IN SEARCH OF THE ANTLERED GODDESS: THE EVOLUTION OF MYTH & MEANING

Preface

The search for the Antlered Goddess, who I first knew as Elen of the Ways, is the path I've been on all my life. However, I didn't know that was the path I was on until I was in my late 40s. Many spiritual masters and teachers over time have said we know things when we are ready to know them. When I was nearly fifty, I knew that Elen of the Ways had chosen me; or I had chosen Her, it hardly matters now. What matters is that She revealed herself to me in several profound and mystical ways. About the time I turned 50, I knew in my bones that She was my patron deity, as surely as I knew that the original, Primordial Creator was Divinely Feminine in nature. What I did not know is that Elen would become the greatest mother, lover, sister, friend, confidante, partner, guide, teacher, and god I have ever known. What she represents to me has changed; I still call her Elen because that is how I first came to really know the Goddess. Today my relationship with Her is more important than my human relationships with others or material things in this earthly realm. She is my number one priority above all else, and I would no sooner go without Her than I would air and water.

In 2021, on the heels of a global pandemic, I was forced into early retirement because of a disability that rendered me incapable of work that required learning new skills and committing said skills to long-term memory. That was simply not possible any longer, and neither was physical or mental over-exertion. However, it did afford me the opportunity to dedicate myself entirely to my passions, my interests, and, above all, my spiritual life. I grew and learned a whole host of new terms, traditions, and belief systems throughout history, especially in antiquity. That was when the foundation of the book you hold in your hands began to fester in my subconscious.

Over the next 2 years several things happened in both my personal and spiritual life (which is really one in the same) that forced me to reexamine myself from a new perspective, and to go deeper within than I ever had before. Every last vestige of guilt and shame I harbored for decades was swept away, I let go of old resentments and grief that I thought were a permanent part of my makeup. I stopped worrying about nearly anything. Remarkably, any self-doubt or self-loathing and especially self-criticism were simply removed from me. I was comfortable in my own skin and confident in my beliefs and values in a way I had never been before. I have no other way to describe what happened to me other than a miracle. I had been what the Hindus call *dvija*, a Sanskrit word that means "twice-born." And I have no doubt that this profound metamorphosis is the direct result of the Goddess and my exploration of Her, and my relationship with Elen. Make no mistake, I am, of course, still human, and I am certainly not on the spiritual mountaintop every day. I make mistakes and I can be selfish, petty, judgmental of myself and others, depressed, angry, ad infinitum, just like everyone else. But when I stray, I suffer emotionally and mentally. So when I fall off the beam, it usually doesn't take me long to get back on it.

When my interest in working with Elen of the Ways began, which was during the Coronavirus pandemic of 2019-2020, I identified as both a Witch and a Pagan. Which meant I was already comfortable working

with Gods and Goddesses, or, if you like, God and Goddess energies, emphasis on the Goddess. When I say “working with” I mean prayer and meditation, spellcasting with an appeal for assistance, invocation, veneration, devotion, and expressing gratitude. I was, as the whole world was at that time at that time, at an emotionally charged place, spending a lot of time online to distract myself, so the first time I ever heard the name Elen of the Ways was in a Facebook post. That simple spark ignited something within me like lightning, hot and fast, and the initial discovery led me to Caroline Wise’s Finding Elen: The Quest for Elen of the Ways.

Recently, I tried to find her (Caroline) online and she proved to be as elusive as the deity she sought. After a series of failed attempts, I began reading the book for the umpteenth time. It is dog-eared, worn and faded, underlined and highlighted. I started to feel a pull and ideas were starting to form that I knew were divinely inspired. I am at a place in my journey with the Goddess where I can practically feel Her standing behind me, hand on my shoulder, and I hear a clearly definable voice in my head that I know is Hers. I had recently encountered a host of spiritual leaders and academics after I started the Goddess spirituality-based podcast, The Girlfriend God, so I was learning new things about ancient history, which led to more discovery about The Antlered Goddess. It had been 8 years since Caroline’s seminal work was published, but that, aside from the very personal writings of Elen Sentier (Following the Deer Trods: A Practical Guide to working with Elen of the Ways and Elen of the Ways: British Shamanism) no further easily accessible or mass-produced books were available. So I decided, partly through the Goddess-given gift of intuition and partly through the beginning of my research, that it was time to write a new more detailed story of Elen.

