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The Pomegranate

A NEW JOURNAL OF NEOPAGAN THOUGHT



Readers' Forum 2
Don Frew's Harran Hypothesis

Sabina Magliocco 4
Spells, Saints, and Streghe:
Witchcraft, Folk Magic, and Healing in Italy

Jeremy Harte 23
Blót on the Landscape:
Re-reading Pope Gregory's Letter on the Heathen Temples

Touraj Daryae 31
Shamanistic Elements in Zoroastrianism:
The Pagan Past and Modern Reactions

Christine Rhone 38
Mirra Alfassa:
A Western Occultist in India

Book Review 43
Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*
Reviews by Laurel Holmström
and Wendy Griffin

The Pomegranate

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Co-Editors:

Fritz Muntean

Diana Tracy

Associate Editor:

Chas S. Clifton

Editorial Assistance:

Melissa Hope

Kara Cunningham

The Pomegranate is the combined effort of a group of senior Pagans in the United States and Canada. Its purpose is to provide a scholarly venue for the forthright and critical examination of Neopagan beliefs and practices. We intend this Journal to be a forum for the exchange and discussion of the philosophy, ethics, and spiritual potential inherent within modern Paganism's many Paths. The consideration of new ideas, as well as the exploration of the roots of our current practices such as classical Paganism, western esoteric traditions and influences from other disciplines, will be included.

Notes from the Underground

The relationships, both historical and modern, between indigenous spiritual practices and emerging religions with a base of support among the ruling elite has been a fertile ground for study during the last several centuries. While the origins of established religions are normally revealed through the analysis of their surviving texts, the study of native religiosity relies on information derived from folkloric and ethnographic research. All three of these methodologies have become far more powerful and reliable tools than they were even half a century ago, and today's more critical attitudes toward texts, along with more carefully nuanced interpretations of folkloric and ethnographic material, often produce results which may be surprising, but are always instructive.

In the first of three articles which examine the relationship between folk practices and 'establishment' religions, Sabina Magliocco, who recently graced our pages with a review of the new edition of Leland's *Aradia*, provides us with a unique and comprehensive overview of indigenous Italian magical beliefs and practices, contrasting this information with an evaluation of Italian-American Witchcraft or *Stregheria*, as popularized in recent years by writers such as Raven Grimassi and (the late) Leo Martello.

Jeremy Harte, in an article reprinted from *3rd Stone*, England's magazine of alternative antiquarian studies, presents a new interpretation of early Christian attitudes toward the sacred sites of Pagan Britain. This is particularly interesting in light of the recent writings of scholars such as Valerie Flint and Peter Brown concerning the early Church's previ-

ously unacknowledged willingness to absorb both magical practices and elements of the sacred landscape from the Paganism(s) that preceded it. In a third article, Touraj Daryae, a scholar of Indo-Iranian religion, evaluates the early Zoroastrian admonitions against indigenous shamanic practices—most notably the use of psychotropic 'allies'—in light of the apparent acceptance and widespread utilization of these substances by subsequent generations of Zoroastrians.

Neopagan scholars have often noted that many of our beliefs and practices have their roots in the interface that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries between Western occultism and Eastern mysticism. Christine Rhone's biographic sketch of Mirra Alfassa, the founder of India's Auroville community, discusses the roles played by several key figures in this important moment in recent religious history.

We are also pleased to offer our readers a pair of reviews of Cynthia Eller's new book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, by two scholars of Women's Studies and Feminist Theology. We consider both this book and Ronald Hutton's *Triumph of the Moon* to be landmark publishing events. At the same time, we acknowledge that both of these books contain much that is controversial, and we encourage our readers to respond with analytic opinions and critical evaluations of this material.

A few issues ago we announced our intention to establish *The Pomegranate* as a refereed journal. The mechanisms for so doing are now in place, and only the details remain to be worked out and made available to our readers. This issue's feature article, by Dr Magliocco, is the first to have been peer-reviewed, and marks the beginning of *The Pom's* latest efforts to evolve into a more distinguished and acceptable academic publication.

Persephone's hard-working minions

The Pomegranate Readers' Forum

Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas. Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended.

LEONARD GEORGE WRITES:

Dear Pomegranate:

I would like to commend Donald Frew on his article "Harran: Last Refuge of Classical Paganism" (*Pomegranate* #9), and to offer a few comments. The pagan philosophies of late antiquity can provide a valuable stimulus to the development of modern pagan thought, and Mr Frew performs a service in drawing to our attention Harran's legacy as a preserver and transmitter of ancient wisdom. Theurgical Neoplatonism in particular, which was most likely what those mysterious "Sabians" of Harran were up to, embraced both ritual/contemplative practices and intellectual studies as mutually supportive approaches for deepening pagan life.

Now some neopagans shun anything "Platonic", believing that Platonism sets up a dualism—a pure "realm of Ideas" divided from a corrupt material world from which Platonists try to escape. And indeed there have been scholars (primarily Christian) through the ages who have offered dualistic glosses of Plato. But Iamblichus (c. 240—c. 325 CE), the genius of the theurgical tradition, explicitly rejected this divide. He made the case that Plato and Plotinus (the founder of Neoplatonism) never meant their

work to be understood in dualistic terms. As classical historian Polymnia Athanassiadi put it, Iamblichus spoke "as an expert and fully confident Platonist, who believes in the essential, though incredibly complex, unity of the cosmos. To him duality, let alone plurality, is a figure of speech, not a way of being; for being exists in unity and can only be comprehended by a simple act of intellection, rather than by analytical thinking" ("Dreams, theurgy and freelance divination: The testimony of Iamblichus" *Journal of Roman Studies* (1993) 83, 115-130). Theurgists held that conceptual analysis and ritual performance can remove obstacles to this "simple act" of insight, but cannot directly induce it.

Both of the critical commentators (*Pomegranate* #10) on Mr Frew's piece get caught in a dualism that the theurgical philosophers of Harran would themselves have disavowed. Dr Hanna Kassis alleges that if the Harranian Sabians were acceptable to the Moslems, then they cannot be called 'pagans'. Mr Aaron Walker suggests that if the Harranians were thought to be monotheists, then they could not be polytheistic pagans. Moslem/Sabian, or Monotheist/Polytheist—however you choose to parse the realm of spiritual perception, theurgical Neoplatonists would not have reified the boundaries. All such doctrinal designations are "figures of speech" as Athanassiadi states, not fixed realities. Ideas about the Divine are to be valued according to their effects on the theurgist's maturation, not their supposed accuracy in describing abstract spiritual objects. The disciples of Iamblichus, those relentless monists, happily invoked a whole spectrum of sacred beings: heroes and daimones, angels and archons, goddesses and gods, cosmic souls and transcendent powers, sentient numbers, etc. They felt it was useful to personify the

unity and the multiplicity of reality. Relating to these personifications through ritual helped theurgists to know, and to feel, their own profound inclusion in the paradox of existence: its dual nature as oneness and diversity. Those interested in learning more about theurgical Neoplatonism should consult Gregory Shaw's book *Theurgy and the soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) and two of Shaw's papers—"The

Empedocles and Pythagorean tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) and two of his papers, both in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*: "Poimandres: The etymology of the name and the origins of the Hermetica" (1993) 56, 1-24 and "From Pythagoras to the Turba philosophorum: Egypt and Pythagorean tradition" (1994) 57, 1-13.

Mr Frew argues for a "direct line of transmission" from Neoplatonic theurgy to the

Neoplatonic theurgy ... is not very specific to modern witchcraft. Theurgy was a wellspring of the entire Western esoteric current, through the largely Neoplatonic atmosphere of late antique high magic ...

mortality and anonymity of the Iamblichean soul" (*Syllecta Classica* (1998) 8, 177-190), and "Eros and arithmos: Pythagorean theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus" (*Ancient Philosophy* (1999) 19, 121-143).

Harran was undoubtedly a crucial link in the transmission of pagan philosophy to both Moslem and Byzantine civilizations (and thence to the West). But Mr Frew's description of Harran as classical paganism's "last refuge" and "last haven" might overstate the case a little. There also seems to have been a vital preservation of pagan doctrine and practice in the Egyptian city of Panopolis (later known as Akhmim) at the time of Harran's supposed lastness. Panopolis and Harran were what Hakim Bey refers to as "temporary autonomous zones", domains of radical tolerance. Concerning Panopolis and the Egyptian transmission in general I recommend the excellent scholarship of Peter Kingsley. Everyone interested in these matters should read his book *Ancient philosophy, mystery, and magic:*

inception of modern witchcraft. This may be true, but only in a broad sense—the "direct line" is not very specific to modern witchcraft. Theurgy was a wellspring of the entire Western esoteric current, through the largely Neoplatonic atmosphere of late antique high magic, later through the seminal grimoire *Picatrix* and later still through that sage of the Florentine Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino (who translated Iamblichus' only complete surviving work, *De Mysteriis*, into Latin; the Greek manuscript he worked from came to Florence from Constantinople, but its ultimate origin was probably Harran). Insofar as modern witchcraft is one of the latter-day eddies of western occultism it is in the "direct line of transmission" in this very general way. As Mr Frew notes, Gerald Gardner quoted the Neoplatonist Sallustius approvingly. But almost any Western esotericist could do so with respect to whatever his/her tradition is. Also contra Mr Frew's
continued on page 53

Spells, Saints, and *Streghe*: Witchcraft, Folk Magic, and Healing in Italy

by Sabina Magliocco
California State University, Northridge

The expansion of Neopaganism and revival Witchcraft in North America during the last decade has brought about a renewed interest in ethnic forms of folk magic, and a corresponding proliferation of books and websites dedicated to the magical practices of various ethnic groups. Italian folk magic is among those which have received considerable attention. Raven Grimassi, Leo Martello and Lori Bruno are some of the more visible Italian-American Witches who have re-worked elements of ethnic folk magic into vibrant new traditions. The re-discovery (and recent re-publication) of Charles G. Leland's *Aradia, or the Gospel of Witches* (1890, 1990, 1998), about an alleged Tuscan witch cult in the late 1800s, has also sparked renewed interest in the possible Mediterranean roots of contemporary Witchcraft. Yet neither Leland's material nor emerging Italian-American Witchcraft traditions bear a strong resemblance to Italian folk magical practice as documented in the ethnographic record of the last 100 years. Italian-American Witchcraft or *Stregheria* traditions differ from Italian folk magical practice in several important ways: 1) Italian folk magic is not an organized or unified religion, but a varied set of beliefs and practices; 2) while it has deep historical roots, it is not a survival of an ancient religion, but an integral part of a rural peasant economy and way of life, highly syncretized with folk Catholicism; 3) knowledge

of magical practices was at one time diffused throughout the rural population, rather than limited to a secret group of magical practitioners.

