

A Note on the Treasure of the Tronoën Calvary in Brittany

By Jane Casewit



Hidden in a corner of the southern jagged, rocky coast of Brittany, France, south-west of the Breton town of Quimper, is a little-known treasure, ensconced in a very intricately sculpted calvary. The central cross at the highest point of this most ancient calvary of the region includes St. Veronica at the base of a smaller cross on the left and St. James at the base of another smaller cross on the right. Below these crosses is an upper frieze depicting Jesus standing in front of the gaping mouth of hell and the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. In the next scene, he is being mocked on the way to the crucifixion. Other unusual depictions show two angels collecting Jesus' blood before he is placed in the tomb. Although most calvaries include the story of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt and Jesus' later victorious entry into Jerusalem, the calvary of Tronoën does not include those scenes, nor his arrest. However, we do find striking scenes of the Last Judgement and the Garden of Paradise.

It is on the lower frieze where we find a most unusual and rare depiction of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ child. In perhaps the most famous scene on this Romanesque calvary, of which there are significantly seven in the region, the blessed mother is lying down. She is horizontal, and her hair is flowing by her sides. Her breasts are bare. Another rare feature of the Calvary of Tronoën is the Christ child standing by his mother's side, a child of about the age of seven, dressed in a flowing gown and holding up a globe in his left hand. He raises a teaching finger in his right hand. St. Joseph is seated nearby holding his staff, perhaps asleep, in any case, not playing an active role in this nativity scene. One of the Wise Men stands to the right, perhaps offering the gift of myrrh. If so, myrrh is an oil used for embalming, likely indicating that the Virgin Mary is close to death in this scene.

Our sculptors wanted to portray a different version of the nativity: Christ stands beside his reclining Mother who is perhaps leaving the earthly state, as he holds up the world, conveying the message with his upward pointing finger of the other hand that 'His Kingdom is not of this world' whilst at the same time blessing it.

But why is His Mother reclining? She may be close to death and her entrance into Paradise, leaving us with a message of mercy and of beauty. As a grown child, her son, Jesus Christ, may be transmitting Mary's message of victorious maternity and salvation, while portraying himself, though still a child, as 'King of kings'. Mary's flowing hair reminds one of generosity, of the flowing of mercy into the world, perhaps in the form of a river. The image of Ganga Devi comes to mind here. While one safely can assume that the Tronoën sculptors had no knowledge of the sacred Hindu iconography, the image is archetypally resonant. The bare breasts signify interiority – "exteriorization with a view to interiorization ... the merciful Inward in the Outward"¹ – and the beauty and mystery of sacred nudity, as found in Hindu statuary. The image of the Blessed Mother also evokes the states of grace and spiritual poverty.

Geographically and more specifically, our calvary is located in the French department of Finistère, known locally as 'Bigouden' country in southwest Brittany. It is carved onto a rectangular granite block about 4½ meters high and 3½ meters long just outside of the chapel of Notre

¹ Description of Celestial Virgin and Child in *Frithjof Schuon, Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, by Michael Oren Fitzgerald, World Wisdom Books, 2010

Dame de Tronoën, in the commune of St Jean Trolimon, a few kilometers north of St Guénolé. The Calvaire de Tronoën is the oldest calvary of the region, and dates between 1450 and 1470. The calvary has two layers of sculptural frieze illustrating the life of Christ; a representation of the crucifixion crowns the calvary. In 'reading' or following this unique calvary, counter clockwise, one is taken aback by the rare depiction of the reclining Virgin Mary.

From the Greek *golgotha*, literally 'place of the skull', a calvary often tells story of the life of Christ, and was for centuries the means for transmitting religious education to the population of the local parish. In the 1500s when these chapels, churches and calvaries were erected in Brittany, the duchy was enjoying economic prosperity, thanks to the fishing and commerce of its ports and world-renowned tailoring techniques. Therefore, most of the calvaries in this area became very elaborate, sometimes painted in vivid colours. The calvaries are also witnesses to the intense religious fervor of the population and, unlike a simple calvary which is usually a mounted image of the crucifixion, the calvaries of Brittany recount in elaborate and often detailed stone sculpture the nativity, passion and crucifixion of Christ, in short, his entire life. All are located near small chapels and miraculous fountains and springs dedicated to the Virgin or to local saints and were sculpted between 1450 and 1610.

Legends and stories of the miracles of the saints and bishops of ancient Brittany abound and keep the presence of the spirit in this region alive. The countryside in fact, breathes an air of sanctity as this peninsula welcomed multitudes of saints and pious folk who crossed the Channel from Britain and Ireland and evangelized most of the Armorican peninsula, later called *La Bretagne* or Brittany in English. The first seven saintly bishops coming from Ireland and Wales symbolically established the seven dioceses of Brittany, marking the origins of a Christianity which set it apart from the rest of France and, until the onset of modern transportation and communication, evolved into its own Christian civilization with a vibrant tradition of legends and saints which remains alive to this day. Although united with France through the Edict of the Union between Brittany and France in 1532, the Armorican peninsula juts off of the French mainland, and never truly shared French culture.

One well-known saint and bishop was St. Vio, called the *évêque d'Armach*, or the bishop of Armach. St Vio was said to be one of the original message-bearers of Christianity from the British Isles. He was allegedly carried across the Channel to the Amorvid coast on an immense Neolithic phallic-shaped stone. As with several other Breton saints, the stone made its own way to St. Vio and offered to carry him across the Channel. He was known as a simple and humble (although influential) bishop, and in the sixteenth century a miraculous spring is said to have gurgled forth on the grounds of his chapel and was the scene of subsequent healing and other miracles. The stone can be seen to this day, and children are taken to the fountain to be blessed. Women visit the phallic-shaped rock to be able to bear children.

An air of sanctity surrounds the gardens and grounds around the chapel, undoubtedly an ancient site of sacred geography, as figurines of Venus and earth goddesses have been uncovered nearby. The miraculous spring and the unusual image of the Virgin Mary lying down, with her flowing hair reminding one of the tumultuous sea surrounding Brittany, invite reflection, inspiration and contemplation.

St. Anne is one of the patron saints of Brittany, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York houses a rare German sculpture of a reclining St. Anne, dated about 1480. One is tempted to wonder if there is a connection here. Yet, her daughter, the Virgin Mary, is most often shown as standing erect, extending her arms mercifully to the world, or, if she is portrayed as seated, the focus is on the Christ child who is either suckling her breast or sitting on her lap. A young standing Christ with the world in his hand, beside his reclining Mother, makes this calvary of Tronoën unique, and invites one to reflect, ponder and meditate.