RESEARCH ARTICLES

St. Michael's Mount: From Christian Folklore to New Age Mythologies

Philip Hayward[1] [a]

[1] School of Health Sciences, Western Sydney University

Folk, Knowledge, Place

St. Michael's Mount, a small, tidal island in Mount's Bay, close to the south-western tip of the English county of Cornwall, is both a highly picturesque tourism attraction and a place that has become associated with various aspects of Christianity, Christian folklore and, more latterly, New Age mysticism. While the island was a centre for Christian pilgrimage in the 12th-14th centuries, at a time when it was closely associated with St. Michael the Archangel and the Benedictine order devoted to him, several other religious and spiritual associations are more recent. One notable folkloric tale, which arose long after the Order had departed, concerned the manifestation of St. Michael on the island. This was also influential in a more modern folkloric connection, that of the island being located at the intersection of two "leys" (lines of spiritual power): one English one, running north-east from St. Michael's Mount to Bury St. Edmunds, and one international one, running south-east from Ireland to Bethlehem. These aspects are discussed with regard to the island being a nexus of various mythical and spiritual aspects within historical, popular cultural, New Age and tourism contexts. The article identifies how associations can accrete around locales and suggest them as spiritually infused in a broad and somewhat "fuzzy" manner that facilitates multiple affective and representational engagements with them.

Introduction

There is a common association of remote, inaccessible and minimally inhabited places with spiritual "energies" and related senses of holiness. These appear to derive from the senses of isolation and calm that may be experienced by humans apprehending, visiting and/or residing in such locales. There are many mountains regarded as sacred, such as the various peaks revered by Buddhists, Taoists and Hindus across southern and eastern Asia (Bernbaum, 2022). Remote desert areas have also been closely associated with spirituality and mysticism (Jasper, 2008) and islands have also held a particular place within various religions. With regard to Christianity, for, instance, there are a number of islands in the UK that have been considered as holy due to their close association with pious recluses, missionaries and/or religious orders over sustained durations. Iona, in Scotland's Inner Hebrides

a prhshima@gmail.com; corresponding author

(Power, 2006), and Lindisfarne, off the Northumbrian coast (Adam, 2009), are two of the best-known examples (with religious communities dating back to 563 and 635 respectively). St. Michael's Mount (henceforth SMM), in the far south-western corner of the UK ([Figure 1](#)), does not have such an institutional pedigree but rather resembles locations such as Glastonbury, whose spiritual status results from cross-associations of Christian and Arthurian legendry (Cusack, 2018) and through a modern mystification of the site that is evident in its branding for tourists (Bowman, 2005). SMM has also been regarded as holy and/or spiritually charged at various times due to its historical association with Christian monasticism and various more fanciful projections that have been made onto it. Many of the latter are New Age interpretations based on eclectic combinations of mysticism, holistic philosophies and reverence for national-environmental phenomena (Drury, 2004; Lewis & Melton, 1992). This article explores the origins and compound aspects of the island's particular status in the contemporary cultural imaginaries manifested in tourism and New Age discourse and in online and broadcast media instantiations of these.

The present-day configuration of SMM as a tidal island within Mount's Bay results from the inundation of the low-lying, wooded land that occupied the present-day bay-floor prior to glacial melting in the early-mid Holocene period (c11,000-4,000 BCE). The massive meltwater flow elevated sea-levels, changing the coastline of the Cornish peninsula and also fragmenting Scilly (to the south-west of the peninsula) into a number of small islands (Barnett et al., 2020). Evidence of the existence of the wooded lowlands that formerly populated Mount's Bay can regularly be seen during neap tides (when the sea recedes to its annual maximum distance from shore) in the form of petrified tree trunks (Martin, 2021). The original Cornish language name of SMM, *Karrek Loos yn Koos* (meaning 'grey rock in a wood') is suggestive of this history (although the name cannot be conclusively attributed to pre-inundation perceptions of the locale). Vestigial folk memories of the inundations of the Cornish coastline and the fragmentation of Scilly have been perceived as the inspiration for the myth of the lost lands of Lyonesse that are supposed to lie beneath the waves off the south-western coast of Cornwall that were subject to literary embellishment and elaboration in the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g., Mitchell, 2016). Padel (2006) has identified that local folklore concerning this topic dates back at least as early as 1478, as reported by William Worcester during his travels in the south-western peninsula. While Lyonesse does not play a prominent role in contemporary perceptions of SMM, it provides what might be termed an 'imaginative backdrop' to later events that unfolded there and to the folklore that has been associated with the island.