There is a rich body of ethnographic data on folk magical practices and beliefs from Italy, but for the most part Italian-American Witches have not drawn from this in re-creating their traditions. I believe this is mostly because outside a few works of ethnography and history (e.g. Falassi, 1980; Ginzburg, 1983, 1991), there is relatively little material on Italian folklore available to English readers. Many Italian-American Witches do not read Italian, and what little Italian scholarship is available in North America is often difficult to get outside university libraries. And, as I will demonstrate, the context of Italian folk magical practice differs considerably from that of contemporary Italian-American revival Witchcraft, so that materials are not always easily transferable from one system to another. In this article I hope to show English readers a glimpse of Italian folk belief and practice in their original cultural contexts, and to illustrate some of the ways that they differ from *Stregheria*, or Italian-American revival Witchcraft. Of course, any such attempt, especially in a short article, is bound to be limited in scope. Italian folklore scholarship spans over 100 years and 20 separate regions, each with its own dialects and cultures; this overview cannot pretend to be comprehensive. However, for those interested in Italian folk magic and popular religion, I hope I can provide a point of departure from which to evaluate existing sources and discover new ones.

My own interest in this topic stems from my personal background as well as my field experience. But although I grew up in Italy and the United States and maintain ongoing ties with Italy through frequent visits, I cannot make any claims to a family tradition

of magical practice. Most of my knowledge of Italian folk magic comes from ethnographic research and fieldwork in Sardinia, an island off the western coast of Italy where I spent 18 months living in a highland community of sheep and goat pastoralists between 1986 and 1990 (Magliocco, 1993). I approach the study of folk magic from the perspective of my training in folklore and anthropology. I tend to look at the social and economic contexts of phenomena, and to interpret folk practices not only in light of their historical roots, but of their current cultural roles. I look for multiple documentation of the existence and meaning of a custom in order to confirm its widespread practice, rather than relying on a single informant's report. Consequently, my approach differs significantly from authors whose aims lie more in the direction of revival or revitalization.

I want to make very clear that my goal is *not* to authenticate or de-authenticate anyone's spiritual practice. Contemporary folklorists and anthropologists have recognized that authenticity is always a cultural construct (Bendix, 1997; Handler and Linnekin, 1983): what is considered "authentic" is a result of how we construe our relationship to the past, and how we interpret that past in light of present concerns. Moreover, all traditions are perpetually in flux as their bearers constantly re-interpret and re-invent them with each individual performance. Revival and revitalization are part of the process of

tradition, even when the result is different from the "original" practice itself. Thus *all* traditions are authentic, and the historicity of a tradition has nothing to do with its efficacy for any given group of people.

STREGHERIA, OR ITALIAN-AMERICAN WITCHCRAFT

While Leo Martello and Lori Bruno were among the first Italian-Americans to allude to their practice of Italian Witchcraft as a Pagan religion (Martello, 1973:7-14; 1975; Hopman and Bond, 1996:119-126), the real architect of Italian-American revival Witchcraft is Raven Grimassi. His works *The Ways of the Strega* (1995) and *Hereditary Witchcraft* (1999) lay out in detail a system of beliefs, rituals and practices which he claims are practiced by North American Witches of Italian descent, but which harken back to the Old Religion which "survived

relatively intact throughout Italy" (Grimassi, 1995:xiv). He accepts at face value Leland's story of Aradia as Diana's daughter and messenger on earth, seeing her as a 14th century revivalist of *la Vecchia Religione* (the Old Religion). Not content to simply pass on some Italian-American spells and folk practices, his intent is to "restore the original Tradition [sic] which Aradia had returned to the people" (1995:xviii)—that is, to recreate the ancient religion of the Etruscan and pre-Etruscan Italic peoples.

Much of what Grimassi presents is drawn from reliable historical or ethnographic

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sources: the deities of the ancient Etruscans (what little we know from later Roman texts), the importance of ancestor spirits in early Italic religion, the Inquisitorial reports of the society of Diana and the Benandanti as preserving aspects of pre-Christian belief, legends about the walnut tree of Benevento as the meeting place of witches, spells to turn away the evil eye—all these are a part of Italy's magical heritage. But Grimassi, like many other Neo-Pagan authors, is not primarily interested in an ethnographic field study; instead he attempts to construct a coherent system that contemporary Pagans can adapt for their own magical practice. He presents Italian Witchcraft as consisting of three traditions: the northern Italian *Fanarra* and the central Italian *Janarra* and *Tanarra* (*Ianara* is one word for "witch" in the dialect of Campania; I could find no evidence of the words *Tanarra* or *Fanarra* in any dialect dictionary). One must wonder what happened to southern Italian traditions, especially since the largest percentage of Italian immigrants to North America came from the southern regions. Each is led by a *Grimas*, or leader (for the record, there is no such word in the most comprehensive dictionary of the Italian language; the closest is the adjective *grimo*, "wrinkled, wizened" or "poor, wretched" [Zingarelli-Zanichelli, 1977:777]), and organized into groves, or *boschetti*. The

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Italian tradition of North America descends from a branch of the Naples-based *Tanarra* tradition. Grimassi adds a great deal of 20th century Wiccan and magical materials to the folklore he presents, and ties it all together with dubious 19th century survivalist theories and New Age concepts such as reincarnation and self-actualization. To be fair, Grimassi never claims to be reproducing exactly what was practiced by Italian immigrants to North America; he admits Italian-American Witches "have adapted a few Wiccan elements into their ways" (1995:xviii), and acknowledges that he has expanded upon the traditions he learned from his Italian mother in order to restore the tradition to its original state (Grimassi, pers. comm., 1996). But in attempting to restore an ancient tradition, Grimassi has in fact created a new one: a potpourri of folklore, revised history, and contemporary magical practice that bears little resemblance to anything that was ever practiced in Italy, before or after the Inquisition. While it is not my intention to deconstruct Grimassi's *Stregheria* point by point, I will concentrate, for the purposes of this article, on several major features of his work which make Italian-American *Stregheria* incompatible with what we know about witchcraft, folk magic and belief in rural Italy from the ethnographic record.

PROBLEMS WITH THE CONCEPT OF AN ORGANIZED "ITALIAN" WITCHCRAFT

One of the problems with the idea of a unified organization of Italian Witches is that Italy as a national and cultural entity is a relatively recent construct. Until 1861, Italy as a nation did not exist at all. The peninsula was divided into a plethora of large and small fiefdoms interspersed with Church-owned territories. Communications and travel between the various regions of Italy were difficult at best due to the mountainous terrain and lack of roads. Centuries of incursions and domination by foreign political powers led to the development of very distinct regional cultures and dialects, such that a person from Palermo (Sicily) literally could not communicate with one from Torino (Piemonte). People could not always move freely about between regions because of the wars and political conflicts that divided them. The Italian peninsula could not be said to have anything resembling an integrated culture between the end of the Roman Empire (453CE) and the beginning of the 20th century, making the existence of a secret, organized Italian witch cult nearly impossible. There was a certain conformity of beliefs about witches and folk magical practices, but on a fairly general level which also extended to other areas in Europe. It is more useful to look at the development of broad culture areas within which one can find a certain range of traits: northern Italy, comprising the regions along the Alps and the coastal Venezia-Giulia; central Italy, consisting of areas in Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, and the northern sections of Umbria and Lazio; and southern Italy, from Civitavecchia (just north of Rome) down to the tip of the boot, including the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. Of course, within these divisions, there exist even finer boundaries, so that each individual region, city, town and small village has its own unique dialect and

folk culture. Italy is part of a broader geographic and cultural region encompassing the western Mediterranean; within this area, regional cultures form distinct clusters, so that for example Friuli, which borders on Austria and Slovenia and was long dominated by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, has more in common culturally with Austria and the Balkans than with many other Italian regions. It is no accident that the medieval Friulian folk beliefs about Benandanti documented by Carlo Ginzburg (1983) have analogues in Balkan folklore about *calusari* (Kligman, 1981). But these beliefs were confined to the area of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, and were not found in other regions of the peninsula. In the same way, we find in the *tarantismo* of Puglia and the *argismo* of Sardinia (both ecstatic dance therapies for the bites of venomous spiders) evidence of cultural similarities with the *zar* possession cults of the north African rim. Thus Italy is by no means homogenous; each region is unique in dialect and culture, and within each region, there are multiple sub-dialects which are often mutually unintelligible. Just as an example, Sardinia, an island slightly smaller than the state of Indiana, has no less than three major dialects, only two of which are somewhat mutually intelligible, plus Catalan, which is spoken only in the town of Alghero and is completely unintelligible to speakers of any of the three major dialect groups. This makes the development of a unified Italian system of ritual magic, diffused through oral tradition on a popular level, unlikely before the 20th century; in fact, any generalizations about an "Italian" folk culture need to be treated with great caution.

