

A Spectacular Specter
An Overview of the Mari Lwyd
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Introduction – Welsh Calendar Traditions and Meeting the Mari Lwyd

The Welsh are an ancient people, with an ancient language, and a continuous and unique culture. With culture comes customs. And with customs, traditions. For Wales, these are diverse and fascinating; many of which accompany the seasons, the harvests and significant religious or life-events such as marriage, death, and afterlife subjects. The Senior Editor and contributing writer of *Celtic Culture: A Historic Encyclopedia*, John Koch, uses the collective term *Calendar Traditions*¹ for categorization and classification and, in addition to the well-known or mainstream May Day or Beltane (Calan Mai in Welsh), some lesser known Calendar Traditions include:

- Plygan – an old Winter Solstice or Christmas time tradition where an all-male troop of carolers sing from three in the morning well into the day. The custom requires that no carol be repeated and many of the participants write their own songs for the event. After long hours of caroling, a feast ensues.
- Holming – Taking place on Boxing Day, this tradition involves men flogging women with holly branches openly in the streets, often to the point of drawing blood.
- Late-sleepers – Here the last to rise on Boxing Day was also met with the prick and puncture of the holly branch.
- The Wren Hunt – Winter Solstice and Christmas in Wales is a multiple day affair, not concluding until 12th Night, or around January 5th or 6th. Men in the village catch a wren, keep it in a uniquely decorated box, and then make door-to-door visits, selling a viewing of the bird for a penny.

Each of these customs, and many others besides, contain both arcane and mundane meanings and riddles, combine humor and revelry with underlying serious and often dark tones, and represent a curious fusion of pagan antiquity with the Christian faith of the Britons, which is also primitive, predating Catholicism by three centuries, and reveals that the Welsh have been an eclectic, oft double-minded, mystical, and enigmatic people from their beginning. This is perhaps best demonstrated by what Koch calls ‘of all wassail rituals, the most spectacular,’² the Christmas custom, found almost exclusively in South Wales in Glamorgan and Gwent, where a troop of carolers with very well-defined roles, rules and rhymes attempt to enter private residences; the center piece of the rite being an ornately decorated phantom horse called the Mari Lwyd.

¹ John T. Koch *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc), Volume 4, pp. 1260-1262

² Ibid, p. 1260

The Mechanics of the Mari Lwyd Ritual – An Overview

Dr. Gwilym Morus-Baird, who holds a doctorate from The School of Welsh Department, Bangor, University, and who manages an academic website, *Celtic Source*, which offers free collegiate style lectures on a range of Welsh literary and mythological topics, describes the participants, roles, and mechanics of the winter ritual in an extensive presentation on YouTube (which is linked to his academic website). He teaches that, at the outset of the evening, the Mari Lwyd's route and destinations are well publicized in advance so that the town or village residents can fill the streets and watch the theatrics. And so that the participants can be well prepared for their part in the ritual.

As Mari makes her procession through the streets, she is accompanied by a minimum of six other actors, all men, portraying: a Sargent, a Corporal, at least one Merryman to provide ongoing background singing or the music, often a fiddle, a Punch and Judy, who although may appear as satirical characters fulfill important roles, and an Ostler. The central character, the Mari Lwyd herself,³ is described by Dr. Gwilym the as 'a strange looking figure, a man with a sheet covering his body, holding what is essentially a horse's skull decorated with ribbons and stars and different types of jeweled decorations.'⁴



Figure 1- The Mari Lwyd in Llangynwyd c. 1904 - 10 and a more recent group of Maris at Chepstow's Mari Lwyd Wassail⁵

Raucous and loud during the procession, when at last they approached the doorsteps of a private residence, all would fall silent. The Ostler or Sargent knocks upon the door, but the troop are denied entry by husband or lord of the home. Then ensues a contest of rhyming song between Mari (portrayed by a man) and the husband, all sang strictly in Welsh, which might

³ Gwilym Morris-Baird, *Mari Lwyd - The Welsh Sources And Meaning* [video]. 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU5pk-Hc758>> [accessed December 26, 2022]

⁴ Ibid

⁵ National Museum of Wales, Mari Lwyd St. Fagan's Exhibit Collection, <<https://www.wales.com/about/culture/mari-lwyd>> [accessed December 27, 2022]

carry on for some time. Dr. Gwilym describes the exchange as a ‘battle of wits’⁶ whereby the Mari Lwyd cannot enter the home until the lord is bereft of reasons to bar her entry. The exchange might contain just a few verses or may be a lengthy and ongoing ‘back and forth’ until, at last and in accord with the custom, Mari prevails, and she and her companions are admitted entry.