Archaeological studies suggest that SMM and the adjacent coast have been inhabited and have been a centre of maritime trade since the late Neolithic Era (c3000-2000 BCE). There is evidence that stone working occurred around Mount's Bay at this time and that the materials produced
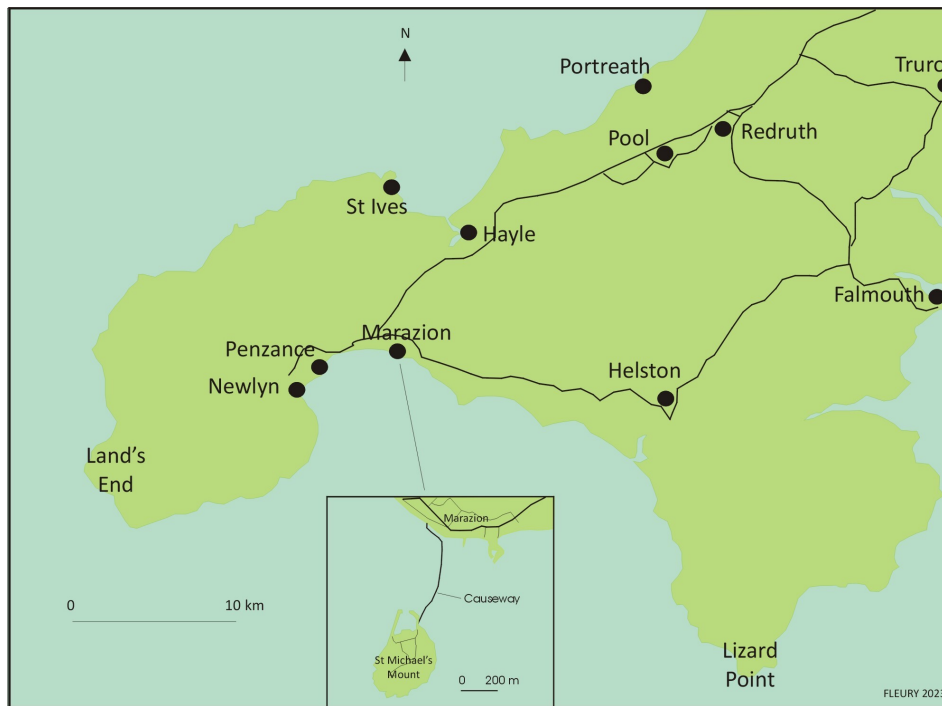
Figure 1. Saint Michaels's Mount and adjacent areas of south-western Cornwall (Christian Fleury, 2023).

were distributed across southern England. Tin mining also developed in various parts of Cornwall in this period and SMM grew as a trading centre, with vessels mooring off its sheltered northern coast. As a result, the island has been identified as one possible site for the tin port identified by Diodorus Siculus as 'Ictis' in the 1st century CE (Hawkes, 1984). SMM appears to have continued as a port after the Roman withdrawal from Britain, exporting tin across Europe. While various sources have suggested that a Christian community of some kind was established in the island around the 5th Century CE, Herring (1993) has identified that there is no archaeological evidence of this and that such accounts are essentially folkloric. The close association of SMM and Mont St. Michel in Normandy (which the former resembles in all but scale - the latter being significantly greater in elevation) dates from the mid-11th century. Following William the Conqueror's successful invasion of England in 1066, William's half-brother, Robert Count of Mortain, became a major estate holder in Cornwall and gave SMM to the ducal monastery at Mont Saint-Michel shortly after, with its abbot establishing a small dependent priory on the island in 1135. Initial fortifications were constructed, either contemporaneously or shortly after, and were later expanded into a castle. The presence of the religious community appears to have increased traffic through the port and a breakwater was built to enhance its operation.

