no agreement on this. And if the tree was spared due to its sacred nature, we can't be sure if this is down to its Christian associations or to a pagan survival - or both. As we shall see shortly, the holly is widely seen as a protective tree. It is possible that the bad luck comes not from the cutting of the tree per se, but rather, will occur due to the absence of the tree.

It is also said by some that it is unlucky to cut a branch from a holly tree - it must be pulled off instead.

It seems that red berries were commonly thought to ward off evil. Therefore, trees such as holly and rowan were seen as having protective properties. Sprigs of both were hung in houses to ward off malign spirits and demons. Perhaps it was also thought that the prickly nature of the holly would act as a deterrent. So the combination of red berries and spiked leaves made the holly an excellent choice for a householder wanting to protect her home. Frazer records beliefs that holly was thought to be hateful to witches, but he put this down to the connection to Jesus' crown of thorns, rather than a pagan survival. I am inclined to agree with him, but it is also true that instances of the protective nature of holly appears in other cultures, both pagan and Christian. Therefore, during the Winter Solstice, the holly provided both colourful decoration and protection from the malign forces, which were often feared at this time of greatest darkness.

After the battle of Dunbar in 1650, Scottish prisoners were taken to

Norfolk to drain the fens. It is said that they stuck twigs of holly around their sleeping quarters to protect against evil spirits. Sometimes, the door frame of a house would be made of holly for the same reason. Holly trees and hedges planted around a house were also grown for their protective properties.

In the North of England, it is recorded that holly was used for divination. Nine leaves of smooth leaved holly should be taken and placed under the pillow. This would result in prophetic dreams. Unfortunately, I don't know when this superstition first appeared. It appears to be an ancient form, but new folk beliefs are often based on things considered to be effective or magical in earlier times. The belief in the magical nature of the number nine and of the holly appears in Celtic, Germanic and Scandinavian cultures, so it's very hard to discern the origin of the superstition. It's interesting that it should be smooth leaved holly - this perhaps helps the dreamer get a good night's sleep - I imagine that prickly holly would guarantee very interesting dreams!

A variation on this belief states that this divination was practiced by young girls wishing to dream of their future husbands. The holly must be gathered into a white, three cornered cloth, which must be knotted nine times. Yet another variation states that this must all be carried out while perfect silence is observed. This is said to make your dreams come true.

Another odd custom from the north of England runs thus: that on any one of a number of special days, a young girl can bring three buckets of water into her bedroom, and go to sleep with a sprig of holly fastened at her breast. She would be awoken by three raucous shouts, and wild laughter, after which, she would see a vision of her future husband. The husband would move the buckets in a manner that suggested their attachment to each other. If the buckets remained untouched, he would not care for her.

There are two possible interpretations of these superstitions. Firstly, that it is not the holly itself which grants the prophetic visions, but the spirits that live in the holly. The three shouts and the laughter are sounds made by these spirits. Or secondly, that the visions are connected with the time of year - usually Samhuinn, Yule or Bealtinne, turning points of the year, in-between times at which the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld are drawn aside. The holly is present in order to protect the dreamer from any harm that might occur as a result of the visions.

In some areas, smooth holly was thought to be 'she-holly', while the prickly sort was male. Perhaps this link with the female is the reason that smooth holly is chosen for the divination discussed above? Another folk belief is that if smooth holly is brought first into the house at Yule, then the wife will rule the husband during the next year - and vice versa for prickly holly. So again, we have the battle of the sexes enacted through the holly, but here, the holly itself is representing both parties. Strangely, some churches in the south of England only permitted smooth leaved holly to be used for decorations. And yet, as we have seen, it was the prickles that were usually thought to have protective properties against undesirable beings.

In Somerset, it was unlucky for holly to be brought into the house before Xmas Eve, and then, it must only be brought in by a man. This is likely to be connected to the battle of the sexes songs and lore, in which as we saw, holly was the masculine plant. It was also thought unlucky to choose holly that had no berries, as this would signify infertility in the year to come.