THE SURVIVALIST BIAS

Like Leland before them, Martello, Grimassi and other Italian revivalists have a tendency to see Italian folk practices as vestiges of ancient religions—either the Etruscan religion (in the

case of Leland and Grimassi) or the Greek-influenced religion of the ancient Sikels, whom Martello eventually conflates with the Etruscans (Martello, 1975:144-155). Leland's survivalism is understandable in a historical context. Late 19th century folklore scholarship was heavily influenced by evolutionist anthropological theories which saw all folklore as "survivals" of primitive practices and beliefs which were destined to disappear under the influence of modernization. But during the second half of the 20th century, anthropologists and folklorists rejected the racist, ethnocentric theories of unilinear cultural evolution which had spawned the notion of survivals, and began to document how traditional practices and beliefs changed in response to social transformation. The result was a new awareness of just how sensitive folklore is to any type of social change, and of how all beliefs and practices are products of unique interactions between individual performers and their audiences. More thorough historical research also began to unearth how many customs which appeared to exist from time immemorial were in fact of rather recent invention (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

The trouble with seeing Italian folk practices as "survivals" of Neolithic or ancient Etruscan practices (besides the fact that relatively little is known about religion in these ancient periods) is that it ignores the many cultural changes which have swept Italy since the early Bronze Age, as well as folklore's extraordinary ability to adapt to cultural change. This is not to deny the historicity of many folk traditions. It is unquestionable that many contemporary customs have their roots in pre-Christian practices of great antiquity.

For example, the people of "Monteruju," the community in Sardinia where I did fieldwork, plant wheat or lentil seeds on Ash Wednesday and grow them in the dark until the Thursday before Easter, when the etiolated

sprouts, known as *sos sepulchos* ("the buried ones"), are placed in brightly-decorated yogurt containers and carried to church. Folklorists recognize in this custom a version of a number of similar ancient circum-Mediterranean practices, from the "Gardens of Adonis" described by classical authors to the small sarcophagi filled with sprouts which have been found in Egyptian pyramids. The adaptation of this practice to Easter is particularly appropriate, as Christ can be seen as just another dying and resurrecting god, much like Adonis or Osiris. But the difficulty with interpreting this practice only as a survival is that it does violence to the way practitioners perceive themselves. It is important to remember that practitioners think of themselves as *Catholic*. Monteruvians were furious when the local priest frowned on their Easter custom as a pagan vestige; as far as they were concerned, they were observing Easter with a very concrete symbol of Christ's death and resurrection. The folk practice is similar, but its *meaning* has changed through the centuries to reflect Christian mythology and values.

The survivalist bias allows revivalists to interpret many ordinary items of folklore as signs of Witchcraft, in the sense of "evidence of pre-Christian practice," and anyone who practices them as a Witch. Thus for example Leland sees the children's rhyme to attract fireflies in "The Conjunction of Meal" as "derived from witch-lore, in which the *lucciola* [firefly] is put under a glass and conjured to give by its light certain answers" (Leland, 1890/1990:107); Martello explains that the *mano fica* gesture was used by magicians to turn back spells (Martello, 1972:71); and Grimassi interprets the wearing of amulets such as the *cimaruta* as emblems of belonging to the *vecchia religione*. But according to this paradigm, most Italians would be considered Witches, a categorization they would vehemently deny. Practices can easily change to adapt to new

belief systems, as the Monteruvian example illustrates. This is not necessarily a sign that practitioners are "hiding" their true pagan beliefs. The presence of folk practices of historical depth does not equal acceptance of the belief systems in which they first existed. Of course, the survivalist interpretation is handy for contemporary Italian-American Pagans, who can find in just about any folk practice maintained in their family evidence of an ancient mystical religion, and who can then claim to be hereditary Witches.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The ambivalent attitude of Italians towards the Catholic church is sometimes interpreted by revivalists as evidence that their relatives were hiding paganism under a veneer of Christianity. But while this might have in fact been the case in the Church's earliest years, intervening millennia ensured an almost complete penetration of Christian discourse into everyday life.

Before the emergence of the nation-state, the Roman Catholic church was the most important social institution uniting Italians. It permeated almost every aspect of the individual's life from the cradle to the grave, and divided the year cycle into spiritually significant times which brought the entire community together. So powerful was its influence that nearly all traditional folk magic and heal-

ing has a Catholic veneer. In fact Grimassi gives a spell to St Anthony for reclaiming lost objects (1995:201) and another to Sts Peter and Blaise for blessing a holy stone (1999:56), both of which have many analogues in Italian and American folklore archives, attesting to their wide diffusion and popularity. In contrast, Leland's conjurations to Diana, which reproduce, in structure and feel, some Catholic folk prayers, seem to be unique.

Nonetheless, many Italians have historically had mixed feelings about the Catholic Church as an institution. The Church has traditionally been allied with the state and the elite classes, leading many non-elites to see it as collaborating in their economic and cultural oppression. Especially in rural areas, many people practiced folk Catholicism, a syncretic mixture of some pre-Christian elements

with a dose of Catholic flavoring, while remaining relatively resistant to aspects of official doctrine, either due to a lack of understanding (until 1962, Masses were held in Latin, which the majority did not understand) or to skepticism about the Church's motives.

Italian folk Catholicism tends to be orthodox rather than orthodox; relations with God, the Virgin Mary and the saints are quid-pro-quo, and punishment for violated contracts cut both ways. In this context, Leland's conjurations, which strike Pagans today as

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petulant, demanding and irreverent, are in fact well within the spirit of the tradition. When certain Sardinian villages suffered a drought, the patron saint's statue was brought out, decorated, and venerated until the rains came. But if the rains did not arrive, it was not uncommon for angry villagers to "punish" the saint by plunging its statue head first into the well. We see the same attitude towards divinity in many of the charms and conjurations in Leland's *Aradia*, which threaten Diana if she does not accede to the conjurer's demands. These attitudes, which reflected clientilistic social relationships in parts of Italy, are completely absent from the works of Martello and Grimassi, where a different, more synergetic attitude between seeker and deity are evident. This new outlook reflects important shifts in social structure and organization between Italy of the late 19th century and today's New Age culture, where an egalitarian spirit prevails even in relations of social inequality.

What of the claim that many practitioners of the *vecchia religione* hid under the eyes of priests by becoming priests themselves, or by becoming involved in Catholic organizations? Again, this is a slight distortion of what is still a common pattern. In my fieldwork I observed that some individuals were attracted

to religiosity in whatever form it took, official or unofficial. These people often became involved in religious fraternities and sororities which maintained various calendar customs and saint's shrines, while at the same time running a lively practice in folk healing on the

side. They did not see these practices as incompatible, since their cures all involved some sort of invocation to the saints, although they were well aware that the priest usually disapproved. Still, they did not see themselves as practicing a pre-Christian religion, but as good practicing Catholics who happened to do very sensible things of which the priest disapproved. Their disobedience of the priest did not trouble them overmuch; priests also disapproved of many other ordinary activities, such as drinking, celebration, the use of birth control and premarital sex, in which they also continued to engage. Anticlericalism has always

been rife in Italy, especially among men; priests, as voluntarily celibate men with access to local women in the confessional, are objects of mistrust and derision, preserved in countless folk narratives, rhymes and songs.

We have seen how three flaws in the reasoning of Italian-American revival Witches often leads them to make dubious claims or interpretations about the origins of their prac-

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although they were
well aware that the
priest usually
disapproved. Still, they
did not see themselves
as practicing a
pre-Christian religion,
but as good practicing
Catholics who
happened to do very
sensible things ...

tices. These include the projection of modern Italian national identity into the historical past; the uncritical interpretation of folklore as "survivals" from a pre-Christian era; and an oversimplification of the complex relationship between official and folk Catholicism which can lead to an erasure of Christian elements from popular belief and practice. But Italian culture has a rich body of folk magical beliefs and practices documented in the ethnographic record of the last 100 years. These are the kinds of practices and beliefs brought to North America by the Italian immigrants who arrived on our shores between 1890 and 1960, and which are likely to have survived in the families of contemporary Italian-American Neopagans. They form the basis of contemporary Italian-American revival Witchcraft.

THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL ITALIAN FOLK MAGICAL PRACTICE

One of the difficulties with adapting folk materials to contemporary practice is that the socio-economic context and worldview of contemporary North American Pagans and Italian peasants are worlds apart. The motifs of self-actualization and fulfillment, the environmental bent, even the "harm none" ethic of contemporary revival Witchcraft are very different from the worldview of Italian peasants. Revivalist works tend to give a rather idealized picture of life in the Mediterranean which differs markedly from the realities of Italian peasant life.

Italian folk magical practice is rooted in a worldview which developed in small-scale, rural communities where life was difficult and precarious. Until after the second World War, the bulk of the Italian population resided mostly in small, agricultural towns and villages. They farmed, herded livestock, and, in coastal areas, fished; the majority were *contadini*, or peasants—sharecroppers who worked for the profit of their landlord. Rural condi-

tions varied widely depending on the region, but for most *contadini*, living conditions were harsh. In the south, especially, the thin Mediterranean topsoil was depleted by centuries of exploitation. Many families barely eked out a living, and that was during a good year. Bad years, caused by ever-present droughts, brought famine; families had scarcely enough to eat and could not afford to give the landlord his share of the crops or livestock products. While some landlords insisted on payment, leaving their tenants to starve, many simply added the year's share to what was due for the following year. This system left most families perpetually in debt to the landowners. There was often no way out of this feudal arrangement: debts grew until they became impossible to pay off, and children inherited the debts of their parents and grandparents.

Families lived clustered in small villages and towns, while the agricultural areas and pastures were scattered at some distance from the town center, requiring a daily commute. Small-town life meant intense social relations which often became strained, leading to quarrels and feuds. Strong loyalty to the family became a survival strategy. Sicily, Campania and Calabria saw the emergence of secret societies such as the Mafia and the Camorra which originally served to protect peasants against the depredations of greedy landlords. Households tended to be matrifocal, but socially, women remained under the control of their male relatives, and strict rules regarding chastity kept their movements circumscribed.