The affiliation with Mont Saint-Michel appears to have given SMM a substantial degree of holiness-by-association, as the former had been a prominent pilgrimage destination for over 150 years at the time of the Norman invasion of England. Much of the Norman locale's religious mystique derived from its myth of origin. A 9th century French text known as

La Revelatio, written by an unknown author around 820 CE, related that the Archangel Michael (also commonly referred to as Saint Michael) visited the early 8th century Bishop Aubert of Avranches in his dreams for three nights in a row in 708, commanding him to build a chapel on top of Mount Tombe, the steep, tidal island now known as Mont Saint-Michel. While some late 20th and early 21st century accounts suggest that the unknown author may have drawn on local folklore (Rosenbergová, p.13 fn. 8), s/he might equally well have fabricated a dramatic myth of origin that boosted the chapel's appeal as a pilgrimage destination. Whatever the inspiration, the Bishop built a new chapel on the island and obtained relics from Monte Gargano (in southeastern Italy) to enhance its association with the saint. As Rosenbergová has elaborated, the hagiographical origin story was subsequently reiterated in various contexts and "could take the shape of discrete narrative texts, but... also appears as charters, royal diplomas, hagiography, reliquaries, sculptures, or architectural design. The legends therefore represent the 'imaginative memory' of the monastery" (2017, p. 15).

This "imaginative memory" of the island as a blessed, sacred space was enhanced by its designation *as* Mont Saint-Michel and by the centrality of that association in its subsequent destination branding. Indeed, the island and its abbey have retained their status as centres of religious pilgrimage through to the present and continue to be actively promoted in that regard (e.g., Destination Mont Saint-Michel Normandie, 2023).

SMM's priory appears to have remained relatively modest during the 12th century and the island only began to develop a variety of amenities in the early 13th century including those necessary to sustain pilgrims. Competition for patronage of religious sites in Europe was intense in the Medieval period, with existing centres such as Mont Saint-Michel or Santiago de Compostela having a clear market advantage over newcomers. New centres required attention-gaining events or (what were claimed as) archaeological discoveries that they could publicise in order to attract visitors. With striking fortuity, SMM's fledgling reputation as a pilgrimage site was enhanced by reports of four miracles on the island in the 1260s that involved pilgrims who had prayed to St. Michael having their disabilities and illnesses cured (Doble, 1932?). Pilgrimage continued, albeit at fluctuating levels (due to external factors such as international conflicts) over the next two hundred years, with the island's community growing and with enhanced facilities being established to receive visitors. There is scant documentation of the specific motivation for pilgrim visitation to SMM (in preference to other English sites), or of the activities of pilgrims on SMM, but pilgrimage sustained for over two centuries. A major change occurred in 1424 when Henry VI ended the priory's association with the Mont Saint-Michel abbey, transferring its control to New College, Cambridge. His successor, Edward IV, subsequently transferred it to Syon Abbey, in Isleworth, and a stone causeway to the mainland was constructed soon after. Religious pilgrimage to the island appears to have diminished around the time of this transition and was

Figure 2. Causeway at high tide and Saint Michael's Mount at rear (author's photo, September 2022).

terminated soon after by the establishment of the Church of England in 1534 and the dissolution of monasteries ordered by Henry VIII that commenced in 1536. The island ceased to house a religious order at this time and changed hands between various members of the nobility until it was sold to Colonel John St Aubyn in 1659, remaining in his family through to the present. Following improvements to the harbour in 1727, a small fishing and trading village prospered on the north coast until nearby Penzance's growth as a port caused the village to diminish in significance. The owning family responded by demolishing many of the buildings on the lower part of the island and, together with a series of restyling works on the castle, created the modern port area and more general islandscape enjoyed by contemporary visitors (Figure 2) and managed, since 1954, by the National Trust.