Figure 2 – Reenactment of the Mari Lwyd custom at St. Fagan’s Museum.⁷

Dr. Gwilym, having gathered evidence of some of the actual verses from a Mari Lwyd ritual conducted in Glamorgan in the early 1900’s, shares examples in his presentation, giving a sense of the mood and pitch of the exchange:

[The women in the home sing to the husband as the troop approaches]

A gloisoch chi drysa?

Ma' bois y Cwrseila

Yn sir o ddod yma

I ganu.

Did you lock the doors?

The wassail boys

Are sure to come here to sing.

⁶ Gwilym Morris-Baird, *Mari Lwyd - The Welsh Sources And Meaning* [video]. 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU5pk-Hc758>> [accessed December 26, 2022]

⁷ Wales News Service, Mari Lwyd St. Fagan’s Exhibit Collection, <<https://www.wales.com/about/culture/mari-lwyd>> [accessed December 27, 2022]

[The husband responds, in song]
Ma'r cwn a ma'r catha
Yn cilio ta'r tylla
Wrth glywad shwd lisha
Y Nos heno.

The cats and the dogs
Are running for the holes from listening to such voices
This night.

Nawr grynda'r gir digri
Ma'th anal yn drewi
Trwy ddwylath o dderi'r
Nos heno.

[Mari responds from outside the door]
Now listen funny man
Your breath stinks
Through two yards of oak
Tonight.⁸

However, in addition to spoof, some of the content possesses more merry tones for as Koch explains, wassailing, or *canu gwasael*, carries a sense of singing with the intent for good health or well-wishing⁹. Lastly, some of the song verses contain religious overtures as well.

As the wassailers enter the home, the action shifts emphasis. Mari dances and neighs, feigning bite the women and scare the children as the Ostler attempts to assuage her encroaches. Once Mari is settled down, Punch makes aggressive advances towards any women participating in the custom (the wife, her sisters, or cousins or whomever is within the home during the custom). Judy, enraged, comes to the rescue and her character, using a broom, chases Punch away. Having vanquished the rogue, she then in turn uses to same broom to whip the home clean of evil spirits. The tenor of song and mood shifts from one of insult, tumult, and fright to healing and praise as lastly, Mari and Judy bless the children and cakes, beer, celebration, and song follow and are enjoyed by all:

Mae'n gaseg
Iwysgedd, wisgi,
Mae miloedd yn ei moli,
Ei phen hi'n gnotog enwog,
O foddion llawn difaeddu.

⁸ Gwilym Morris-Baird, *Mari Lwyd - The Welsh Sources And Meaning* [video]. 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU5pk-Hc758>> [accessed December 26, 2022]

⁹ John T Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volumes 1 (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2006), p. 339

She's a lovely, lively mare,
Thousands praise her,
Her head is famous and knotty
She's full of unsurpassed medicines.¹⁰

With some variation this is the standard procedure for the Calendar Tradition of the Mari Lwyd.¹¹

But What Does It Mean?

The Importance of the Horse in Celtic Ethos and Mythos

The tradition is layered with symbolism and meaning and, like unto many harvest or Calendar Traditions the world over, is celebrated by a vast range of diverse individuals with broad understandings at motives. For most, it is a time of celebrating the New Year, for enjoying friends and family, and for revelry and recreation. Some view it as a serious transitional and spiritual time of death and rebirth, with deep connections to fertility and reproduction. And others still view it as the remnant scraps from the pagan beliefs, a tip of the cap in remembrance to the old pagan gods. Therefore, the depth of meaning to the Mari Lwyd, or to Beltane or Holming, depends very heavily upon the individual observing or participating in the custom.

