

#### BOOK LIST

- Colley March H. (1901) 'The Giant and the Maypole of Cerne', *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeology Society*, xxii, 101-118.
- Crawford O. G. S. (1929) 'The Giant of Cerne and other Hill Figures', *Antiquity* iii, 277-282.
- Dewar H. S. L. (1968) 'The Giant of Cerne Abbas', *West Country Folklore* 1, 5-10.
- Hutchins J. (1774) *History of Dorset*.
- Marples M. *White Horses and Other Hill Figures*.
- Petrie F. (1926) *The Hill Figures of England*.
- Piggott S. (1932) 'The Name of the Giant of Cerne', *Antiquity* vi, 214-216.
- Piggott S. (1938) 'The Hercules Myth — Beginnings and Ends', *Antiquity* xii, 323-331.
- Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *West Dorset* (1952), 82.

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ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE NATIONAL TRUST

## CERNE GIANT DORSET

Given to the National Trust in 1920 by Mr. Alexander and Mr. George Pitt-Rivers. It was endowed by Sir Henry Hoare in 1924.



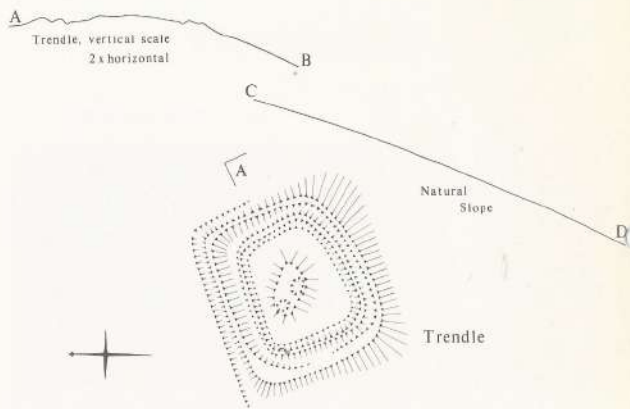
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THIS COLOSSAL HILL FIGURE, a Giant, is cut into the turf exposing the natural chalk rock below. He is 180ft. long from head to foot, and appears to be striding towards the left. In his right hand he brandishes a club 120ft. long. His body is outlined and detailed by narrow trenches no more than 2ft. wide and his condition has been maintained by periodic scouring by the local people, an activity which traditionally occurred every seven years. Today he is maintained by the National Trust. Only one other ancient chalk hill figure of a giant survives today. The Long Man of Wilmington in Sussex, but there are legends of others, the most famous of which are on The Gog Magog Hills below Wandlebury *hill-fort*, Cambridgeshire.

The Cerne Giant, from his resemblance to Hercules, is best thought of as a Romano-British figure, dating perhaps from the second-century A.D. He has been, and indeed still is, the subject of a great deal of folklore.

Above the Giant is a small near-rectangular earthwork known as the 'Trendle' or the 'Frying Pan'. It may well have been associated with the Giant. It was, until recently, the site of a Maypole.

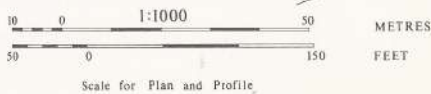
**VIEWING:** The best view of the Giant is from the A.352, the main Sherborne to Dorchester Road. There is however a footpath up the hill from the village, leading up through the Churchyard. The Giant and the Trendle are fenced off to protect them from erosion. Visitors are pleased asked to remain outside the fence.



Plan showing relationship between Giant and Trendle.



Scale of the Giant measured down the slope, not horizontal.



Hercules, the classical deity whose principal attribute seems to have been his superhuman strength, is depicted many times and in many different media in Roman Britain. He is seen in relief on altar stones, such as that from Whitley Castle, a Roman fort in Cumbria, and on a sherd of *Castor ware* pottery from Welney, near Peterborough. He is also seen in the round on a number of small bronze figures, many of them from the Cambridge Region where a cult-centre of Hercules may have been associated in some way with the Gog Magog Hills, named after legendary giants. Many of these small bronze statuettes show the naked Hercules wielding a club in his right hand, with a cloak or a lion-skin in his left in a posture very similar to that of the Cerne Giant. The semi-naturalistic modelling of the Cerne Giant is much closer to Roman art than to that of the earlier *Iron Age* or medieval periods.

The worship of Hercules, with his particularly human attributes, seems to have played an important part in the religion of the Roman Emperors, a number of whom attempted to establish cults identifying themselves with the god. In fact, in A.D. 191 the Emperor Commodus declared himself an incarnation of Hercules, and it has been suggested that the figure at Cerne dates from this period.

There is some evidence for a local tradition calling the Giant by the name of Helis or Helith. The earliest suggestion of this name comes from a thirteenth-century version of the Legend of St. Augustine of Canterbury's visit to Cerne at the end of the sixth century A.D. This version, given by Walter of Coventry mentions that the God Helith was worshipped in Dorset and the prefix 'Hel' is certainly found in archaeological contexts in the county (as in the Hell Stone *long barrow*, Portesham). It is perhaps worth wondering whether the establishment of the Abbey at Cerne was

connected with the object of neutralising or dominating the pagan cult.

Later, in the eighteenth century, the historian and writer, William Stukeley, mentions that the name of Helis was given to the figure by the local people. Unless Stukeley obtained his information from Walter of Coventry's version of the legend it would seem that the folk memory of this name was still alive.

Recent studies of the Harlequin of Pantomime have traced the history of this character to a group of medieval French stories in which a 'wild Huntsman' called Helequin or Hierlekin leads a troop of damned souls. In the earliest, a twelfth-century reference, the character is described as a club-bearing giant. An English form of this name is given as Helethkin, a name very similar to that of the Cerne Giant, Helith. Hints of parallel English legends are gained throughout the literature; hence Herne the Hunter in Shakespeare's 'Merry Wives of Windsor', the 'Wild Man' of the medieval Bestiaries, and later the 'Woodwose' of heraldry. All these characters seem to have derived from Hercules.

There are a number of local legends of lesser significance adhering to the figure. The stories vary but the main theme is that the outline of the Giant was cut around the figure of a real giant, sleeping on the hillside after a feast of sheep stolen in the Blackmore Vale.

Some of the earlier writers on the Giant mention that certain letters or figures were at one time visible between the Giant's legs. Hutchins in his *History of Dorset* (1774) mentions three 'rude letters scarce legible' and over them three others. He included them in his plan of the figure, interpreting the numerals as a date 798; the letters possibly as IHS, the first syllable of the Greek form of Jesus. These figures are no longer visible and their meaning is now lost.

#### THE TRENDLE

Immediately above The Giant is a sub-rectangular earthwork enclosure, terraced into the hillside, with an external bank and ditch. An internal bank and ditch is said to be relatively recent. The association of this

earthwork with the Giant suggests that it may have been the site of a temple or shrine associated with the cult of Hercules. It was certainly the site of the village Maypole celebrations until recent times.