The present-day promotion of SMM and its representation in print, visual and online media substantially derives from fanciful renditions of the island in the 18th and 19th centuries and by what might be termed the retro-injection of holiness and the miraculous into it. During this period, the history, built heritage, landscapes and culture of Cornwall began to attract those sufficiently affluent, time-enabled and intrepid enough to make their way down to a region poorly served by major carriage routes. The history and general charms of the peninsula were notably extolled by William Borlase in his impressively titled 1769 volume *Antiquities, historical and monumental, of the county of Cornwall: Consisting of several essays on the first inhabitants, Druid-superstition, customs, and remains of the most remote antiquity in Britain, and the British Isles, exemplified and proved by monuments now extant in Cornwall and the Scilly Islands, with a Vocabulary of the Cornu-British Language.* Borlase was a Cornish ordained minister and scholar of

antiquities, geology and culture who was rector of a small parish north of Penzance between 1722 and 1772. He wrote extensively about Cornwall and is largely responsible for its image in the late 18th and 19th century British literature and art. Borlase's volume contains highly speculative discussions of Druidic culture and beliefs and the "Sacrifice, Luxury and Debauch" involved in them (p. 61). As an earnest Christian, Borlase devotes considerable attention to the establishment of Cornish Christianity that ended the pagan era. Describing SMM as the "most entire Religious House now standing in Cornwall" (p. 387), he characterises that the date at which monks settled on the island is uncertain but that King Edward the Confessor (p. 1042-1066) "found monks here serving God, and gave them by charter the property of the Mount and other lands; first obliging them to conform to the Rule of St. Benedict." Borlase's account of this is based on what is now widely acknowledged to be a forged charter written after the Norman conquest (Hull, 1967) and the issue of whether there were monks on the island in the 1040s or 1050s is unclear. Borlase (1769) also contends that:

> long before this, this place seems renowned for its sanctity, and therefore must (according to the custom of the first ages of Christianity) have been dedicated to Religion; for St. Kayner, or Keyna, a holy virgin of the blood royal, daughter of Braganus, Prince of Breckonshire, is said to have gone on a Pilgrimage to Saint Michael's Mount: a fact farther confirmed by the Legend of St. Cadoc (though disfigured by Fable), who, according to Capgrave... made a pilgrimage to St. Michael's Mount, there saw, and converted with St. Kayne, and on his return, parched with thirst, miraculously produced a most plentiful and healing fountain in a dry place, and had a church dedicated to him in Cornwall, where this miracle was performed; from which it appears that this place [i.e., SMM] was dedicated to Religion, at least as anciently as the latter end of the fifth century. (p. 385-386)

The language of this passage, using terms such as "seems", "therefore must" and "is said" – let alone the qualification of a "fact" "disfigured by Fable" – illustrates how speculative Borlase's account is, and no evidence has yet been uncovered to substantiate a pre-Norman religious establishment on the island.

One notable visitor to Cornwall in the late 18th century was the proto-Romantic poet William Lisle Bowers, who travelled there in the late 1790s. Bowers wrote about SMM in a densely dramatic poem written in 1798 that combines characterisations of SMM as a "mountain... frowning, bleak, and bare, and tempest-proof" with lurid historical fantasies of pagan rituals that resemble Borlase's accounts and reference the myth of an "Angel-spectre" (discussed further below):

> Low sinks the cadence of the solemn lay,
> And all the sombrous scenery steals away–
> The shadowy Druid throng, the darksome wood,
> And the hoar altar, wet with human blood!
> Marked ye the Angel-spectre that appeared?