For researcher and writer John Evans, who provides the first contemporary written account of the Mari Lwyd, was an exercise in heathenism. Writing in 1798 in his *A Tour Through Part of North Wales, in the Year 1798, and at Other Times: Principally Undertaken with a View to Botanical Researches in that Alpine Country: Interspersed with Observations on Its Scenery, Agriculture, Manufactures, Customs, History, and Antiquities*. After spending the sum of two preceding chapters speaking harshly of the Welsh and Scottish views towards faeries, ghosts and other spirits, Evans turns to his accounts of two other singular customs observed in North Wales; one Christian and benign, one in which he, bewildered, could 'find no rationale.'¹²

On Christmas Eve, about three o'clock in the morning, most of the parishioners assemble in the church, and after prayers and a sermon, continue singing songs and hymns till daylight, and if, through infirmity or age, any are disabled from attending, they have prayers at home, and carols on the Nativity: this act of devotion is called *plygan*, or the cock crowing.

Another very singular custom, I could never learn the *rationale of* is, that of a man on New Year's Day, dressing himself in blankets and other trappings, with the factitious

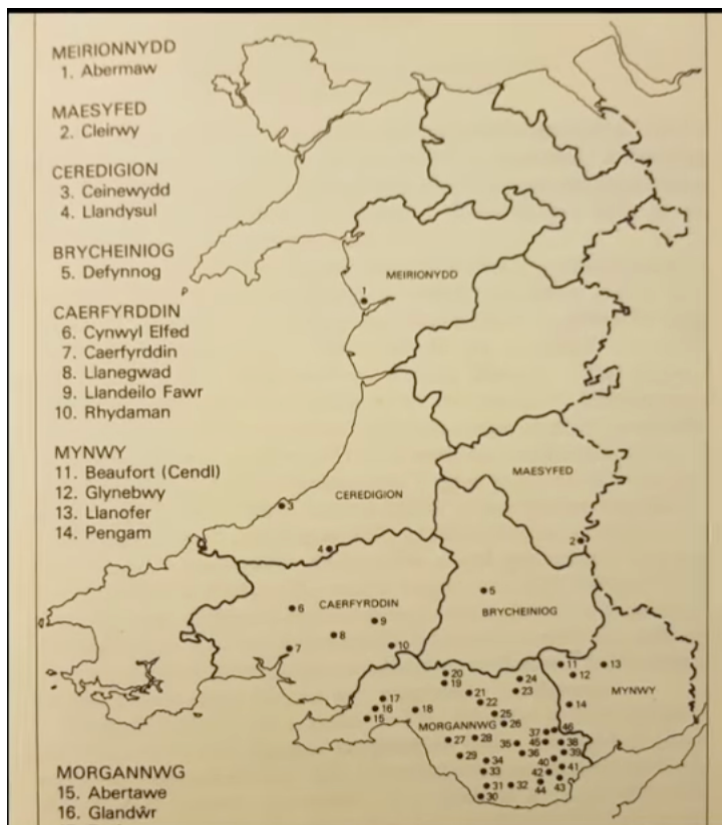
¹⁰ Gwilym, Youtube Gwilym Morris-Baird, *Mari Lwyd - The Welsh Sources And Meaning* [video]. 2020
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU5pk-Hc758>> [accessed December 26, 2022]

¹¹ Ibid

¹² John Evans, *A Tour Through Part of North Wales, in the Year 1798, and at Other Times: Principally Undertaken with a View to Botanical Researches in that Alpine Country: Interspersed with Observations on Its Scenery, Agriculture, Manufactures, Customs, History, and Antiquities*, (J. White, Fleet Street, London, 1800), p. 403

head like a horse, and a party attending him, knocking for admittance, this obtained, he runs about the room with an uncommon frightful noise, which the company quit in real or pretended fright: they soon recover, and by reciting a verse of ancient cowydd, or, in default, paying small gratuity, they gain admission. A similar custom is prevalent in the Highlands; (Vid. Johnson) and from Du Cange, we find it was a practice of Heathenism.¹³

It is noteworthy that Evans's next chapter records his thoughts on the fires kindled by Druids at the equinox, and the pagan practices of coal miners, who spend long hours understanding the fiery veins that kindle the earth. There may be strong connection between the coal mining community and the preservation of druidic or other polytheistic, pantheistic, and folk magic practices, given the danger of their occupation and inseparable linking to the earth (and things below the earth). This may answer, in part, why the tradition either revived in, or continued, in the coal mining towns and villages of South Wales and, although first there observed by Evans, had minimal presence in the north.