Before the unification of Italy, public education was non-existent; *contadini* were usually illiterate, and relied on oral tradition to maintain their folkways. This makes the transmission of a text such as Leland's *Vangelo* rather unlikely. Because medical doctors were rare and expensive until 1866, when government-funded physicians were stationed in

every small town and hamlet, ordinary people relied on folk healers to cure their ailments and on local midwives to deliver their babies. These women often had extensive knowledge of herbs and their uses, and were able to alleviate a number of minor illnesses, although they could do nothing against the tuberculosis, malaria and Mediterranean anemia that were endemic in the population. Their knowledge was fragmentary and mixed with a good dose of popular magic and folk Catholicism, and death rates remained high. There was a sense that life was a precarious enterprise, full of dangers at every turn; magic was one of many protective strategies people employed to ensure their survival and that of their family members.

Against this background, most peasants maintained a magical view of the world. Their universe was an interconnected whole, and tweaking one part of the fabric was likely to bring about changes in another. Rural people were thoroughly familiar with their environment; each feature of the landscape had its own name and legends. They knew well how to exploit it—where to cut wild beet greens in the spring before there were other vegetables to harvest, or where to find land snails to supplement their diet. They planted, harvested and butchered according to the phases of the moon and its position in the sky, believing that this affected the success of their enterprises, and therefore their ability to survive in harsh conditions (Cattabiani, 1988). The world was animated by a variety of local spirits, as well as by angels, demons and saints; these beings could be invoked to aid survival, but could also be dangerous at times. Invoking or appeasing these beings was not considered witchcraft, but common sense; it was not limited to a small group of people in a village, but was widely practiced.

THE FOLKLORIC WITCH

It is nearly impossible to understand Italian folk magic without reference to the evil, malevolent witch, a figure revivalists attribute to distortions of the Inquisition. Yet belief in witchcraft—that is, that certain individuals, both male and female, had supernatural powers to heal or harm—was widespread in all regions of Italy. The witch has always been an ambiguous figure in the popular imagination. On one hand, the witch was essential as a healer and counter-hexer in a society that had little access to, and much distrust of, formal medicine. Yet witches were also feared for their supernatural powers and their reputed ability to do harm. Witches were therefore both real individuals living in communities and frightening supernatural figures, and these categories overlapped considerably in people's minds, sometimes giving rise to specific accusations of witchcraft.

It is clear that many activities attributed to witches were folkloric in nature—that is, no living member of any community, even traditional magic-workers, practiced them. Following Davies' recent work on witch belief in Britain (1999), I call these the province of the *folkloric witch*—the supernatural figure of legends and folktales. The word *strega* (plural *streghe*), from the Latin *strix*, "screech-owl," is often used in Italian to refer to the folkloric witch, and the word has ancient negative connotations. Pliny the Elder wrote about *striges* (plural of *strix*), women who could transform into birds of prey by means of magic, and who would fly at night looking for infants in their cradles to slaughter (Pliny the Elder, cited in Cattabiani, 1994:207-208). The *strega* therefore is not just a bogey created by the Inquisition, but a dangerous character with deep roots in Mediterranean folklore.

The folkloric witch appears predominantly in legends (accounts about supernatural events that were told as true) and folktales (purely

fictional accounts set in a magical world). In Italian folklore she is usually female. Folkloric witches perform feats that are obviously supernatural: they can transform into animals (wolves, hares, lizards and cats are popular choices), fly through the night sky on the backs of animals, tangle people's hair in their sleep, steal milk from nursing mothers and livestock, suck blood from living beings, and torment their enemies by paralyzing them in their beds at night (DeMartino, 1966/83: 71; cf. Hufford, 1982). Folkloric witches' activities sometimes overlap with those of fairies and the dead: in Italian folklore, noisy night raids and circle-dancing in the cemetery or church square are attributed to all three.

Clearly, the folkloric witch is fictional; she represents an embodiment of rural peoples' worst fears, and her actions do not correspond to any real folk practices documented by ethnographers. Nevertheless, the presence of this character in Italian folklore from all regions indicates the ambivalent feelings villagers had towards those who practiced traditional magic and who just *might* be dangerous *streghe*.

IL MALOCCHIO, OR THE EVIL EYE, AND ITS RELATIONS

Streghe were especially feared for their powers

to give the evil eye, or *il malocchio*. According to the distinguished ethnographer Ernesto De Martino, much of Italian folk magic and healing centers around the evil eye belief complex, a set of interrelated beliefs and practices focused around the idea that an individual can psychically harm another person through the

gaze (De Martino, 1966/87:15). The evil eye belief complex encompassed a range of phenomena, from the often inadvertent *malocchio* (evil eye) to more intentional magical attacks, known as *attaccatura* ("attachment"), *fascino* or *legatura* ("binding"), and *fattura* ("fixing") (De Martino, 1966/87:15).

These latter terms graphically suggest the domination of the victim's body and mind by the attacker. One did not need to be a witch to give the evil eye, as it could happen accidentally; but trafficking in the more complex forms of ritual magic necessary to bind or fix another involved greater magical knowledge and intent, and

was often attributed to witches and folk healers.

The evil eye belief complex is one of the most widespread in the world, spanning the area from the western Mediterranean to North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. According to most scholarship (De Martino, 1966/1987; Dundes, 1980), the evil eye is the

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envious eye. The harsh economic conditions under which most peasants struggled gave rise to a worldview of "limited good" (Foster, 1965) in which the good in the world (fertility, prosperity, etc.) was thought to exist only in limited quantity. Therefore, whatever good one had was at the expense of one's neighbor, and vice versa. In the dry Mediterranean climate, good was often associated with moisture: wetness meant fertility, while dryness signified barrenness. In Roman slang, the expression *non mi seccare [le palle]*, literally "don't dry up my testicles," or "don't annoy me," is a current reflection of this underlying system of binary oppositions. Similarly, the Roman slang expression *rimanerci seccola*, "to dry up of it," is a euphemism for dying. This symbolic system extended to the human body: youth was relatively "wet," while old age was "dry," and bodily fluids such as semen, milk and blood were symbols of the

capacity to reproduce and nurture. Those in a condition of "wetness," or fecundity, were particularly vulnerable to the envious looks of strangers because they had what others did not. Newborn babies, young livestock, new brides, pregnant women and nursing mothers were thought to be especially susceptible. Conversely, those who had cause to feel envy were thought to be able to give the evil eye. In Naples, priests—men who had renounced sexuality and fatherhood—and hunchbacked women, who suffered from a disability that perhaps had made them less than desirable

marriage partners, were avoided because they were believed to be intrinsic casters of the evil eye, or *jettatori* in Neapolitan.

The evil eye need not be intentionally given; in many regions, people believe that it can be given accidentally just by admiring something. When I was in the field, I was cautioned never to express admiration for any

living thing—a child, a lamb, even a houseplant!—without taking pains to remove any evil eye I might have inadvertently placed upon it by touching it and saying *che Dio lolla benedica*, "may God bless him/her/it." The evil eye can also be avoided by ritually spitting (no saliva is ejected, but a "p" sound is made three times with the lips) after admiring something, symbolically demonstrating one's possession of surplus bodily fluids to avert the drying powers of envy.

There are literally thousands of spells to turn back the evil eye in Italian folklore; in fact, many of

Leland's *scongiurazioni* to Diana are in fact spells against the *malocchio*. Grimassi gives two in *Ways of the Strega* (1995:200-201) and another in *Hereditary Witchcraft* (1999:56-57). Many cures for the evil eye, appropriately enough, involve water: typically, some matter (wheat seeds, salt, oil, or molten lead) is dropped into a bowl of water and the resulting shapes are interpreted to see whether an "eye" forms. This diagnosis is often the cure as well, although some cures also involve prayers. Often, mothers and grandmothers knew how to resolve simple cases of the evil eye at home,

It is profoundly ironic that Italian-American Witchcraft revivalists, beginning with Martello, interpret amulets against the evil eye as emblems of belonging to the witch cult, when in practice they are intended to repel witches.

since children were always falling prey to this folk ailment. More complicated cases require the intervention of a folk healer or specialist. It was far preferable to prevent the evil eye in the first place by using amulets, and folk magical practice throughout Italy, from ancient times forward, is rife with these devices.

AMULETS AND PROTECTIVE DEVICES
It is profoundly ironic that Italian-American Witchcraft revivalists, beginning with Martello, interpret amulets against the evil eye as emblems of belonging to the witch cult, when in practice they are intended to repel witches. Amulets are very common in Italian folklore, and knowledge of their use is neither secret nor limited to a group of practitioners of the old religion.

Since the evil eye is fundamentally about the lack of fecundity, it should not be surprising that some of the oldest amulets against it are symbols of fertility and regeneration. The most obvious of these is the phallus. The phallus was a common motif in Roman art and sculpture, where its purpose was to bring good luck. This custom has persisted in charms and amulets found throughout Italy well into the 20th century. It is most often carved in coral, but can also be made of other materials, and is hung on a charm worn around the neck. Phallic symbols such as fish, roosters, daggers, snakes and keys are also commonly found on protective amulets. Many of these are also euphemisms for the penis in folk speech (e.g. *il pesce*, "the fish"; *l'uccello*, "the bird"; and *chi-avare*, "to 'key', to screw").

The horn or *corno* is a closely related symbol. It represents the sexual potency of the mature male herd animal, usually the goat or ram. Horn amulets in bronze and bone, identical in shape to contemporary ones, have been found in numerous Etruscan and Roman-era tombs, attesting to its continuous presence since very ancient times (Bellucci, 1983:50).

Mediterranean coral, because of its blood-red color, has long been associated with potency and good fortune; horn-shaped amulets were often made of this material, a tradition which continues today. The cheap red plastic horns from souvenir stands that hang ubiquitously from the rear-view mirrors of Italian cars are the modern-day versions of the older coral horns, although they have now become general good luck charms or, in North America, symbols of ethnic pride (Malpezzi and Clements, 1992:121).