It is my hope that, in these pages, you will find your own personal understanding of the Goddess we call Elen, or whatever else you may have sought within.

Introduction

The book in your hands is truly the result of a labor of love, for my story with Elen is truly a love story from the very beginning.

Elen of the Ways, the Antlered Goddess, means many things to many people. I have come to believe that when Goddesses appear on the scene and are spread through the masses via social media and popular culture, it is because we need that particular Goddess at that particular time. I think it means wherever we are in our human history and evolution, She speaks to us in that moment, bringing what we need to the world. For example, Hecate was once a relatively obscure and unknown Goddess and information about Her was not in the framework of common knowledge. However, by the time the TV series, The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, brought Hecate fully into popular culture at the end of Part 3, Her name was on the lips of anyone with even a casual familiarity with Goddesses and their roles and archetypes. If we look back at what else was trending in social media when Hecate was making the rounds, we discover an awful lot of chatter about trauma healing and shadow work, two personal growth tools that have everything to do with our own personal descent into the Underworld, one of the realms in which Hecate reigns supreme. Whenever there is a Goddess everyone seems to be talking about, there is no doubt that if you look you will find one or more connections to global issues, trends in spirituality, or anything else that has the attention of the collective consciousness.

I believe that Elen rose to prominence because we need Her now, especially in the United States. As Elen is the Deer Goddess, antlers and all, it is because of deer, reindeer in particular as they are the only species of deer where the females have antlers, that she has appeared. In the US, reindeer are now extinct in the lower 48 states, surviving only in Alaska. The main reason is snowmobiling and logging in the northern states. Elen has come to remind us of the sacredness of the reindeer and to pay attention to their endangerment.

As Elen is also presumed by some to be a nature Goddess, or at the very least a forest Goddess, her appearance now as the destruction of global warming reaches a fever pitch, is also right on time, and that's true for the whole world, not just where the deer roam. Some say Elen is also a Goddess of sovereignty; this is a fitting time for a Goddess associated with no man or counterpart, flying in the face of patriarchy. For these reasons and likely others, we have not even begun to imagine, Elen is making herself known again in the world, whispering to us from the arctic tundra to remember, and revere, Her.

Chapter One – Interpretations of Elen

If you Google “Elen of the Ways” today, you’ll immediately find hundreds if not thousands of search results, from books to essays to articles to art. Yet, if you do some digging into the metadata of the webpages, few of them are older than 5 or 6 years, the oldest I found was 8. It is fascinating to me to watch popular culture erupt online. Being a researcher of Goddesses, I have seen this happen with other Goddesses time and time again. One day a Goddess few have heard of in America appears on the scene, Americanized witches grab hold of it, and there are 10 Facebook groups, 5 Etsy shops with art of the interpretations of said Goddess, 15 webpages, and 20 Instagram accounts using the name of the Goddess overnight. I saw this happen with Elen, Hecate, and Cybele, to name a few. Sometimes I cringe at this point because suddenly there are a lot of opinions about these Goddesses being displayed as facts by people who haven’t done their due diligence with historical research. On the other hand, for ancient Goddesses, all publicity is good publicity, right? In either case, I can’t complain because a Facebook post told me about Elen of the Ways, and that is where my hunt for the Antlered Goddess began. I quickly found, and this is still true today, that when trying to find information about Elen, the most common sources on the web will point to information about her as a Celtic or British Goddess. So let our journey begin there.