While it is unclear whether Bowers actually visited SMM, it is likely that his impression of it drew on Borlase's general characterisations of Cornish pagan antiquity. But this source does not fully explain the epic grandeur of Bowers' poem nor its reference to the "Angel-spectre" (as Borlase doesn't refer to any such a myth). Instead, the chief model for Bowers' poem appears to be John Milton's 'Lycidas,' written in 1637 to mourn the death of his friend Edward King in a shipwreck off the coast of Anglesey. The poem commemorates King in a dramatic pastoral text that draws heavily on classical imagery and is rich in allusion. The following lines are of particular relevance to this essay:

> Or whether thou, to our moist vows denied,
> Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,
> Where the great Vision of the guarded mount
> Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold.
> Look homeward, Angel, now, and melt with ruth:
> And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

The "Bellerus" referred to is a giant whose name is derived from Latin or Greek terms for Land's End, the most westerly tip of Cornwall, or the county itself, depending on which classic source is being alluded to (Sheldrake, 2012, pp. 122, 165, 169, 176). The "guarded mount" reference is cryptic (and may not, necessarily, allude to an actual place) but is open to interpretation as SMM (given the latter's proximity to Land's End). This association seems to have gained traction in England in the 1700s and Bowers treads similar ground to Milton in his poem. The association was made even more explicit by land- and sea-scape painter Joseph Turner in 1835 when he illustrated the title page of *The poetical works of John Milton Volume VI* (1835), which included the poem 'Lycidas,' with a dramatic engraving that is commonly referred to as 'St Michael's Mount Shipwreck of Lycidas / The Death of Lycidas—Vision on the Guarded Mount' ([Figure 3](#)). Aside from its dramatic composition, the image is notable in two regards. For one, it does not closely resemble SMM either in terms of the building on its peak, or in terms of the island's steep elevation (problematising interpretations of it *as* SMM). A second significant aspect is the figure seen atop of the tower, in a circle of light. This appears to be a representation of the "Angel-Spectre" referred to above. It can also be taken to allude to a myth that the Archangel Michael appeared on SMM in the Early Medieval period (well before the island was either associated with him or was associated with the abbey at Mont Saint-Michel). This story has persisted in contemporary folklore and online

representations of it despite its historical veracity being comprehensively debunked by Müller (1874), Bivar (1953) and, most recently, Pearse (2021). Pearse identifies the origin of the story as an account by Johannes Mirkus written around 1400 in which the author conflates the foundation myth of Mont Saint-Michel with a characterisation of SMM. It was repeated by William of Worcester and again by William Camden in 1586 in his *Britannia*. Pearse also identifies that despite any specification in Milton's poem, several subsequent commentators on the poem have perceived it to refer to both SMM and to the legend of St. Michael's manifestation on the island.

In the early 1800s a number of artists visited Cornwall. Turner's title page engraving of *Lycidas* discussed above appears to have been inspired by his visit to Mount's Bay in 1811. Another belated result of that trip was his 1834 canvas entitled 'Saint Michael's Mount' that also exaggerated the island's elevation in a similar manner to the engraving. A similar tendency was also evident in Clarkson Stanfield's widely praised painting 'Mount Saint Michael, Cornwall' exhibited at the Royal Exhibition in London in 1830. Queen Victoria was so taken with Stanfield's canvas that she commissioned him to represent her own visit to the island in 1846 which he rendered in similar form ('Royal yacht passing St Michael's Mount'). The growing popularity of the West of England as a destination for those able to explore its landscapes and antiquities fed into the destination branding of Cornwall in the 1860s following the construction of the Royal Albert Bridge across the Tamar River (dividing Cornwall and Devon), which allowed rail passengers smooth passage down into the county. The extension of the line to Penzance (6 kms west of St Michael's Mount) in 1867 also made SMM far more accessible to tourists. A short newspaper report entitled "A Day at St. Michael's Mount" (TRE, 1862) characterised "the noble bay from whose peaceful surface the Mount appeared to rise as if by the touch of some fairy's wand" (p. 6) and went on to detail the appearance of the castle before venturing into historical fantasy that appears to derive from Borlase and/or Bowers' previous writings. Speculating on the nature of the bay as a forest before its inundation, the item ambiguously referred to Druids and ancient Celts inhabiting the area (in a manner that suggests they were one and the same) before echoing Bowers' earlier poem by going on to characterise that:

> it was to become still more famous, traditionally and historically, than when the ancient Celt stood on its summit, and the cruel, crafty priests of a false religion sacrificed on the altars of unhewn granite, human beings to appease the wrath of their offended deity; for at an early period Christian pilgrims planted the cross up high amongst the rocks once stained with the blood of the victim, and on the hill top proclaimed the new system that was to be promulgated through all lands; and from this circumstance, and the tradition, that it was once visited by the archangel St. Michael, it became famous for its sanctity. (TRE, 1862, p. 6)

Figure 3. Joseph Turner's engraving 'St Michael's Mount Shipwreck of Lycidas / The Death of Lycidas—Vision on the Guarded Mount' (1835).