The *mano fica*, a fist with the thumb caught between the bent first and second fingers, is another common symbol found in amulets against the evil eye. The gesture represents the phallus inside the female genitalia (*fica*), a graphic opposition to the power of the evil eye. Martello alone among the revivalists mentions this gesture. Like the phallus, it can be made of coral, silver, tin, plastic and other materials, and is worn as a charm around the neck, on a bracelet or keychain, or, today, hung on the rear view mirror of a car. The *mano cornuta* or horned hand—a fist with the first and little fingers extended—has long been used as a gesture to avert the evil eye, usually with the fingers pointing upwards and the hand waving side to side. This symbol needs to be deployed with care as it has other meanings, however. Jabbed towards another with the fingers pointing at them, this gesture is a powerful insult meaning "cuckold." I have personally seen a driver leap out of his truck and physically assault another driver who had made *le corna* (the horns) at him, such was the challenge he felt to his masculinity.

The naturally branching shape of coral lent itself to the creation of multi-pronged amulets. Rare today, these were more common in the 18th and 19th centuries. Since according to the logic of magic, more is always better, each branch of the small coral charms was carved with a different protective symbol.

Perhaps it is from these multi-pronged coral charms, as well as from an attempt to craft a likeness of the rue flower, that the multi-branched *cimaruta* evolved. Cimaruta means "top of the rue [plant]"; these amulets, usually made of silver or tin, had a different symbol on the tip of each branch. These might include phalli, horns, solar disks and crescent moons (symbols of fertility and increase), fish (a symbol of Christ, but also a euphemistic term for the phallus), a key (to protect against epilepsy, but also a phallic symbol), the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and numerous others. Such charms were generally worn under clothing, and were meant to protect from witchcraft, not to identify magical practitioners as Grimassi claims.

Ruta graveolens or rue, a medicinal herb native to the Mediterranean with emmenagogue and abortifacient properties (Stuart, 1979:256-57), was used by folk healers to treat colic, stomach ailments and skin eruptions. It was so beneficial that it was believed to protect against witchcraft and the evil eye as well. Rue was often combined with lavender in *brevi*, small packets or bags made of fabric and worn around the neck next to the skin. Mothers often made these for their children. In addition to the beneficial herbs, they might contain garlic, salt, apotropaic stones, prayers, saint's images, ashes from sacred fires (for example, the burned remains of palm fronds and olive branches from Palm Sunday), flowers grown near churches, and of course amulets such as those described above (Di Nola, 1993:14-15). They may be related to the *bullae* Roman mothers hung around their children's necks (Di Nola, 1993:15), which often contained phallic objects. Grimassi's "Nanta Bag" seems to be a rendition of this tradition in a Neopagan context (Grimassi, 1995:102-103).

In *Aradia*, Leland includes a conjuration for a holy stone (1890/1990:21) which Gri-

massi reproduces almost verbatim in *Hereditary Witchcraft* (1999:55-56). In fact, a number of naturally-occurring stones and found objects were thought to have apotropaic qualities, and were carried in the pocket as protection or incorporated into other amulets. For example, arrow or spear points from paleolithic sites, known as *pietre della saetta*, were believed to be the physical manifestations of lightning, and to be both the cause of and a form of protection against strokes (Bellucci, 1983:80-85). In some areas of southern Italy, women would find round or kidney-shaped stones of iron-rich clay that rattled from the loose minerals trapped inside. Through sympathetic magic, these became known as *pietre della gravidanza*, or pregnancy stones, and were believed to protect pregnant women and allow them to successfully carry to term (Bellucci, 1983:92). *Pietre del sangue*, or blood-stones, were red-spotted jasper thought to stop bleeding if applied to a wound (Bellucci, 1983:87), while *pietre stregonie* (witch stones) or *pietre stellari* (star stones), polyporic pebbles whose tiny spots were popularly interpreted as "stars," were thought to protect against witchcraft. These stones were sometimes carved into cross-shaped amulets and combined with figures of Christian saints, the Virgin Mary or Jesus to enhance their powers (Bellucci, 1983:100). Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) was known as *legno stregonio* (witch wood), and was carved into crosses for protection against witchcraft. Once again, rather than being evidence of being a witch, carrying such objects was evidence of belief in the evil powers of folkloric witches.

WITCHCRAFT AS FOLK HEALING

At one time, many villages had a number of folk healers who could cure a variety of illnesses. They ranged from those who cured with herbs, magic formulas and prayers to professional sorcerers who were called in seri-

ous cases of magical attack. In practice, however, these practitioners overlapped, since almost any illness could be judged to be the result of a magical working. Folk healers seldom referred to themselves as *streghe* (although their neighbors might call them such), but as *fattucchiere*, "fixers," *maghi* (masculine plural; singular *magò*), *maghe* (feminine plural; sing. *maga*), "magic-workers." This latter term has nothing to do with the Latin word *imago*, "image," but derives from the Latin *magus*, ultimately from the Persian *magush*, "magic worker, mage" (Zingarelli 1970:993). In Sardinia they are simply known as *praticos* ("knowledgeable ones," akin to the English "cunning-folk"). Most inherit their craft from a relative, although occasionally a healer will acquire power directly from a saint. This was the case of an old woman in Castellammare di Stabia (Campania), who in the 1970s told a folklorist how she obtained her healing powers as a child by falling into a deep trance. Her parents believed her dead, but St Rita "touched her mouth, bestowing power onto her" (Di Nola, 1993:40; my translation), and she miraculously recovered. Another folk healer from central Sardinia told a researcher that one could acquire magic powers by going to a sacred place (a cemetery or church) and receiving *su sinzale* (a sign), although the

nature of the sign was not specified (Selis, 1978:139).

Some folk healers worked in a state of trance. DeMartino movingly describes how one such healer diagnosed and treated supernatural illness:

During the course of her recitation [of the prayer], the healer immerses herself in a controlled dream-like state, and in this condition she merges with the psychic condition of her client, and suffers with him: the altered state causes the healer to yawn, and her suffering with her patient causes her to shed tears. When the healer does not yawn or weep, it means that she was not able to discern any spell in effect, and thus her client is not bewitched, but his illness depends on other causes (DeMartino, 1966/87:17; my translation).

In the late 1970s, folklorist Luisa Selis interviewed "Antonia," a 75-year old *maghiarja* (sorceress) from central highland Sardinia. Antonia reported being possessed by three spirits who helped her with her healing work: a priest, who helped her foretell

the future; a physician, who helped her cure illnesses; and a bandit, who helped her recover lost livestock (Selis, 1978:141). Trancing healers and diviners like Antonia demonstrate a clear link with pre-Christian practices that was often recognized by their fellow villagers. About one such healer, an informant of De Martino surmised "... these are people who were born before Jesus

Bellucci presents a series of amulets to heal epilepsy associated with San Donato, many of which show clearly pagan roots. Among the most common are lunar crescents and frogs, originally symbols of cyclicity and fecundity sacred to the goddess Diana.

Christ. ... [they] know ancient science, and maybe remember something that [they] tell us now" (De Martino, 1966/87:70-71).

Trancing healers might be consulted to discover whether an illness was caused by witchcraft, to find lost or stolen livestock, or for love magic; but ordinary people could also possess healing knowledge, often in the form of magic formulas and prayers. In any one village, formulas are secret and proprietary; they belong to individuals in the community. For example, in Monteruju, Tiu Basiliu possessed *sa meikina* ("the medicine," cure) for warts, while Tia Minnia could cure styes and chalazions, and Tiu Dominigu could cure the evil eye. These people belonged to different families (*Tiu* and *Tia*, meaning "uncle" and "aunt," may be used as honorifics before the name of an elder in Sardo), and thus the cures, rather than being concentrated in one individual, would be diffused throughout the population. Healing formulas are passed on from one family member to another at calendrically significant times of year such as Christmas Eve or St. John's Eve (June 23). The owner of the formula passes on the power along with the knowledge; once they have been transmitted, the original owner ceases to practice. Often it is only certain family members who can receive the knowl-

edge; for example, a descendent of the opposite sex, or the youngest daughter. It is commonly believed that folk healers cannot die until they have passed on their knowledge. For the most part, folk healers of all types did not require cash payments, but accepted whatever clients or their families could give.

The nature of folk cures is quite varied; I can include only a small sample here. Many remedies were mixtures of olive oil and various herbs. De Martino reports that in Lucania, wounds and sores were treated with a mixture of olive oil or animal fat and rue (De Martino, 1966/87:38-39), while Antonia, the Sardinian folk healer, treated boils with an infusion of mallow leaves and olive oil (Selis, 1978:143). For maximum efficacy, herbs were to be gathered on St. John's Eve before sunrise.

Many cures demonstrate the syncretism between pre-Christian

and Christian content, but perhaps none so clearly as the charms against epilepsy. Epilepsy, known as *il mal caduco* (the falling sickness), *il male di San Donato* (St. Donato's sickness) in the south, or *il male di San Valentino* (St. Valentine's sickness) in the north, was greatly feared and misunderstood in rural Italy, where it had long been considered of supernatural or divine provenance (Di Nola, 1993:114). Iron was considered a protective amulet against attacks, and epilep-

tics often carried iron keys or nails to ward off the illness; but since epilepsy was believed to have a supernatural cause, only the saints could cure it. Bellucci (1983:113-117) presents a series of amulets to heal epilepsy associated with San Donato, many of which show clearly pagan roots. Among the most common are lunar crescents and frogs, originally symbols of cyclicity and fecundity sacred to the goddess Diana. These were thought to cure epilepsy because the illness was believed to be cyclical in nature, following the phases of the moon. Eventually, in much of the Italian south, these symbols came to be associated with San Donato. As this took place, the amulets began to change: pagan symbols were combined with figures of the saint, who is shown holding or standing on the crescent moon (Bellucci, 1983:116).