The Dream of Mascen Wledig

Perhaps the most widely known rumor about Elen is that she is the woman who is the obsession of Mascen in ‘The Dream of Mascen Wledig’ in The Mabinogion, the collection of the earliest known Welsh prose stories belonging to the Matter of Britian.[1] The Mabinogion itself is a curious text with a rich history of its own. It first came to literary prominence in the mid 19th century when Lady Charlotte Guest published her translation of 11 medieval Welsh folk tales under the title The Mabinogion. Interestingly, the name itself has been dismissed as an error; The word 'mabinogion' is what Lady Charlotte assumed was the plural form of 'mabinogi'. 'Mabinogi’ is derived from the word 'mab', originally meant 'boyhood' or 'youth' but gradually came to mean 'tale of a hero's boyhood' and eventually, simply, 'a tale.’[2]

In summary, The Dream of Mascen Wledig is the story of the real life Roman Commander of Britian, Magnus Maximus who, following a dream, comes to Wales to be united with Elen, rewarding her and the Welsh for their support in his successful military campaign to regain his authority in Rome. Elen Lluyddog, or Eelen of the Hosts, is the name given to the fair maiden that enchants Mascen, a woman presumed to be a real person. When Mascen claims her as Empress of Rome, Helen then claims the Island of Britian for her father, Eudaf, to hold for Mascen. She then claims the three offshore islands for her own, and three stronghold castles are built for her, as are the roads that connect them.

The tale begins with Macsen Wledig, emperor of Rome, falling into a deep sleep after hunting. He dreams of discovering a great city with a great castle and a fleet of ships. He boards the largest ship, which sets sails along the seas and oceans before arriving at wondrous lands. He comes to a castle with a hall decorated with precious stones, gold, and silver. He comes upon two young men playing chess. Elsewhere in the hall is a man sitting in an ivory chair, and a maiden who is the most beautiful woman Mascen has ever seen.. The maiden rises from her chair, and the man embraces her. Then Mascen wakes up.

Obsessed with the woman in his dream, Macsen returns to Rome. He withdraws from everyone, wanting only to hide himself away and sleep. Each time he dreams of the gorgeous maiden. One day his page tells Macsen Wledig that the people are turning against him, because they get no messages from him and their questions go unanswered. The wise men of Rome are brought before the emperor, and he tells them of his dream. They advise Macsen to send messengers for three years to the three parts of the world to see if they can find the woman in his dreams.

After a year the messengers have not found her and Mascen becomes depressed. The king of the Romans tells him to go and hunt where he did before the dream. 13 messengers accompany him and from there they ascend to a high mountain, and from the top they see the land that Mascen had described to them from his dream. Eventually they come to the vast city and its castle decked with gold, silver, and precious stones. They cross the sea in the giant ship, which takes them to Britain. They ride until they come to Snowdon. "Behold," said they, "the rugged land that our master saw." They continue to Anglesey and Arvon.

At Aber Sain they find a castle at the edge of the river. They go inside and into the hall from Mascen's dream. They see the two youths playing chess, the man carving chess pieces and the maiden in a chair of gold. The messengers proclaim the maiden empress of Rome. She tells them she will not go with them to Rome; proclaiming that if Macsen Wledig loves her, he must come to her.

They journey back home to Rome and tell the emperor everything that happened. Mascen embarks on the same route the messengers had taken. Upon entering the hall, He sees Kynan and Adeon playing chess, and their father Eudav son of Caradawc, carving chessmen. Then he sees the woman from his dreams. "Empress of Rome," he says, "all hail!" Mascen embraces her, and that night she becomes his bride. The following day she asks for Britain for her father, and three chief castles made for her, the largest in Arvon. The emperor grants this; the other castles are built in Caerleon and Carmarthen.[iii]

Mascen stayed in Britian for several years, building roadways, including the roads that connect the castles built for Elen. This is where we get the monikers Elen of the Hosts and Elen of the Roads. There is still portions of stretches of the original Roman road still today in Wales known as Sarn Elen or Sam Helen.

