

gests it should be *Sheila-na-gog*—lady of the god, or mother goddess.

This view is convincingly argued by Michael Dames, a senior lecturer at Birmingham Polytechnic, in his book *The Silbury Treasure*,¹ and subtitled *The Great Goddess Rediscovered*. Silbury Hill, near Avebury in Wiltshire, is a vast prehistoric mound whose purpose has puzzled historians for centuries. The most popular theory is that it is a Bronze-Age barrow—a mound of earth raised above a burial site—although it is vastly larger than any known barrow. And careful excavations have revealed no grave inside it. The legend that it was the grave of a certain King Sil, who was entombed upright on his horse, clearly has no foundation.

A flint discovered inside the hill suggested that it was far older than the Bronze Age (1000–2000 BC). Since then, radiocarbon dating has proved that the hill is some 5,000 years old, pre-dating the oldest part of Stonehenge by a century or more. Yet the most recent excavations (1967) still revealed no clue to its purpose.

Michael Dames concluded that the mystery of Silbury can be explained only when we recognise that the hill itself is intended to represent the womb of a pregnant woman. Seen from above, with its oddly-shaped surrounding moat, Silbury resembles a *Sheila-na-gig* seen in profile—a woman squatting in the birth position, with her legs open. (Many primitive people still give birth in this position.) Dames believes that Silbury was the scene of a Stone-Age religious rite. At harvest time, when the corn was ready to be cut, country people would climb to the terrace just below the summit of the hill, to watch the spectacle of the goddess giving birth, with the aid of Diana, the moon. At eight o'clock on Lammas Eve (August 7th), the moon rises over Waden Hill; it falls across the thigh of the mother and indicates the vulva; at ten o'clock it touches the left knee, and at eleven thirty, the baby's head—the reflection of the moon in the moat—appears to emerge from between the mother's legs. A few hours later it falls on the breast, and the reflection of moon in the water simulates flowing milk. (A legend reported by Aubrey says that the hill was raised 'while a posset of milk was seething'.) The child held on the belly is now feeding, and the corn can be cut. The earth mother has given birth.

Predictably, Dames's theory has aroused bitter opposition from the 'experts', who nevertheless admit that they have no idea of why Silbury Hill was raised. But it supports, in every particular, the views

advanced by Lethbridge. The *Sheila-na-gigs* are images of a religion far older than Christianity, older than the Druids and the warriors who besieged Troy. And no clear distinction was made between the earth goddess and the moon goddess; like the Italian Diana, they blended into one. This is the religion of Magog, whose symbols are carved into the Wandlebury hillside.

At this point, I should admit that my own attitude towards these matters was distinctly sceptical, until I began to look into it for myself. Cornwall, where I live, is full of survivals of the 'old religion', and a little research soon revealed many more.

At Helston, in Cornwall, the May Day celebration takes place on May 8 (the date has probably been displaced over the centuries because of changes in the calendar). The people of Helston dance through the streets to a tune called the Floral Dance. But the dance itself is called the Furry, not the Floral, Dance. From the time of the Stone Age *shamans*, fertility ceremonies have been performed by men dressed up as animals. The other song that is sung during the celebrations concerns Robin Hood and Maid Marian; Robin Hood has been shown by the folklorist Lord Raglan to be a Celtic horned god. Even the name of the town, Helston, seems to be a version of Hele stone, the stone of the sun god. (The same is true of the Heel Stone of Stonehenge.) Its patron saint is, of course, St Michael.

The ceremony that takes place at Padstow, in Cornwall, on May Day is generally acknowledged to be a survival of an ancient fertility rite. It is known as the Festival of the Hobby Horse (pronounced Obby Oss). The horse is the most important of Celtic animal gods, hence the various white horses portrayed on hillsides. In Padstow, the horse parades through the streets surrounded by dancers. Claude Berry has described the scene in *Portrait of Cornwall*: 'Although the Hobby Horse is the principal figure in the festivities, scarcely less important is the man who, with mask and club, "dances before" the horse the day long through. . . ' The 'horse' occasionally darts at a girl and bumps her, or takes her under its skirts; custom has it that the girl will become pregnant within the year.

The article on 'Curious Customs and Ceremonies' by I. O. Evans in *Romantic Britain* is full of reference to rites involving fertility and animals. The ceremony of the Deermen is held at Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire every September 4. The Deermen, dressed in antlers,