MAGIC AND COUNTER-MAGIC

Not all magic was healing magic. The ethnographic record is rich with instances of manipulative or aggressive magic, usually in response to claims of sorcery done against the client. *Attaccature*, *fascini*, *legature* and *fatture* are examples of this type of magical working, and share an emphasis on the domination of the victim's body through attachment, binding or fixing. While an important part of Italian folk magic, these spells are entirely absent from Italian-American revivalist literature, as modern Witches are likely to find them both unethical and disturbing. The structural features of these spells were often similar, whether they were used for love or to cause illness or death. Love spells often involved the manufacture of philters or potions using menstrual blood or semen. In Syracuse (Sicily), a woman would give her straying husband food in which she had placed a few drops of her menstrual blood, usually on Christmas Eve or St. John's Eve (Di Nola, 1993:45). In Naples, a man could gain a

woman's affections by mixing a few drops of his semen into her coffee (ibid.).

A number of spells made use of the transformative power of the moment of the elevation of the host during Mass. A Sicilian spell to make an enemy fall ill entails taking a lemon or an orange to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, removing a bit of peel, and piercing it with pins while reciting "*Tanti spilli infiggo in quest'arancia, tanti mali ti calino addosso*" ("As many pins as I stick in this orange, may as many ills befall you"). The fruit is then thrown into a well or cistern (Di Nola, 1993:49; He gives this incantation in Italian and not in Sicilian). A number of spells from Italy reproduce this basic format, with variations only in the object being pierced; in fact this is quite similar to Leland's "Conjuration of Lemon and Pins" (Leland, 1890/1990:29-32). Some scholars interpret these similarities as evidence that the spells may derive from the Roman practice of making *defixionum tabellae*, lead tablets often stuck with nails and engraved with verses dedicating one's enemies to underworld deities in order to provoke their decline (Di Nola, 1993:42).

Some cases of grave illness are still attributed to magic. As recently as the 1980s, folklorist Luisa Del Giudice documents that her brother-in-law's congenital blood disorder was interpreted by a folk healer in Terracina (Lazio) as the result of *sangue legato*, "bound blood" caused by a spell put on him by a former girlfriend (Luisa Del Giudice, pers. comm., 1999). This diagnosis points to the fraught nature of social relations in small communities that frequently led to accusations of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft. The folk healer's diagnosis re-opened an unresolved social conflict and raised suspicions about a person—the former girlfriend—who in all likelihood was perfectly innocent of any wrongdoing. This case also

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illustrates the pervasive idea that anger and ill-will alone are enough to unleash psychic and physical harm. As De Martino demonstrates, folk healers may themselves become caught in this dangerous web:

“... people go to [the folk healer] to have *fat-ture* undone; but they also believe the old mage can weave evil spells, especially in matters of love, and occasionally he finds himself in the embarrassing situation of having to undo magic he himself made” (De Martino, 1966/87:71; my translation).

THE FATE OF TRADITIONAL FOLK BELIEFS

Today, the social changes of the late 20th century have profoundly transformed the self-sufficient, rural villages of Italy and have begun to integrate them into a global economy. In much of Italy, post-war urbanization and immigration stripped the villages of half their population. Legal reforms abolished the old, exploitative land-holding systems that strangled *contadini*; contemporary agriculturalists practice their trade only part-time, working in factories or in the expanding service economy as well. Women now fill positions in the labor market and in politics that the emigrating men left empty, and mass tourism, cable TV, and now the Internet have introduced new models of identity and consumption. The old sense of the precariousness of human life has lightened somewhat as a result of better conditions and new opportunities, bringing a decline in evil eye belief and witchcraft accusations. While some customs remain—many young mothers still put their babies’ undershirts on inside-out—the explanations have changed: instead of saying this is to keep away the evil eye, my informants now tell me the purpose of this custom is to protect babies’ delicate skin from the chafing of the seams. But magic and occultism are not dead in Italy; they are finding new expressions in a plethora of New Age

religions and practices, mostly concentrated in urban areas, that build upon Italy’s magical heritage (Gatto-Trocchi, 1990).

While many folk beliefs and practices were brought to the New World by Italian immigrants (Malpezzi and Clements, 1992:113-147), few endured among the second and third American-born generations. In part, this was due to language loss; formulas, prayers and narrative cures no longer made sense once the dialect ceased to be spoken. The end of the traditional rural way of life also meant that customs associated with agriculture and pastoralism, the collection and preparation of herbs, and the protection of crops and livestock were forgotten. Italian immigrants’ increasing acceptance of a more Irish-American Catholic piety and doctrine, as well as the influence of American education and consumerism, with its ideology of unlimited good, also led to a decline in traditional folk beliefs and practices (Malpezzi and Clements, 1992:131). Belief in the evil eye surfaces occasionally among the American born, but only in times of crisis (*ibid.*, 128).

This state of affairs, along with the lack of ethnographic evidence to corroborate the reports of Martello, Bruno and Grimassi, makes the existence of an Italian witch cult among Italian-Americans extremely unlikely. Even if practitioners were sworn to secrecy, the likelihood of secret societies remaining hidden for long is low; other secret societies such as the Mafia have not been very successful in keeping out of the limelight. What we have instead is the re-discovery, on the part of second, third- and fourth-generation ethnics, of aspects of traditional folk belief and practice, and their transformation by creative interpreters such as Grimassi into coherent magical systems that serve the needs of contemporary people for spiritual connection and a sense of ethnic pride and distinctiveness.

We have seen how the folk beliefs and magical practices of Italy differ substantially from contemporary Italian-American Witchcraft. Despite some common themes across regions and culture areas, they never constituted a unified religion. Cultural and linguistic differences and obstacles to communication prevented the development of an organized Italian folk religion until very recent times. While the pre-Christian roots of Italian folk magical practice are still quite evident, over the course of nearly 2000 years, it has become highly syncretized with Catholicism, so that it becomes difficult to tease out the pagan elements from their Christian interpretations and uses. Moreover, interpreting modern practices as pagan survivals violates the ways their practitioners interpret themselves, and does not acknowledge impor-

tant aspects of their own identity and beliefs. We must not confuse Italian and Italian-American anti-clericalism with paganism; these are part of a pattern of opposition and resistance to authority rooted in centuries of hegemonic domination and exploitation. This system of domination created the harsh economic and social conditions under which Italian peasants struggled for centuries; magical practices were an inseparable part of this integrated cosmos. While folk magic could become a form of resistance, especially for

women, who had few other means to acquire authority outside the domestic sphere, the relationship of folk magic to the structures of domination was never a simple one; resistance, as Foucault suggests, is inextricably intertwined with the power system that produces it (Foucault, 1984:295). Because it was

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American anti-clericalism
with paganism ... the
relationship of folk magic
to the structures of
domination was never a
simple one; resistance, as
Foucault suggests, is
inextricably intertwined
with the power system
that produces it**

considered a necessary survival technique, folk magical practice was diffused throughout the population, rather than limited to an elite body of secret practitioners. Specialized folk healers existed, to be sure, often using trance-healing techniques and inheriting their powers from a family member. Yet these individuals themselves sometimes worked aggressive or manipulative magic, and were subject to the mistrust of their fellow villagers and to accusations of witchcraft.

Even when folk magical practices described by contemporary Ital-

ian-American Neopagan writers come from ethnographic sources or family tradition, they are de-contextualized from the traditional way of life in which they once existed. In a contemporary Neopagan context, these items acquire a different meaning—one related to the maintenance of ethnic identity in the face of increasing cultural homogenization. Why and how this is happening in the Pagan community are topics that I continue to investigate.

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Sabina Magliocco is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at California State University, Northridge. She grew up in Italy and the United States and has done field research on traditional Sardinian festivals and socio-economic change, as well as on Pagan groups in the San Francisco Bay area. She is currently completing a book on Neopagan sacred art and altars. She is the author of several articles on Paganism, the guest editor of the special issue of Ethnologies devoted to Wicca, and has also published extensively on Italian folklore. During the course of her Pagan research, she became a Gardnerian initiate.

Blót on the Landscape: Re-reading Pope Gregory's Letter on the Heathen Temples

by Jeremy Harte

Pope Gregory's letter written to Abbot Mellitus in the year 601 is often cited as evidence for the widespread Christianisation of pagan British monuments. Jeremy Harte examines this celebrated text and reviews its impact on modern notions of site continuity. This article is reprinted from 3rd Stone 34 (April-June 1999). 3rd Stone magazine is enthusiastically recommended to our readers, who are encouraged to visit its website at <www.thirdstone.demon.co.uk>.

People are fascinated by the pagan origins of the English church. I remember a television series on the subject which began, for some reason, among the stones at Castlerigg. Dark, ominous chords—suggestive of heathen goings-on—were succeeded on the soundtrack by melodious chanting as a party of monks climbed up the hill. This was followed by a short period in which the camera waned about violently, presumably to indicate that important historical events were taking place, and when it finally settled down again, the stone circle contained a polystyrene model of the Ruthwell cross.

Clearly site continuity can mean different things to different people. It embraces things as diverse as Egyptian hermits squatting in rock-cut tombs, popes fitting crosses onto the obelisks in Roman plazas, and English country vicars giving churchyard burial to the people whom they had

disinterred from barrows (Grinsell 1986). Only recently has attention moved from the general concept of continuity, or re-use, to the different social contexts within which it has occurred. And there is nothing to show what leaders of the Church thought of this process—nothing, that is, apart from Pope Gregory's letter to Abbot Mellitus. This celebrated text has been employed many times by writers struggling to clarify their thoughts on Christianity and paganism. It is easy to forget that it represents the views of one man, in a particular historical situation.

Gregory dictated his correspondence. A secretary sat on a folding stool, taking the words down in shorthand; from the rooms beyond there came an echo of scratching pens as the papal clerks wrote the letters out in full. After finishing the fair copy and sealing it for dispatch, they prepared a file copy for the Vatican archives. At the end of the year, these were bound up into a single codex, which is how come the letter with which we are concerned found its way into volume 11 of the register, covering the year 601. Only a fraction of Gregory's correspondence survives. The letter to Mellitus—or to Augustine, for Mellitus was only acting as a messenger—is the 56th surviving entry for that year, and it will be convenient to refer to it as letter 56.

