

their bright, golden yellow leaves and extraordinary, copper, gold-lusted branches. The description here of the 'ruddy rind', meaning reddish bark, is a variation of the previous quote where the bough bears the 'ductile rind'.

There are few trees that have 'ruddy' or reddish bark, the yew being one of them. 'Ductile' refers to a jewellery-making process where gold is drawn out into pliant wires or threads of gold that resemble twigs. 'Rind' means bark. So here it is spelt out that the Golden Bough bears twigs like metal. The modern Golden Boughs vary from young, small twigs to an entire branch or bough, an inch or thicker. Extraordinary as it sounds, the larger of today's Boughs do indeed glitter and glisten with a kind of red-gold lustre, more reminiscent of metal than wood.

### Triple goddesses

Hecate and Athena were both known as 'triple goddesses', as were others, such as Hera, Demeter and Proserpina or Persephone. These goddesses are all linked with the Underworld and the passage known as Tartarus by the gloomy banks of the River Styx or Cocytus, the lifeless stream where the yew tree, sacred to the triple goddess, grows. It is worth noting that what is triple about both the goddesses and the yew tree is the concern with life, death and eternity.

Hecate has a direct association with the yew tree. Anciently depicted with a yew branch, she was celebrated at festivals with garlands of yew. The Norse Vala, similar to the Sybil, is also depicted holding a yew branch. They, along with the Furies, were the 'go-betweens' connecting humans with the Goddess, ensuring that the Golden Bough was found, taken and eventually presented to Persephone, Goddess of the Underworld.

In another version of the Underworld described by the Roman writer, Seneca, it states that here, 'The leaves shudder, black with gloomy foliage, where sluggish Sopor (Hypnos, sleep) clings to the overhanging yew.' (Hypnos is depicted holding a yew branch.) Yew foliage on a dismal winter's day in Wales can look black and the early classical writers, when referring to a 'gloomy branch' connected with the Underworld, were invariably describing a yew.

### The World Tree

But the Romans were not the only ones to pass down the legend of the Golden Bough. As we move north to colder climes, we come across the Norse legend of the World Tree, Yggdrasil, which, strangely enough, also makes reference to the Golden Bough. Here in Asgard, before

the doors of Valhalla, there stands a grove called Glasir. The needles or leaves of Glasir are described as gold and the 12<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic poet, Snorri Sturluson, tells us that the old name for Asgard was Troy! So, here is an astonishing link and surprise connection with Aeneas, the Trojan hero and his Golden Bough!

Apparently, the Norse people had previously lived in Aeneas' part of the world but migrated from there as a result of war. Could this have been the Trojan War? Snorri Sturluson says: 'Behind him came a priest who carried a miniature palm tree with gold leaves.' (Those familiar with the yew's history know that the palm was often confused with the yew.) Snorri asks, 'Why is gold called the Needles or leaves of Glasir?' He describes the leafage or needles (as yew leaves are often called) as all red-gold.

So, did the people from Troy perhaps take the Golden Bough with them, to be planted at their new home where it grew into a golden tree, or perhaps a tiny tree already grown from it? Ancient peoples are known for taking their sacred trees with them.

From the 1886 Hibbert Lectures (an annual series of non-sectarian lectures on theological issues sponsored by the Hibbert Trust), we learn some further detail as to the nature of the tree of Glasir with golden foliage. It was an evergreen tree with wide-spreading branches, said to have stood in close proximity to the temple of the gods in the ancient town of Uppsala. This mythic tree called 'Glass' was described as standing with leaves of gold before the hall of Sig-tyr, the Norse Zeus. To those of us who know the yew so well, the description of 'an evergreen tree with wide-spreading branches' is a perfect description of the yew tree.

### Brought to Wales?

There is one last thing to consider. Were the Golden Bough trees of Britain brought here originally as cuttings or staffs taken from these legendary trees in ancient times? The most recent discovery of the manifestation of a golden fleece-type Golden Bough (which is often the way it grows when it first begins to sprout) is on an ancient yew in the churchyard at Llanelltyd. The significant thing about this is that Saint Illtyd, to whom the church at Llanelltyd is dedicated, was one of three saints, along with Cadoc and Peredur, given the title of 'Keepers of the Secret of the Grail' in the Welsh Triads (a collection of folklore and history, the earliest surviving collection dating to the 13th century). The earliest and most authentic statement

left to us of what the grail actually was is that of the 12th century writer, Wolfram von Eschenbach, who disclosed it to be 'the perfection of Paradise, root and branch', in other words the Tree of Life.

Illtyd, a 5th century saint of Druid descent, would have carried a yew staff. Such early Celtic saints were known to have planted their staffs, some of which were brought from the Holy Land. There are many stories of these staffs that then grew into trees. In Wales there is a tradition of *Taxus Sanctus*, saints' yews or sacred yew trees. The Golden Bough Yew at Llanelltyd is of an age and position in the churchyard that makes it likely it was one of these trees, planted by Illtyd himself and placed here in order to preserve the lineage of the tree from Paradise. One can only speculate as to what properties such a tree would have.

So, what are we to conclude from the fact that the Golden Bough has returned once more to claim our attention? In its presence I feel something sacred, magical and not of this dimension. The Golden Bough, 'unseen for many years', hangs between the sky and the earth, the gods and our world. It is a thing of light and beauty that feels like a good omen, a flame in the darkness.

The purpose of the Golden Bough 3,000 years ago was to act as a talisman, ensuring the safe passage of the querent in their descent into the Underworld, for the purpose of bringing back the knowledge they sought. My hope is that the Golden Bough has returned in our time to act as a talisman for the human race, so besieged by darkness, that we may finally learn something so momentous that it transforms the way we live and reconnects us to the natural world and the sacred.

### Bibliography

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Picture: Newly discovered 'Golden Bough' on an ancient yew in an undisclosed location (to prevent vandals) in Wales (Photo: Desiree Lowit)

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