

FEATURES



The Goat of Mendes from Hammer's *The Devil Rides Out* (1968).



THE HORPED GOD

PART ONE

“Chaos is what we’ve lost touch with. This is why it is given a bad name. It is feared by the dominant archetype of the world, which is ego, which clenches because its existence is defined in terms of control”. Terence McKenna

The Horned God is a powerful mythological archetype that has fascinated and terrified me from a very young age. I first encountered it when my parents read to me the children’s fantasy book *The Dark is Rising* by Susan Cooper, which featured a striking-looking horned deity on the cover. As a child in the ‘80s I was also deeply struck by the popular TV series *Robin of Sherwood* in which Robin Hood and his band of men appeared not to be followers of Christianity, but instead of an older, horned, pagan nature god simply referred to as ‘Herne’ who would appear deep in the woods, often accompanied by the haunting music of the folk group Clannad. Then when I was about 11 or 12 I discovered the books of Dennis Wheatley, and saw the Hammer Horror film, *The Devil Rides Out* which features a horned figure referred to as ‘The Goat of Mendes’. I was also exposed to the Ancient Greek myths where I learned about Pan and Dionysus.

Later on, in my early 20s, I knew several people involved in the Wicca movement and learned that their religion also features a male deity represented by a horned god. It was during this time I had many experiences that might be described as supernatural, which I cannot, even to this day explain in rational terms.

Over the next few years I became interested in pre-Christian beliefs in ancient Britain and discovered many books on the subject including the works of Carl Jung, *Frazer’s Golden Bough*, and the poet Robert Graves’ controversial work *The White Goddess*. This was where I first heard of the theory that the ancient peoples of Europe may have worshipped a female deity

in the form of a nature goddess and also, quite possibly, a male horned god called Cernunnos. In addition to this there was of course the image of the devil himself, with his horns and goaty legs. My imagination was now full to the brim and I started to wonder how all this might fit together. The horned god, it seemed, was everywhere!

But what did all this mean? Why did he keep appearing in so many books and stories throughout our culture? It seemed odd that in Britain, historically one of the cornerstones of Christian civilisation, he should keep emerging. It was as if some older and deeper layer, some archaic stratum of our cultural psyche, kept bursting through. I had further questions; did the ancient pagan peoples of Britain really worship a horned god, did the monotheistic Christian religion then try and suppress him by turning him into the devil, was he then resurrected in the early 20th century in the form of modern paganism and the Wicca movement? Or was this all just a load of nonsense?

After many years of searching I may have finally found the answers thanks to Ronald Hutton, professor of history at Bristol University and world renowned expert on folklore and paganism. The views in this article are partly based on my own ideas but are also influenced by Hutton's book, *Triumph of the Moon*, and a lecture by him courtesy of The Last Tuesday Society simply entitled, *The Horned God*.

According to Hutton, to understand the modern phenomenon of The Horned God we must first start with the Romantic Movement and then work our way backwards. The movement known as Romanticism was a cultural phenomenon of the 19th century largely seen as a reaction to the scientific revolution referred to as 'The Enlightenment'. During this time there was a major shift in thinking about Man's relationship to nature. Most importantly, nature ceased to be perceived



Le Faune (1923) by Carlos Schwabe

as a threat, but instead as something that needed to be subjugated and controlled. The roots of this attitude can partly be found in the views of the philosopher Francis Bacon [1561-1626] a key early figure in the development of science. Bacon said,

“I am come in very truth, leading you to nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave”.

He continues, ***“Nature must be taken by the forelock, it is necessary to subdue her to shake her to her foundations”.***

We can hear in Bacon’s misogynistic metaphors that this taming of nature was going to be done through science, the machine, and the elevation of rational thought and reason over all other modes of thinking.

The Enlightenment gave birth to the Industrial Revolution and England was the first country to be industrialised. It is impossible to underestimate the colossal impact this had. Hutton gives us the rather stark statistic that in England in 1810 about 80% of the population lived in the countryside and were concerned with agriculture. By 1910, 80% of the population lived in towns and were employed in industry or commerce. Agricultural life was certainly no paradise, but with the huge shift from agriculture towards industrialisation and technology, factories, poor working conditions and exploitation became abundant.

Many writers, artists, and poets reacted to what they perceived as the philistinism of the new science, as well as the enslavement, exploitation and mechanisation of the human soul. They sought to reconnect with the instinct and imagination that had been laid bare by the forces of reason and rationality, and also, fundamentally, to forge a reconnection with nature. As a result the Romantic Movement was born. The prevailing view among Romantics was, to quote Prof. Hutton “That civilisation was no longer seen as fragile and potentially about to be usurped by the ferocity and power of nature, but instead it was nature that was under threat, fragile, and threatened by the powers of commerce, industry and civilisation. There was a feeling that at last Europe had got ‘too much’ civilisation”.

This new cultural movement with its desire to reconnect with instinct and imagination demanded new deities or the resurrecting of old deities. It is here we first see the beginning of the modern resurrection of the metaphor of Mother Earth or the Earth Goddess, representing the female deity. Its counterpart or male deity is represented by ‘The Horned God’ most commonly appearing in the form of Pan.

It is interesting that the Romantics turned to classical Greece for their new deity. The Greeks had identified Apollo as the god of poetic inspiration, but to the 19th century poets and radical thinkers Apollo was just far too rational. The philosopher Nietzsche had already pointed out that in his view Western civilisation had become much too Apollonian, rational, and blinded by reason, and that what we needed was to re-engage with the wilder, freer, Dionysian forces within ourselves. However it was not Dionysus that was chosen as the primary deity of The Romantics, possibly because he was seen as too terrifying and destructive. Instead it was Pan that was seen as the ideal god of poetic inspiration as well as a figure of sexual liberation and the natural world. In 1819 the poet, painter and essayist William Hazlitt proclaimed “Pan is a god, Apollo is no more”. Pan was a figure who might lead modern humans away from stifling social conformity and repression. Pan could now be used as a metaphor for rebellion and the bashing of respectability, hooray!