Most of the letters in the Register are replies to queries from other correspondents. This one is unusual. It represents the pope's own dictation, rather than the standard wording of the papal scrinium. It was initiated by him after he had given long thought to Augustine's mission in England: *diu de causa Anglorum cogitans*. Uniquely, it was forwarded by special messenger (Markus 1997: 183). Whatever Gregory had to say, he clearly thought it

City-dwellers in Egypt learned to keep out of the way when monks swarmed in from the desert, like brownshirts in sackcloth, intent on breaking up the altars of the ungodly.

was important.

Once the fair copy had been sealed, it was handed to a servant who rode down to the port at Ostia and took ship for southern Gaul. Four weeks earlier, Mellitus had followed the same route with his companions. This party had been laden down with chests containing chalices and patens, vestments, altar frontals and relics—all the equipment needed to re-establish church worship in Britain (Bede I: 29). The original instructions had been to construct new buildings for worship, but letter 56 changes all this to allow the altars and relics to be placed in converted pagan structures—*altaria construuntur, reliquia ponantur*. Together with the precious gospels and lectionaries, Mellitus also carried a sheaf of 24 letters, all dated 22nd June. The clerks of the scrinium had been hard at work. He was to hand these over in a dozen towns throughout Gaul, as well as seeking out the Frankish nobility who were underwriting the English project with their political support. It would be a long process, allowing plenty of time for the messenger to catch up with this final letter.

Mellitus' journey retraced the route followed by Augustine four years earlier. The original missionary party had sailed from Rome to the neighbourhood of Marseilles, stopping off for spiritual refreshment at

the island monastery of Lérins (Dudden 1905: 2.105). There they would have seen the tomb of Honoratus, who had founded the site two centuries earlier when it was a wilderness of snakes and brambles. They would have been told how he placed its foundations on the ruins of an old heathen temple; a significant touch. From Lérins, Augustine and his company passed northwards, pausing at Tours. Here they could pray at the newly built shrine of Martin, the charismatic figure who had done so much to bring the faith to the illiterate rustics of Gaul. After his death in 395, Martin had become venerated throughout Christendom. The youthful Benedict, later to become the father of western monasticism, had known of him in his isolation at Monte Cassino. Here he cleared a site for the future community by throwing down a temple of Apollo, and on its ruins he built a chapel instead, dedicating it to Martin. Gregory had mentioned this incident in the *Dialogues*, written when he was abbot of his own monastery on the Coelian Hill, where Augustine was prior. So the two men had already shared thoughts on the treatment of pagan temples, many years before the English mission.

At last Augustine reached the channel ports and took ship for Thanet, where he was to meet Æthelberht of Kent. The queen, Bertha, was herself a daughter of the Frankish royal house and a Christian. On her marriage in 570, she had brought with her a chaplain, Liudhard, who could minister to her and to any other believers at the court. East of the ruined city of Canterbury was an abandoned mausoleum, pointed out by tradition as that of a Christian nobleman in the days before

the English came (Wallace-Hadrill 1988: 37). Liudhard fitted it up as a chapel and dedicated it to Martin, the scourge of the pagans. This was as far as he seems to have got in converting the English.

Back in Rome, pagans were not a problem. In 365 the worship of idols had been made punishable by death, with subsequent offences incurring disenfranchisement from public office. Despite these twin threats, pagan priesthoods had continued to officiate, and they were still rich enough for their assets to be worth confiscating in 382. Successive emperors stepped up the actions against paganism for another fifty years until the old faith was stamped out, at least among the upper classes (Chuvin 1990). Gregory never encountered an educated man who was not a Christian or a Jew.

But the departing pagans had left their cultural heritage behind. There had been some acts of destruction. In the eastern Empire, temples had made easy targets for fanatics from the 340s onwards (Fox 1986: 672). City-dwellers in Egypt learned to keep out of the way when monks swarmed in from the desert, like brownshirts in sackcloth, intent on breaking up the altars of the ungodly. The Serapeion of Alexandria was gutted and the church of John the Baptist was built on its ruins. But the governors of cities, themselves often pagan or with pagan connections, were alarmed at the prospect of violence. In 342 Theodosius decreed that urban temples were to be maintained as ancient monuments, a convenient place for works of art. Custodians had to be appointed to throw out visitors who were caught praying to the statuary. In 399 it was re-enacted that 'temples which are situated in cities or towns or outside the towns shall be vindicated to public use'. Justinian repeated the order in

451 (Greenhalgh 1989: 91).

If temples were to survive in the streetscape, their conversion to churches must have seemed a logical step. After all, big public buildings of any kind were in short supply in the 6th century. In letter 56, Gregory says that the temples of the English are to be converted if they are well-built—*si bene constructa sunt*—and this may reflect the situation in Rome. But in practice there was no great rush to convert pagan shrines to the new faith. The most famous of them all, the Parthenon, spent many years lying derelict before it was overhauled and rededicated to the Virgin Mary. Another temple of Athena, at Syracuse, was made into a cathedral, but this did not happen until after 597. In the cities of central Italy there were no site conversions at all until after the time of Gregory. The Forum was still lined with temples, as it had been in the great days of Rome, but they stood empty while churches were fitted into the gaps between them—one accommodated in a disused granary, another in the library of an abandoned palace (Greenhalgh 1989: 95). The unspoken ban on temple conversion was not lifted until 608, when Gregory's successor Boniface IV turned the Pantheon into the church of All Saints.

Things were different in the countryside. City temples had been part of the urban elite's display of wealth and power. The little shrines which clustered around groves and crossroads were for devotion only, with no pretensions to high art, and they had correspondingly few friends. There were still those who opposed their vandalism. 'If anyone with a thought of God wants to burn the wood of these shrines or to tear to pieces and destroy the diabolical altars, they become angry... They even go so far as to dare to strike

those who out of love for God are trying to overthrow the wicked idols', as Caesarius of Arles saw it in the 500s (Fletcher 1997: 51).

Under these circumstances, setting fire to temples was the safest and quickest way for religious enthusiasts to make their point. You can see why the owners of neighbouring properties objected, regardless of their religion. Martin of Tours had left a trail of incinerated temples in his campaign against rural paganism, and on one occasion flames from the targeted building were about to engulf the house next door. Being a holy man, Martin simply stood on the roof and ordered the fire to head the other way. Human opponents were less tractable, and in one village near Bourges the bishop was roughly treated when he tried to destroy their temple. Kneeling in prayer, he became aware of two tall figures in shining armour. They stood guard over him while he returned to the work of demolition. Martin assumed that these were angels who had taken on the form of soldiers, but they may equally well have been soldiers who resembled angels. Either possibility could be regarded as a miracle (Fletcher 1997: 43). Martin frequently built churches on the ruins of the temples he had destroyed, and at Mont-Beuvray the shrine of Bibracte, abandoned in about 375, has been found under one of his chapels (Mâle 1950: 32). Today it is the continuity of the site which interests us, but the destruction of the fabric must have made a greater impression at the time.

Letter 56 stands alone in condemning the policies of rural evangelisation to which Martin had devoted such energy (Markus 1970). There is to be no destruction, vandalism or confrontation; instead, the old buildings are to be retained for the

new worship, and the change is to be as imperceptible as possible. The festival at which the English sacrificed oxen—presumably the annual *blót* which took place in November—is to be replaced by a feast on the day of the saint whose relics have consecrated the church. Given his background, Augustine may have wanted to initiate his mission by tearing down a few heathen temples, but he would soon have realised that in Saxon Kent there were no soldiers, heavenly or otherwise, to protect him.

Conditions in Britain—and indeed in northern Gaul—must have come as something of a shock to the missionaries. There is nothing to suggest that Gregory had prepared them for the complete breakdown of Roman rule in these parts: probably the pope was unaware of it himself. His ideas on the province were vague in the extreme. In a passage written after the first mission reports, he described the English as Britons, living at 'the extremities of the earth' (Dudden 1905: 2.147)—a literary cliché with a pedigree going back before the Claudian invasion. Gregory assumed that the prefectures of Upper and Lower Britain still existed, with their provincial capitals at York and London, and that Augustine would be able to pass between them, stopping off at two dozen cities where he could found bishoprics. The reality was more disappointing.

Gregory was as unaware of English weather as he was of English politics. He sketches out a picture of the new converts holding outdoor feasts under shelters thatched with the branches of trees. This is not (*pace* Hutton 1991: 272) a detail of existing pagan practices. Gregory was thinking of the picnics which took place around the shrines of saints and martyrs in the Mediterranean countryside, where

sunscreens are essential to comfort. They would have offered little protection against an English November.

Gregory's ideas about the temples of the English were influenced by the situation as he knew it in the Italian countryside, but even more so by the language of the Bible. Had not Ezekiel said: 'In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate; that your altars may be laid waste and made desolate, and your idols may be broken and cease' (6: 6)? Gregory had preached a series of homilies on the prophet, whose messages of devastation struck a responsive chord in abandoned Rome. Of course altars and cult statues did exist in Italy and Gaul as well as in Palestine, and could be smashed up in suitably Biblical fashion. But there is nothing to suggest that they were current among the Anglo-Saxons. When Gregory refers to the English as worshippers of stocks and stones, his thoughts are on Isaiah 40:20 and not on the facts (if any) of tree and megalith cults.

Behind Gregory's ideas about idols is a theology of pride and humility. The things of this world, like Job's prosperity, are given in order to excite thankfulness to the creator (Straw 1988: 238). Christians, who understand the right use of the creation, return thanks to God, the giver of all good, just as the converted English will follow their alfresco barbecues with a prayer of thanks—*donatori omnium de satietate sua gratias referant*.

At the same time, Gregory had retained an ascetic view of the world from his days as a monk. The body was an untrustworthy vessel, pinning down the spirit with its

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demands for food and sex. Ezekiel, like the other prophets, repeatedly describes idolatry in terms of sexuality. 'The pollution of idols' was a stock phrase, and significantly it was usually ascetics who were most obsessed with breaking up the white limbs of cult statues. Christian writers developed the literary figure of the virgin martyr, miraculously preserved from seduction either by the pagans themselves or by their idols. What is remarkable about Gregory, given his generally pessimistic view of the flesh, is the latitude which he allowed to the English mission on questions of pollution and purity.