By the early 20th Century there was a concerted effort to promote the county's Celtic heritage (Perry, 1999), rather than any fabled, blood-stained pagan past. This involved aspects such as emphasis of its folkloric elements (such as mermaids, giants and pixies ['piskies' in Cornish-English spelling and pronunciation]), which had been reported by 'gentleman scholars' such as William Bottrell and Robert Hunt in the 1860s-1880s and Arthurian legendry, such as that affixed to and commercialised at Tintagel, on the county's north-coast, from the late 1800s on (Orange & Laviolette, 2010). Both aspects have been subsequently embellished and reiterated in various forms through to the present.

Since the late 20th century SMM has been associated with what have become known as 'ley lines'. The concept was first proposed by British amateur antiquarian and archaeologist Alfred Watkins in a lecture to Woolhope Naturalist's Field Club in 1921 and was subsequently published as a short book entitled *Early British trackways: moats, mounds, camps, and sites* (1922). Observing the Herefordshire countryside in Summer 1921, Watkins (1922) perceived a pattern of straight "sighting lines" that he called "leys" (p. 10) connecting significant landscape features and sacred sites that he dated back to Neolithic times and that he also saw as determining the routes of Roman roads. He went on to develop this concept in his book *The old straight track* (1925), and other writers subsequently identified further ley lines across areas of the United Kingdom. Thurgill (2015) has characterised that:

> Leys belong to that classification where lines are engendered through a process of production; they trace connections between and bind ancient objects to the landscape, and as such, are valorised by something far more than just the provision of scale, distance, direction or destination. As lines, leys provide meaning; they suggest that our ancestors knew the land around them in a manner that many believe has been lost in the contemporary urban existence. Leylines enrich history through a deepening of our interrelation with the natural world and of greater import still, they provide a way of getting back into the landscape, of mapping, retracing, reimaging and resurrecting our position within and amongst places. Leylines imply a meaning between places; they indicate a movement between spheres, areas that might once have appeared as the hostile milieu of otherwise abstract space. Watkins' leys, then, can be seen to make sense of things, to provide clarity through the making of lines and a close or "deep" mapping of landscape. (p. 641)

Ignored or dismissed as fanciful by mainstream historians, archaeologists and geographers alike, Watkins' work was relatively sedate compared to the manner in which it was taken up by 1960s' adherents of what came to be known as the 'Earth Mysteries' movement. Writers such as John Mitchell fancifully expanded the idea of ley lines as landscape markers and contended that they were persistent energy flows of a similar type to the *lung-mei* (dragon paths) of Chinese geomancy. This colourful interpretation also involved a reconceptualisation of the nature of dragons in British Christian mythology (as in the story of St. Michael's victory over a dragon - seen as representing threat and evil), to them being symbols of older, pre-Christian knowledge that were discarded and obscured after the introduction of Christianity. One of the key English leys identified by Mitchell was the St Michael Line which he claimed to commence at SMM before tracking north-east through Glastonbury and Avebury to Bury St Edmunds (with a southern extension to Land's End and a northern one to the Norfolk coast) ([Figure 4](#)). Despite persuasive debunking of the concept of leys (such as Forrest, 1976), interest in the phenomenon persists and there have been more sympathetic attempts to understand them as cultural concepts akin to those of constellations in the night skies rather than as objectively verifiable energy flows (Radford, 2013); and the lines have also been used as starting points for autoethnographic interpretations of travel through landscapes (Thurgill, 2015). With regard to the specific topic of this article, Broadhurst & Miller's (1994) book-length study of the St Michael and associated Mary ley lines helped to publicise them and contributed to their contemporary prominence as the "most famous" English leys (Griffiths, 2019), promoted by bodies

Figure 4. Route of the St Michael ley line (Christian Fleury, 2023).

such as The British Pilgrimage Trust and traced by modern-day recreational "pilgrims," who often provide audio-visual documentation of their journeys on social media (e.g., La Luna Coven, 2020).

