

## Mary Magdalene, Glastonbury, and the Dark Goddess

By Siobhán Houston

Glastonbury, a small market town in the county of Somerset in southwest England, accommodates an amazing nexus of traditions within its cobbled streets and mist-laden moors. A holy center possibly since the Megalithic era, it draws people from all over the world to walk its hallowed paths and stroll the ancient monastery ruins, drink from the healing Chalice Well, and soak up the indescribable soul-force pervading the town.

As ancient pilgrimage destination of several traditions, it holds a significant place in both Celtic and Christian legends. Jesus and Mary Magdalene feature prominently in a number of these stories. One long-circulated legend tells that while a young boy, Jesus sailed to Britain numerous times with his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a successful merchant and trader in metals, including tin. In support of the this theory, E. Raymond Capt writes: “Traditions among the hill folk of Somerset relate that Joseph, after first seeking tin from the Scillies (islands) and Cornwall, came to the Mendips [hills near Glastonbury] and was accompanied on several occasions by the boy Jesus”. According to some of William Blake’s biographers, he believed this legend and referred to it in his poem, Jerusalem:

“And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the Holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?”

Another time-honored story relates that Jesus spent much of his “silent years,” from ages 12-30 (a period of time not accounted for in the New Testament) in the Glastonbury area. Reportedly, it was a safe refuge for Jesus because the village inhabitants knew him and were protective of him. Moreover, Glastonbury was free from Roman rule and influence. Whether “the Holy Lamb of God” ever did actually stroll on the verdant Somerset hills will probably never be known for sure; the legend, however, continues to persist.

The main street in Glastonbury is named “Magdalen,” reflecting the popularity of devotion to St. Mary Magdalene during the medieval period. During my first visit to Glastonbury, I strolled down Magdalen Street and came to a medieval gate that leads to the heart of Glastonbury, the ruins of the medieval Abbey. Very much alive in modern Britain is belief that Joseph of Arimathea established the first Christian church in England at Glastonbury. This ancient and richly detailed story may be summarized thus: After the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea, Mother Mary, Mary Magdalen, Veronica and other disciples escaped the Holy Land by boat, traveling first to Marseilles in France, and then continuing on to England. Various accounts have Joseph ferrying the Holy Grail with him, as well as two cruets containing blood and water from Jesus’ bodily wounds. After being granted land by the reigning king, the band of apostles built a wattle and daub edifice, the first aboveground church in Christendom, and the first church in England.

I first visited Glastonbury in 2003, arriving on the Celtic holy day of Samhain (pronounced “saúw-en”), now known as Halloween. It was a weekend and there was not a room to be had anywhere. Even the backpackers’ hostel, the last on my list of possible accommodations, was

full up. The streets teemed with students on their winter term break, carousing, laughing, and shooting off fireworks. I hopped on a city bus and journeyed to the nearby town of Wells, also a medieval pilgrimage site and home of the famous Wells Cathedral, where I roomed at a friendly bed and breakfast. On Monday morning, I returned to Glastonbury, the town now emptied of its revelers and reverting once again to a more peaceful state.

The Glastonbury Abbey grounds, 36 acres of serene parkland at the center of town, were almost deserted on that late fall afternoon. Walking across the verdant and carefully manicured lawn, I came across the Mary Chapel. The story goes that monks built this stone chapel to encase and protect the oldest church in Britain, a wattle and daub structure established by Joseph of Arimathea. According to the narratives handed down for centuries, Joseph and his band originally used this ancient method of building, packing a mud plaster (daub) over a frame of twigs (wattle).

The wattle and daub edifice has long decayed, if indeed it ever existed, leaving only the ruins of the medieval chapel. I peered downward into the recesses of the oratory, where services are still held, the altar a stone slab and a few metal folding chairs lined up on the packed dirt floor. Did the Magdalene stand on this very ground once upon a time, maybe pregnant or holding her child in her arms? Was the Mary Chapel named after the Holy Mother, as is assumed, or perhaps after the consort of Jesus, Mary Magdalene herself? Although it is unlikely that historians will definitely establish Mary Magdalene's physical presence in Glastonbury, it does not deter her followers or the persistent legends connecting her to this place. In the religious imagination of many, her presence dwells in this land, no matter if archaeology and history do not bear this up.

I find that a powerful way to work with the Glastonbury Magdalene is as the Dark Goddess of the Celtic and British mysteries. Caves, grottoes, crypts, wells, crossroads, and the underworld: these are the sorts of places in which the Dark Goddesses dwell and reign. Locales that are damp, earthy, fecund, mysterious, and hidden are their natural haunts. These chthonic (underground) divinities appear all over world, identified by a plethora of names and, not infrequently, show up as sinister figures in our nightmares and ghost stories. The Irish have the Old Hag named Cailleach (kal-yak) and the band of Morrigan, warrior goddesses possessed of shape-shifting abilities. The Scottish tell of the Washerwoman (also known as the Washer at the Ford) who rinses bloody clothes in a river and prophesies death. In the Arthurian romances, we have Kundry, also known as the Loathly Lady or Loathly Damsel. Moreover, European fairy tales are replete with characters typifying the negative Dark Goddess, such as the Bad Fairy, the Wicked Witch, the Evil Stepmother, and Baba Yaga.