Elen Luyddog of this story, although never formally canonized by Rome, is traditionally considered a saint in the Welsh Church; in English she is sometimes known as Saint Helen of Caernarfon to distinguish her from Saint Helena ("Helen of Constantinople"). This Elen of the Hosts has a detailed historical record - Elen was believed to be the daughter of Eudav, or Eudaf Hen, a Romano-British ruler of the 4th century (also featured in "The Dream." She was the mother of five children including a son named Constantine who was also known as Cystennin, or Custennin. She introduced into Britain from Gaul a form of Celtic monasticism and founded a number of churches. There are also many holy wells and springs named after her and are popular sites for rituals throughout Britian. [iv] There are many river names that seem related, such as the Ellen, Allan, Alne and Lyne. These names seem to come from a British and Gaulish stem, Alauna/us, which, given the diversity of its application, seems unlikely to have been a deity's name as such, but more likely an adjective, such as 'mighty', 'holy' or 'shining'.[v]

Other Elens

Over the years, many scholars and self-taught researchers have written about Elen and made a wide berth of far-reaching connections. They have expounded upon the theories of Caroline's colleagues, the contributors to Finding Elen. Two major themes that come up repeatedly as Elen as a Sovereignty Goddess and a Nature Goddess.

The Goddess of Sovereignty

Many myths and legends in Britian focus on the land and its fertility. The Goddess of Sovereignty is one of the most ancient archetypes found in the Celtic tradition. These ideas go back to the earliest of written folklore in Britian and supply us with a connection through time to when the land's inhabitants roamed freely and everything that was needed to sustain them was garnered from the land itself, including its antlered animals. The land was also seen as female, as it gave birth to the life of the plants and animals that sustained its residents. Perhaps some see Elen as a way to reignite the reverence for and connection to place and surroundings.

As a goddess of sovereignty, Elen is seen as the guardian of not only the country or land, but also its people. She is their spirit. As such, she maintains the wellbeing, best interests, and continuance of these. The sovereign king, who is there to serve her, the land and the inhabitants, and as important as that is, as an individual he is he expendable and can be replaced. This power of Her sovereignty is apparent in the Mascen story – it is she who has the power to be kingmaker, and then insist that her demands be met in order for him to have any power at all.

There is also the concept of personal sovereignty such as that sought by Albina and her Sisters who, in myth, were the first humans to set foot on the island and named it Albion. It was later named by Brutus of Troy as Britain. The sisters sought mastery over their own lives and bodies. This tale of personal choice and freedom appears again and again in British legend. We see this in the stories of the horse Goddess Epona, ancient Celtic Queens such as Cartimandua and Boudica, and the tales of both Macha and Rhiannon. Elen is also seen today as a Celtic Goddess of Sovereignty.

The Green Goddess

Elen is also frequently seen as a Green Goddess or Earth Goddess. As the Deer Goddess she is the soul of the forest and the creatures that dwell within it, the facilitator of human and animal movement. Judith Shaw tells us "Long before the Romans arrived Elen was the Guardian of the Leys, the ancient track ways. In Her guise as the Horned Goddess, She led the way on the migratory tracks of the reindeer, the only species of deer in which the females have antlers. Later, after all the reindeer migrated further north and out of Britian, Elen opened the pathways the red deer followed in the ancient forests of Northern Europe."[vi]

As Green Lady and Antlered Goddess, Elen has several functions, including being the guardian of migratory trackways of both human and animal. As reindeer have moved through their own evolutionary processes, it stands to reason that the soul of Elen moves with them, across Europe, the Arctic tundra and adjacent boreal forests of Greenland, Scandinavia, Russia, Alaska, Canada, and into the United States (though now extinct in the lower 48 states). Some might theorize that the reason Elen has made her appearance in the public eye, in the consciousness of more and more people over the last several years, because we are at a place in history where reindeer are in trouble. She likely bows Her head and weeps as she watches continued logging and snowmobiling, the two things largely responsible for the displacement of not just reindeer but all deer species.

Some scholars have linked Elen, or Helen in other languages, with the fly agaric mushroom, *aminita muscaria*, with Elen of the Ways. In Siberian shamanic practice, the Shaman would eat the mushroom to induce trance and hallucination, in which they shapeshifted into the souls of the reindeer herds. As the reindeer herding people traveled with their animal counterparts, the shamans would fly above the herd, getting a view of the whole trackway, gauging how far they had come from where they were before, and seeing if trouble in the route, like fallen trees, or predators lie ahead. John Allegro, in his book The Sacred Mushroom and The Cross: A study of the nature and origins of Christianity within the fertility cults of the ancient Near East, makes a claim that the mushrooms spring from the resin that drops from the tree, and that those resin drops are referred to as "The Tears of Helen."[vii]