One of the more striking engagements with Mitchell's work and the St. Michael's ley was conducted by the late 20th century experimental theatre group Welfare State International, known for mounting large-scale, participatory spectacles and festivals. In 1972 they staged a work entitled 'The travels of Lancelot Quail' which involved performers travelling in a convoy of disparate vehicles from Glastonbury to SMM and staging performances along the way. Creative reporting on the event was part of its extended performance and one catalogue note on their work characterised that they set out for SMM "in search of the mermaid" and "finally disappeared into the sea in a submarine" (Science Museum Group, n.d.). While the submarine appears to have been apocryphal and while their search for a mermaid was fruitless, they performed on Marazion Beach, opposite SMM, and photo-documented their visit (Figure 5). Such performances reflect both distinct perceptions *of* space and contribute to such spaces being read through such performative lenses.

As significant as SMM might be as the south western anchor point of the English line, it has been given enhanced New Age status since the English line has also been deemed to be intersected at SMM by a transcontinental ley (referred to as either the Apollo line or – confusingly for English devotees – as [another] St Michael line) that has been identified as flowing between Mount Carmel, in present-day Israel, to Skellig Michael in south-western Eire. The recent nature of references to this line suggests it as a 21st century invention but it has gained some attention, including in Roman Catholic publications (e.g., Del Guercio, 2017). Perceptions of the existence of these ley lines appear to have had no effect on the management and/or promotion of SMM but the number of videos uploaded to YouTube indicate that ley line devotees regularly visit the site. Indeed, the official SMM website identifies this aspect in its 'History and Legends' section, posing SMM as an "important landmark" for "spiritual seekers" interested in following leys.

Figure 5. A Welfare State International performer at St Michaels Mount (Roger Perry/ Welfare State International, 1972).

In addition to this modern lore, SMM's official website also refers to (debunked) myths concerning the apparition of the Archangel Michael on the island and, puzzlingly, asserts that "as far back as 495AD, tales tell of seafarers lured by mermaids onto the rocks" (*St. Michael's Mount: History and Legends*, n.d.). Despite this claim, there is no account in any published material on Cornish folklore of mermaids inhabiting the island and/or the broader Mount's Bay area. However, this association is not simply an invention on the webpage author's part, as it is made elsewhere. There are, for example, paintings of mermaids in the vicinity of SMM, such as John Dyer's "Midnight mermaids at the mount" (2016) (which shows buxom, blonde mermaids frolicking in the waters around the mount and puffins flying above against swirling night sky) and Candice Scorey's "Mermaid in the moonlight at St. Michael's Mount" (2016) (which shows a slender mermaid gazing wistfully from the shore over to SMM). Mermaid tarot card designer and interpreter Karen Kay has also promoted a connection between SMM and mermaids by making promotional videos about her tarot work on the shore looking out to SMM that have been uploaded to YouTube (e.g., 2020). She also notably appeared in the same location, together with 'Moontail,' a mermaid performer, in a 'live cross' sequence on the popular British TV show *This Morning* on June 20, 2020. In the sequence she claimed to be able to communicate telepathically with mermaids and asserted that they were in the water behind her in Mount's Bay and that they were aware that the item was going to air ([Figure 6](#)).

Figure 6. Karen Kay and 'Moontail' at Mounts Bay for live interview on the *This Morning* show (2020).