Very rarely however do we see these shadowy feminine figures in a positive way, as role models to emulate and powerful goddesses to revere. It was not always this way, contends Demetra George, in her book, *Mysteries of the Dark Moon: The Healing Power of the Dark Goddess*. In earlier cultures, writes George, "[T]he Dark Goddess, who is the embodiment of the dark phase of the moon's cycle, was thus honored for her role in presiding over the mysteries and initiations of the intermediary passage between death and rebirth . . . The ancient power of the Dark Goddess's capacity to heal, regenerate, and renew was centered in her ecstatic sexuality". George remarks that the skills and arts associated with this Goddess and with women in general—such as astrology, magic, healing, and midwifery—eventually came under suspicion by the increasingly male-dominated church, and they remain so today.

In the early days of Christianity, women held leadership positions such as bishops, deacons, and preachers. But by 200 CE, “we have no evidence for women taking prophetic, priestly, and episcopal roles among orthodox churches.” By demonizing menstruation, childbirth, and traditional herbal medicine, the Church tamped down women’s enormous power as bringers of life, containing it beneath a stifling code of religious restrictions, civil laws, and social decorum.

Below is a visualization of Magdalene as a Glastonbury Dark Goddess, which appears on the meditation CD accompanying my book, *Invoking Mary Magdalene: Accessing the Wisdom of the Divine Feminine* (Sounds True Publishing). I penned this after a fall visit to Glastonbury Abbey, when ripening apples hung from the trees in the orchard. The Abbey sells these apples commercially, as most probably the monks did centuries ago. I notice many apples lying on the ground and covertly took one and ate it.

Apples are vital to the town’s history, as Glastonbury is believed by many to be the ancient Isle of Avalon, the “the Isle of Apples.” Legend tells us that Avalon hosted a community of Druidic priestesses dedicated to the Goddess, a sacred story retold perhaps most famously in our time as *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. As I stood among the ancient grove of apple trees, I took in the Abbey’s gently sloping grounds, the pond where ducks frolicked, the marble ruins of buildings coruscating in the sunlight and the fragrance of fresh apples. The tangible divine presence infusing this site, so long a stronghold of the Goddess, transfixed me. The archetypal, the numinous, reign triumphant at this place. Come to Glastonbury and experience this for yourself!

#### Magdalene as Grail Guardian and Queen of Shadows visualization

By Siobhán Houston

Sit or lie comfortably, close your eyes and center yourself by observing your in- and out-breaths. See yourself as walking across the manicured grounds of Glastonbury Abbey in the late fall twilight. The sky is quickly darkening as you pass the huge stone ruins of the Abbey buildings and head toward the apple groves by the monk’s kitchen—a round, low stone building still very much intact. The air is redolent with the scent of ripe apples, some still in the branches, others starting to rot on the ground. Soft quacking sounds travel from the duck pond, as the waterfowl settle in for the night. Other than that, the Abbey grounds are silent—you see no one else.

Once in the apple grove, you move toward a large tree hung with a banner of black silk and appliquéd with a silver crescent moon, its points turned upward. Directly below the banner, a crone sits in front of a stone cauldron full of liquid. She bids you to sit across from her and says, “The Grail Guardian has many forms, as does the Grail.” As you watch, she first transforms into a dusky-skinned maiden, her dark hair bound with vines and flowers, standing at an empty tomb, a box of embalming spices in her hand. Then the maiden changes into a heavily pregnant woman, arrayed in crimson velvet, as vibrant with life as a pomegranate bursting with its ruby seeds. The mother then turns back into the bent hag, her stern face crossed with deep lines, her fathomless and cryptic eyes gazing hard at you.

This hag points to the cauldron with a withered forefinger. You notice the cauldron is painted with the same upturned silver crescent that appeared earlier on the banner of black silk hanging from a branch in the apple grove. Now the cauldron swiftly changes to a crystal goblet holding a deep red liquid and then into a burnished silver plate, and then into a large black stone, before finally returning once again to its form as a massive stone kettle.

The Magdalene, who appears as an old woman in her role as Revealer of the Void, tells you, “Behold the cauldron and scry the future.” As you contemplate its obsidian surface, images reflect back at you, first indistinct, then becoming clearer. What appears to you? You may ask the Dark Magdalene for any advice or interpretations you wish.

Addressing you once more, the Magdalene says, “As the Grail transforms, so do its servants.” You remove your clothes, and step in the warm waters of cauldron, which has now become wide and deep. When you have stayed under as long as possible, you emerge once again into the brisk night air. The Magdalene hands you a warm soft robe, which you drape around yourself. Does your immersion in the cauldron change you? Do you feel different? Do you look different? How?

Before you leave, the Dark Magdalene writes one word on a piece of parchment, then folds it into quarters and offers it to you, along with her blessing. During your walk back through the Abbey grounds, you unfold the paper. What is the word she wrote? What does it tell you about yourself?

When you are ready, slowly return to normal consciousness, eating or drinking something to fully ground yourself if necessary. Record the experience in your journal if you wish, making sure to date the entry.

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