Caroline Wise's book examines other potential connections of Elen with Elaine the Lily Maid of Arthurian legend, Helen of Troy, and Saint Helena of the Cross. The information available today online when you search for Elen of the Ways relays and regurgitates essentially the same information that Caroline published in 2015. In other words, there is presumably 'nothing new under the sun.' The result of all these theories is the understanding that mythic characters of legends and folklore tend to become melded over time and then are solidified as one set of beliefs infused into a singular Goddess. What is fascinating still is that no one discusses how we made the leap from all the Elen/Helen lore to a woman who adorns antlers atop her head. We collectively took Caroline Wise's interpretation and simply wove it into the fabric of other, already existing mythology and folklore. As we shall see, the underpinnings of the antlers and the idea of the magical deer are much, much older than the Etsy shop selling Elen paintings or the mass-produced statues available on Amazon. To truly understand the origins of the Deer Goddess, we must travel back in time to her Paleolithic source.

Chapter Three – A Brief History of Deer and the Evolution of Reindeer

Deer evolved from their tusked and antlerless ancestors that resembled modern duikers, a small to medium-sized brown antelope native to sub-Saharan Africa and diminutive deer in the early Eocene, about 56 to 33 million years ago. Over time they developed into the first antlered cervoids in the Miocene, about 23 to 5 million years ago. With the development of antlers, the tusks as well as the upper incisors disappeared. Thus, the evolution of deer took nearly 30 million years.[viii]

The glacial cycles of the late Pleistocene (126,000 to 11,700 years ago) had a major influence on the evolution of Rangifer species and other Arctic and sub-Arctic species. *Rangifer tarandus,* reindeer or caribou, are in the subfamily Odocoileinae, along with roe deer (Capreolus), Eurasian elk/moose (Alces), and water deer (Hydropotes). These antlered cervids split from their horned relatives, cattle, yaks, sheep and goats, about 36 million years ago.[ix] Several named Rangifer fossils in Eurasia and North America predate the evolution of modern tundra reindeer. Archaeologists distinguish "modern" tundra reindeer and barren-ground caribou from primitive forms — living and extinct — that did not have adaptations to extreme cold and to long distance migration. The oldest undoubted Rangifer fossil is from Omsk, Russia, dated to the Paleoproterozoic Era about 2,500 to 1,600 million years ago.[x]

Reindeer "evolved as a mountain deer, ...exploiting the subalpine and alpine meadows..."[xi] They divided into 2 classes, or ecotypes, the tundra reindeer and the forest (boreal) reindeer. Tundra reindeer migrate between tundra and forest in huge herds numbering up to half a million in an annual cycle covering as much as 5,000 km (3,000 miles). Forest reindeer are much less numerous.[xii] *Rangifer tarandus caribou,* the North American reindeer, is further subdivided into ecotypes: woodland (boreal), woodland (migratory) and woodland (montane), R. t. granti (Porcupine caribou or Grant's caribou), R. t. groenlandicus (barren-ground caribou) and R. t. pearyi (Peary caribou).

As reindeer evolved over many millions of years they began to be distributed, moving from their origins on the frozen tundra over millions of years in Europe and Northern Asia, primarily in Russia. Gradually they spread west, into Finland, Norway, Greenland, Sweden. Eventually making their way into Britian, Ireland, Scotland. Then pushed even farther west into Canada and down to the United States.

We cannot know the first time a human encountered a reindeer, or any deer for that matter. Just as people have been telling stories about the cosmos, creating mythology and folklore, from the time we learned to communicate, so too we must have tried to make sense of the majestic creatures. Science tells us that we humans began our own evolution about 8–4 million years ago, in the late Miocene epoch.[xiii] We have been chasing the mystery of reindeer ever since, wondering how she came to be, and what she means for us. Lore about deer and particularly reindeer has been spanning the globe all this time, with the echoes of Eurasia, and the whispers of our prehistoric past with the gentle creatures who capture our hearts and imagination.

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