Figures 3. A map drawn for and presented in Dr. Gwilym's presentation on the Mari Lwyd demonstrating the prevalence of the custom in Glamorgan and Gwent.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid pp. 403-405

¹⁴ Gwilym Morris-Baird, *Mari Lwyd - The Welsh Sources And Meaning* [video]. 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU5pk-Hc758>> [accessed December 26, 2022]

The horse is a powerful, yet domesticated creature. It makes humans mobile, and grants them superiority in war. Its manure is well known as a fertilizer, and its phallic associations are joked about even today. Its liminal associations (witness the word “nightmares”) can even be seen in our own culture.

In the Celtic worlds, we are seeing a symbolic interplay with the horse’s real characteristics, writ large upon a goddess. The horse’s fertility (via manure) is expanded into fertility of the land and its flip side, death. Its strength is abstracted to control over the land and sovereignty. Its sexual associations are expanded to the idea of fecundity, but also to granting the power of sovereignty via union. These abstract ideas and symbols are all linked to a very real and very powerful animal that can be seen each day. This anchoring of a cultural idea in a real animal may be what has allowed the horse deity to survive (albeit in bastardized form) and passed down the generations to the present day.

Culture tends to be conservative, and this may be even more so when based on a real animal. Traditions like the Mari Lwyd or even Beltane fires may have started as having religious intent, but later evolved to act as an affirming and bonding mechanism for a group.¹⁷

As Tompsen observes, the horse is like unto a hub whose spokes connect to every aspect of the ancient Celt’s life, with minimal change through history until the Industrial Revolution replaced the horse with the train, or automobile. Because of this, it is no wonder that the gods and goddesses of mare and steed would be retained, even if in rebellious and naughty fashion, when the light of Christianity came to the Isles.

The attitude of the Church Fathers is captured in a quote found in *The Celtic Encyclopedia* and attributed to Augustine of Hippo (c. 430) ‘if ever you hear of anyone observing that exceedingly corrupt custom of impersonating a horse or a stag, punish him most severely.’¹⁸

Even in the early 1900s sample rhyming exchange presented by Dr. Gwilym, there is a self-awareness of the blend of pagan and Christian, and a clue to the observer that the practice is disliked by the Church. Notice that, after several turns of wit, humor and insult, the lord of the home or responder cries:

Mae Jenkins y 'ffeiriad,
Yn dyfod, ar f'enaid,
A gwna fe i chi fyned o f'annedd.

Jenkins the priest,
Is coming,
I swear,

¹⁷ Lyle Tompsen, *The Mari Lwyd And The Horse Queen : Palimpsests Of Ancient ideas*. (Masters Thesis, University of Wales, Trinity St David,

2012) <https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/401/1/LYLE%20TOMPSON.pdf> [accessed December 27, 2022], p.83

¹⁸ John T. Koch *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc), Volume 4, p. 1260

And he'll make you leave my dwelling.

Conclusion - A Possible Interpretation

The Mari Lwyd is an example of the 'mystical yet Christian' culture of Wales and its peculiar, and wonderful, customs. A simplified explanation of the ritual, from all that can be gathered from ancient sources and modern observations might be as follows:

The horse is a symbol of life and death. She is a goddess or queen accompanied by her consort, the King or Ostler.

Death comes to everyone's door. It can be danced with, insulted, debated, and delayed but, at last it enters, visiting every man. But before it leaves, new life it gives, dancing with the women and children, reminding all that winter has an end, and that life will come anew.

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