

Attrition  
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*„And pulled from the mud was a stone,  
And the stone bore the shoulders of a red giant  
And the stone bore the spine of a woman with child  
So curved in imitation of the river that bore it”*

**Extract: Song of Llyr, trans. Albrecht Spiegal**

The River Cult of Llyr is first recorded as coming into existence around the Severn Estuary in approximately 30 B.C, and, according to several of the medieval sources which see fit to mention it (including the Domesday book and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *A Historie of Albion* amongst others) it is generally concluded that it was initially usurped by the coming of Roman Mithraism to Britain, and later completely crushed by early Christianity in the first century A.D. What makes this short lived but fervent religious movement - based roughly on several of the deified folk heroes of the Mabinogion – so unusual is the prevalence within its canon of images and occurrences of self-manifested icons, a religious phenomenon widely recorded but most commonly celebrated within with the pictorial faiths of North-East coastal India and the Ugric basins. It is said, in the widely read 'Song of Llyr', that for thirty days, the fishermen in and around the modern city of Chepstow pulled in on their lines only blind fish, their eyes described as 'milky walls'. According to the bards who sang the song, it was considered a bad omen, the fish were uneatable, and so in desperation and fear the river was primitively dredged to seek out the aqueous malcontent. What was pulled from the silty bed was no Grendel, no poisoned flue, but, we are told, a seven foot 'bloodied sandstone mass'

– a complete, self manifested image of Llyr bearing his/her two children. The people of the riverbank had reclaimed an icon from their waters, and, we understand, a striking one indeed; involving elements of their oldest stories, including their most celebrated religious associations. The ores present in the estuary were surely what had caused the deep red residue (the colour red being connected with the powerful hero Gwydion), which is sung about extensively in all modern forms of the ballad, but other details on the precise form of the stone icon vary from region to region – some say that the bottom right of the image showed a kneeling figure, others proclaim the icon was winged, or held a serpent, a flute or a trident in its right hand. Despite the inconsistencies, for a people under oppression by two powerful new colonial doctrines, the river had given up a seemingly powerful iconic sacrifice.

The gods of the Llyrians sit within a pantheon of elite global religious images, and are remarkable for the fact that the creation of the icons was said to be so symbolically threatening to two burgeoning, rival and popular faiths, it is reported that they put aside their differences to discredit the cult of Llyr and defame their god as a heresy, a local superstition borne of darkness and ignorance. After several successful and intriguing geothological studies, we are re-opening the study of self-manifestation, and present this paper as an introduction to the concept with the anticipation of considerably bolstering the archives with further evidence, in order to support hypotheses surrounding the subject and the formation of visual faith and iconography.

The self-manifested deity is defined by our leading scholars as 'an icon sacrificed by the earth, or a found image miraculously bearing the characteristics or iconography of godhead', and the mythical and historical occurrences of such icons have understandably brought prestige to communities, transformed entire towns into sites of pilgrimage, even forced irreversible transformations upon well established religious threads and movements. This was indeed true for the Llyrians, whose discovery of their ore-stained 'red parent' – generally understood to be a composite image of the royal trinity of the ancient Britons; Llyr the father/mother, Bendigeidfran the son, and

Branwen the pregnant daughter – brought a two-generation long boom of trade and intrigue across the Bristol channel, and established the borders of the modern county of Gwent. Here was an unearthed miracle, a historical record commemorating their god in stone. It is, of course, an academic tragedy that the icon itself was either destroyed or more likely lost due to the completion of the erosive process on the brittle sandstone which had allowed it such a unique shape to begin with. Thankfully, the strong oral culture of the time and place preserved its existence alongside the stories which ultimately contributed to a rich source of iconic history, and the Roman records confirm many details of the threatening presence they found amongst the ecstatically faithful and industrious denizens of the Severn banks.

As a result of the reopening of the investigation into the formation of the cult of Llyr, a project brief to gather details of further self-manifested deities was formulated, with the hope of developing a new research department. We include some of the proposals here. An academic group was dispatched to Ganpatipule, a coastal pilgrimage town in the state of Maharashtra, to record and attempt a dating of the icon of Ganapati which was supposedly washed to shore several hundred years ago. However, results were inconclusive, and the team was sent onwards to the upper shores of the Yamuna river, where it is said an image of Balarama grows organically from the calcific strata of a salt lake. The following letter was received in August, 2002, following the abandonment of the Ganpatipule temples, with a concise evaluation of the nature of worship at the coastal town:

„the temple is overrun with pilgrims, who, even after half a millenia of unmoving solemnity, are still drawn in their thousands to the bulbous, elephantine figure who sits above the Saivite tridents of the altar. The icon itself has been smoothed glassily by a hundred million touches, taming and beautifying that which was once battered and carved by the sea, and is clearly slowly losing its definition and shape under the hands of the faithful seeking benediction, luck, wealth, love. What draws so much academic attention to the Ganapati icon is fascinatingly not the icon itself, which, as mentioned is becoming increasingly abstracted and arbitrary through the sand-stippled palms of devotion, but the

sacrifice of the image, any image, by a considerably older deity – the delta. The stone which washed up upon the shore (perhaps coincidentally an oceanographically typical location for another moulder of coastal tribal religions - the beaching of whales. Indeed, there is the rotting hulk of a Humpback not two miles from the camp) was rounded, fat, with an obvious protrusion, thus it gained the title of Ganapati, Elephant-headed one. Had the same stone been found in Bhimbekta, it would perhaps be heralded as a Shivalingum. Were it to have three parallel curves, no doubt this would be the dancing Bhagavan. The importance of the physical icon is irrelevant, malleable, and the devoted realise this in their prayers. Their attention is unwaveringly on that which made it, and ultimately gave it up, sacrificed it – a power as culturally important, as devastating and generous a deity as the sun itself, that of the ocean, of water and her complex embracing of the land.”

Of course, by far the most famous and culturally successful and prevalent self-formed icon of god is that of Jagganatha, trans. 'Lord of the Universe' – an instantly recognisable abstraction of Visnu who is still celebrated in his unique and bizarre truncated form on his festival day of Ratha Yatra (day of the chariot) in hundreds of cities worldwide. The story of Jagganatha takes two very separate forms – the Vaisnavas of the north tell of how god (as a man) was listening to his female devotees sing his praises, and was so moved by their penance and devotion that 'his eyes grew wide as saucers, and his smile enveloped his face as his limbs curled inward' – an almost cartoonish, amplified aspect of the physical manifestations of holy ecstasy. The more preferred origin story tells of a great black log washed up on the banks of the river, taken to be carved by a monk who for varying reasons is unable to finish his work, and returns it to the water, only to find a 'worshipful image of god' in its place the following morning. Jagganatha is indeed a visual enigma, essentially a rounded, black, wooden lingum with red-lined eyes and a gaping smile. What separates it completely from the icon at Ganpatipule, and the unseen but understandable Llyrian totem is that the image of Jagganatha, the self-manifested deity washed upon the shore is not that which is worshipped

– the location of the original is unknown, if indeed it ever existed at all. Those icons which grace the altars are copies, casts of something which was said to be cast by nature itself. Several scholars have claimed that the reason for Jagganatha's basic form and mundane features are due to his being an exo-universal god, literally lord over that which the Vedas tell us is outside this, one of uncountable universes floating in the causal ocean. Thus, his material form is reduced to a black lump, an adorned mass churned out from the ever-changing murky waters of Yamuna.

Never are self-manifested deities found without an origin offered of sacrifice by water; the new icon is without fail produced by rivers and coastlines, given up onto banks and beaches to be stumbled upon by a visionary and 'recognised' for what it is. Much has been written on the subject of the human mind seeking patterns and recognisable iconography in the chaotic and orderless lines which nature provides, but this paper requests that the reader steps back momentarily, considers the deification of land, the icon of the city, carved by water for millenia prior to its 'discovery' or 'recognition'. We utilise our cities and settlements in much the same way as we do our icons – at no point can we question their creation, their foundation. We accept their existence as a fixed point in a process of erosion or development, attrition or contrition which is far more organic than we allow ourselves to consider. Our cities are the merciful sacrifices of our rivers and deltas, we, as humans, artists, architects of the most simple intentions look at the spiralling calligraphy of meanders through soft loam, the ghostly footprints of their former routes in the oxbow lakes of the lowlands. We look at the shapeless, and we see defences, ramparts, vantage points. We move downriver, and the water offers visions; boons of fertility, brownfield, sluice. Art, and its creation. We identify with the self manifestation of our city. We totemise the river's grace with coats of arms. We anthropomorphise it, we sell it. We pray to it. We pull the present from its marshlands, and we leave our dead in the shallows. It comes as no surprise that we fish our gods from the lapping waves of estuary waters and flagging seaside towns, from whence else could a societal structure so urban as faith come? The Romans and early

Christians who robbed the Severn of her claim to the divine were not so foolish as to fear the image of God in the form of sand-battered Llyr, but the timeless, morphous creator of that God will never lose the power to crumble churches into mud, or engulf Mithraic holy caves, to birth great civilisations and dictate the shape of cities, self-manifested and relentlessly cleaving the living stone in two.