In his *Theatrum Botanicum* of 1640, John Parkinson notes that holly offered protection from witches, and that it would prevent a house being struck by lightning. He thought that these beliefs originated with Pliny. I wonder if the connection with lightning is a case of sympathetic magic, with the jagged shape of the leaves echoing the forks of lightning bolts. Pliny recorded the protective power of the tree, saying that a holly tree planted in a town or country house, wards off magic. Pythagoras also mentions the power of the holly. He believed that its flowers were able to solidify water - a curious statement. Pythagoras describes strange attractive powers of the holly - a stick from the tree thrown at any animal, even if it falls short because the thrower lacks strength, rolls nearer the target of its own accord. Pliny gives a similar example, an animal hit with a holly stick will be subdued and compelled to obey the wielder of the stick.

This is interesting to me, as it reminds me of an episode in the story of the bard Taliesin. For various reasons, Elffin, the patron of Taliesin, is engaged in a contest with Maelgwn. Elffin has boasted that his horse is faster than any of Maelgwn's horses, and is required to prove the truth of this. So a race is to be run. The crafty Taliesin hands the rider of Elffin's horse nine twigs of holly, instructing the man to throw a stick at each horse in the race as he comes up close. When the horses are hit with the

holly twigs, they lose their strength and fall back, so that Elffin's horse wins easily.

So in that story, holly causes the horses to weaken. We see this property in another Celtic tale, this time from Ireland. Fionn MacCumhail and his men were lured into a cave by three women, who were spinning with spindles of holly. Fionn and Conan are compelled to touch the holly spindles, which causes them to lose their strength. They are unable to escape, and are forced to await rescue, which comes at the hand of Goll-One-Eye.

So is there any more holly lore to be found within Celtic belief? Fittingly, we can find a Scottish example, which rounds things off nicely, and shows some kind of holly lore to be, or have been present throughout several 'Celtic' societies.

This particular tale links holly with the Cailleach Bheur. The Cailleach is one of the most important figures in Celtic (or perhaps pre-Celtic) myth and folklore, but is largely overlooked. In her most simple form, she is a hag who personifies the winter season, but the stories and lore surrounding her portray a more complex being. In old Scottish myths, the Cailleach was said to be born each Samhuinn. She spent her time smiting the earth with her staff to harden it and kill off growth, and calling down the snow. On May-Eve, the turning point of the Celtic year from winter to summer, she threw her staff under a holly tree, and turned into a stone. The holly tree was said to be sacred to her, as was the gorse. As a figure that stalks the earth during the winter time, it is fitting that the holly be connected with her. She reminds me in this way of the Germanic Holda, another complex winter Goddess, to whose name the holly tree can tentatively be linked.

So the holly plays a significant part in the folklore of Britain and Europe. It also appears further afield, in myths from North and South America, consistently believed to be a tree which offers protection and that has powerful magical properties.

In the mythology of the Kwakiutl and Bella Coola peoples of North West Canada, we find Sisiutl, a three headed water snake. His left and right heads are that of snakes, the middle head is human. Sisiutl's skin was so tough, that only holly leaves had magic enough to pierce it. So again, the

holly is used as a weapon, or deterrent against a powerful supernatural being. At the other end of the American continent, we find the Tupari people of Brazil. Holly plays a part in their creation myth. When the first human being, Valejdad, was created, he tried to destroy his mother, the Earth, by flooding her with the sea. The Earth cried out to the Sun for help. The Sun dried the Earth and then sent a powerful sorcerer, who captured Valejdad. He filled his eyes, ears and nose with beeswax, stuck his fingers together, and bound him with holly - "whose magic no stone-giant can break." It is interesting to compare these myths with Pliny's statement that a sprig of holly has the power to subdue any creature.

In conclusion, much of the lore surrounding holly, especially neo-pagan lore, is unfortunately fabricated. The Druids in particular are the targets of many fanciful theories on tree lore. Some of this can be traced back to Graves, who at least was a good poet. The rest of it is probably 'unsubstantiated personal gnosis', which, thanks to the Internet, has been widely read, copied and rehashed. Assertions that the Druids wore crowns of holly while collecting mistletoe, or that the Druids decorated their houses with holly, or that Santa Claus has his origins in said Druids, are sadly unfounded.

However, we do have vibrant and varied folk traditions throughout the world, running through many faiths and cultures, which all agree that the holly is among the most powerful and magical of plants. It seems that I am not alone in my appreciation of this beautiful and mysterious tree, and I hope that this article has kindled the flame in others too.

Heigh-ho! sing heigh-ho! unto the green holly!

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