It is possible to conceive of several explanations for the cluster of mermaid allusions and texts around SMM. One is that Cornwall, as a whole, *does* have strong associations with mermaids as a result of mermaid images appearing in Medieval churches, in local folklore and in popular cultural texts such as the two mermaid-themed films *Miranda* (1948) and *Mad about men* (1954) set in Cornwall (Hayward, 2017, pp. 64–69, 78–81). Another explanation is more tendentious – although plausible – in that Milton's previously discussed poem *Lycidas* also alludes to nymphs (who can be interpreted as sea-nymphs and, thereby, as mermaid-like, at least) in the following couplet:

> Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep
> Clos'd o'er the head of your loved Lycidas? (Verse 4, line 2)

If the "mount" in previous lines could be interpreted as SMM (as it appears to have been), could not then the "nymphs" also have been associated with SMM in some context?

Of all the tales circulated about the island in recent times, the one that has most legitimate folkloric connection concerns a giant who lived on the island. Under the heading 'Giant Rumblings', SMM's official website relates that:

> The Cornish legend of Jack the Giant Killer is one our islanders know well. A gruesome beast who terrorised the land, Cormoran the giant made the Mount his home, stealing cattle when his tummy began to rumble. Only Jack, a young lad from Marazion – the town peering back at the Mount from the mainland – was brave enough to rid the town of its curse. It's said that one moonlit night, he made his way across the cobbled

> causeway to lay a trap, before luring the monster out with a blast on his horn. What happened next takes a climb to the castle to discover. Will you be as bold as Jack and venture up the Mount to find the giant's stone heart? (*St. Michael's Mount: History and Legends*, n.d.)

The passage does not represent a studious attempt to retell any specific local tale but rather rewrites one for promotional purposes, adding a modern twist with reference to the "giant's stone heart" – a heart-shaped paving stone on the island. Given the lack of folkloric reference to the stone, its characterisation appears to be made for tourists who might be interested in the tale of Jack the giant killer. Spooner (1965) provides a complex unravelling of various (modern and old) myths and literary narratives concerning Cornish giants in which she identifies the story of a young local man named Jack and a giant named Cormoran as being a modern literary version of tales from Cornwall and elsewhere. The unfinished part of the story on the website concerns Jack trapping the giant in a pit on the island and killing him while he was immobilised. Spooner has identified the latter aspect as the most problematic with regard to Cornish folklore in that several versions have the giant ageing and losing his powers and, indeed, in some versions, as being nurtured by kind locals rather than being executed by them (Spooner, 1965). In this sense, again, SMM is only tenuously connected with the specific tale related on its website.

Conclusion

As the preceding discussions have made apparent, in the early 21st century SMM has been more of a *holiday* isle than a *holy* one but nevertheless has enduring associations with spiritual themes both ancient and modern. It is also, once again, a place of pilgrimage. But unlike the Medieval period, when travellers were attracted to a location regarded as sacred by virtue of miracles related to St. Michael having been reported there, recent visitors appear to fall into the "recreational pilgrimage" category noted by Kadzior in which, "the distinction between pilgrimage and other forms of travel is increasingly fuzzy, as the separation of the spiritual from the religious in contemporary Western societies leaves individuals with choices of what they want to consider sacred" (2012, p. 181). As he has emphasised, for some modern travellers, journeys to sites of striking natural beauty containing historical buildings, ruins or other types of monuments may have "the elevated status of pilgrimage" in themselves (Kedzior, 2012, p. 181). In a similar manner to that of Glastonbury Tor, rising dramatically above surrounding lowlands, the sight of SMM from the shores of Mount's Bay is key to visitors' apprehensions (and plentiful online visual documentations). Similarly, just as the steep, winding path up to Glastonbury Tor is key aspect of visiting the sacred site at its peak; the variably exposed causeway and the ferry route over to SMM is central to visitor experiences of it, whether they have travelled to it as a historic island imbued with fading

Christian mythologies, to experience a spiritually charged intersection of leys or else simply to appreciate its scenic beauty. In these regards, SMM constitutes a cultural landscape that not only exists materially within Mount's Bay, at the end of a causeway tethering it to the mainland, but also as a nexus of New Age discourse and the invisible energy lines perceived to flow through particular physical spaces. Its sacred status is subject to multiple considerations and is an aspect co-created by folklore, representations in various media and visitor experience and reporting.

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