Instead of a purgative destruction by fire, the English temples are to be cleansed with holy water—*aqua benedicta fiat, in eisdem fanis aspergatur*. Then they can be consecrated with altars and relics for the service of the Church. This matches with Gregory's thoughts on purity in the *Responsa*, a series of instructions sent four weeks earlier with the main party. In his missionary duties, Augustine had encountered aspects of life which had never troubled him in the Coelian monastery—pregnant women turning up to be bap-

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tised, couples coming to church after having had sex (but before having washed), women receiving communion during their periods or after childbirth. His instincts were to keep all these disturbing reminders of the human condition at bay, but Gregory would have none of it. 'The workings of nature cannot be considered culpable': fault could only lie in the human will, which was redeemed by grace (Bede I: 27). Gregory was making a decisive break with the earlier Christian tradition, which had sought to protect sacred places from ritual impurity (Brown 1981: 434). The body, temple of the Holy Spirit, could be made clean by faith alone. So, presumably, could those other temples which had been polluted by idols. This was a flexible theology, intended to bring converts into the fold. It seems to have worked.

Gregory viewed the growth of the English Church through the lens of Biblical history. The old law, preoccupied by ritual, was to give way to a new dispensation of inward values. Even after their initial rescue from the clutches of the demons, he knew, the English would still be preoccupied with external pleasures in the feasts—*aliqua exterius gaudia*—but they would gradually learn about spiritual joys—*interiora gaudia*. The Christian life was always striving to move from action to contem-

plation (Markus 1997: 17). When the Jews came out of Egypt, they had been allowed to keep external observances, such as sacrifices, but these were no longer the same—*sacrificia ipsa non essent*. This was not just because they were now being offered to the true God rather than to idols, but because they had acquired symbolic meaning, being types of the real sacrifice, the offering of Christ.

In the same way, Gregory draws on the instructions of Leviticus 23 to sketch out the festive arrangements which will replace the heathen *blót* (Hulse 1998). Like the Israelites, the English have come from an Egypt of diabolical bondage. Now they can gather for an annual feast in which they will kill animals and remember God with thanks. They will construct tabernacula—'ye shall dwell in booths', 23: 42. These will be thatched with tree branches, *de ramis arborum*, just as their Old Testament counterparts used 'the boughs of goodly trees', 23: 40. At one level this is simply a scriptural exegesis of what was common practice around Mediterranean churches. It seems, from the flow of ideas in the letter, that Gregory came up with this England-Israel analogy virtually in the course of dictation. But it fits into a theology of type and antitype. The most familiar tabernaculum was that of Moses and Aaron, which was to be translated into the Jerusalem Temple. And the Temple is a type of Christian community. The pagan English are not just turning their *fana* into churches, they are being encouraged to turn themselves into a Church.

Letter 56 is meant to be practical. Gregory hadn't sent a special messenger hotfooting through Gaul just to offer theological musings, or to share his experiences in

town planning. He is aware that he is contradicting his own previous instructions; on 22nd June Æthelberht had been instructed, in standard fashion, to suppress the worship of idols and wreck their shrines. Now no attempt whatsoever is to be made to destroy them—*fana destrui minime debeant* is peremptory language.

It is not certain how many shrines were in fact converted. The survival of 7th century placenames with the element *hearg*, often at ecclesiastical sites, suggests that this was the class of buildings being targeted. The *heargs* of the Gumeningas (Harrow) and of the Besingas (unknown: somewhere in Surrey) would have been the places where people assembled for the annual *blót*, and where after the conversion they were to gather for a yearly festival in which they could be catechised and baptised (Morris 1989: 69). In any case, the missionaries had limited resources. The church furnishings brought by Mellitus and his company were too intricate to be replicated by Kentish craftsmen, and they had a limited supply of relics, which were certainly not renewable. Perhaps there were enough in their saddlebags to supply a dozen churches, whether on pagan sites or not.

Æthelberht had been more than accommodating to Augustine. The abbot had arrived with forty men, no small drain on the resources of a small Dark Age kingdom, and had stayed for four years. The king was their friend, but there was a snag—'he would not compel anyone to accept Christianity'. We have this on the authority of Bede (I: 26), who thought it was an admirable policy, but it may be doubted whether Augustine felt the same way. God had raised up kings to safeguard the Church, not to promote some kind of liberal pluralism. Without the active, coer-

cive power of the state (such as it was) Augustine could end up like Liudhard, a lonely figure ministering to voluntary believers. Gregory had no time for a policy of religious toleration, either. His letter to the king exhorts him to extend the faith among his subjects, whether they like it or not, in imitation of the good emperor Constantine. Admittedly Constantine had governed most of the known world, while Æthelberht was only really secure in his home base of east Kent, but the facts of power were the same in both cases.

Gregory had no compunctions about urging his correspondents to use their authority against rural paganism. Clerics or laymen, it made no difference. The bishop of Terracina had gone soft on tree-worship: Maurus the vice-comes was to lean on him to make sure he inflicted more severe punishments. Landowners in Sardinia should be made responsible for the souls of their tenants, preferably by jacking up the rents of the few remaining pagans until they too came into the fold. 'You have received God's enemies into your power', wrote Gregory indignantly, 'and yet you disdain to subdue and recall them to him'. Spiritual exhortation was the right way to begin, but if that got nowhere they should proceed to whipping for the slaves and imprisonment for the free men (Dudden 1905: 2.148; Markus 1997: 81). John the Deacon, Gregory's biographer, described his hero as spreading the faith by sermons and the lash (*Vita* III: 1). This was not meant to be critical.

There is no doubt that Gregory would have liked Æthelberht to suppress paganism by force, just as he had encouraged Brunhild on the other side of the Channel to restrain her subjects 'by a moderate discipline' from the worship of trees and animal sacrifice (Dudden 1905: 2.62). The

flexible policy outlined in letter 56 was a temporary expedient, a response to Æthelberht's obstinately English liberalism. Gregory assumed, correctly enough, that after a transitional stage the kings of Kent would employ coercion rather than persuasion to spread the gospel. In 640, Æthelberht ordered the destruction of idols, 'enforcing his decrees by suitable penalties for disobedience' (Bede III: 8). The time for accommodation was at an end.

Gregory's flexibility proved an embarrassment to future generations—not in the matter of the temples, since most missionaries went on following Martin's confrontational attitude, but in the more delicate matter of sexual morals. When Pope Zacharias learned that his predecessor had been prepared to allow the marriage of second cousins, at first he was shocked. Still, *autres temps, autres mœurs*; 'we are prepared to believe that he allowed this because they were as yet uncivilised and were being invited to the faith' (Fletcher 1997: 283). And this just about sums up the context of Gregory's letter on the heathen temples: a document which has received much more attention among historians than it probably ever got among the hard-pressed missionaries of 601AD.

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Shamanistic Elements in Zoroastrianism: The Pagan Past and Modern Reactions

by Touraj Daryaei
California State University, Fullerton

Please note that in this paper diacritical marks have not been used for Indo-Iranian words

The parameters of the Shamanistic tradition has been fully outlined in the work of Eliade, where the Zoroastrian traditions has been given its due attention (Eliade 1970). One should begin by stating that the word Shaman itself appears to be connected with the Zoroastrian tradition, where its origin is assigned to eastern Iran/Central Asia, from the Sogdian language (Gershevitch 1954; 159). In Sanskrit the word appears as *sramana* and in Middle Persian and Modern Persian appears as *shaman*, when it entered into Siberia (Russell 1990; 192). Not only the word but also the concept of Shamanistic voyage to the netherworld is clearly present in the Zoroastrian tradition, and the Zoroastrian literature does not betray this fact. Still, the study of this tradition has caused modern Zoroastrians trouble and outrage and some scholars have denounced any clear connections. This essay attempts to delineate some of the functions of the Shamanistic voyage in the Zoroastrian tradition and some modern reactions to this issue.

The shamanistic voyage in the Zoroastrian tradition had dual functions which were not necessarily distinct from one another. The first type of voyage was that

which was made to gain knowledge of the future and was apocalyptic and eschatological in nature. The second type of voyage was geared toward discovering the truth about the religion, correctly performing the rites and rituals, and finally visiting heaven and hell. By accomplishing either or both of these types of voyages, the messenger was able to come back to earth and inform the co-religionists as well as the non-believers of what was going to come and how to act so that they would not end up in the pits of hell. These ideas certainly predated Zoroaster, whose exact time period is unclear and is estimated as living between 1100 and 600 BCE in Central Asia. The Indians in their tradition also clearly manifest the idea of visionary activity by taking sacred hallucinogens to gain access into and knowledge of the netherworld (Gonda 1963). Among the Iranian speaking people, the Avestan people (Central Asia) have left us the oldest Iranian sacred poems, suggesting the practice of this visionary journey. Zoroaster's poems are the oldest known compositions in the Avestan language and his ideas can give us an understanding of the nature of these activities among the pagan Indo-Iranians.

From what can be gathered from the Indo-Iranian poems is that certain classes of pagan priests, such as Usiys, Kavis and Karapans, partook in the drinking and burning of a sacred hallucinogen which is called in Sanskrit *Soma*, and in Avestan *Haoma*. There is much debate in regard to the exact nature of this substance, whether it brought hallucination or exhilaration, or whether it was a plant or type of mushroom (Schwartz 1985). It is clear, however, that *Soma/Haoma* brought some form of vision which enabled man to meet with the gods, such as Mithra, and

compose poems about the pagan and other Indo-Iranian deities. Mithra is one of the important Indo-Iranian or Indo-European gods who has made an indelible mark on ancient India, Iran, Armenia, Anatolia, and the Roman Empire.

From what Zoroaster claims to have been the now abandoned pagan tradition, the pagan priests used this Indo-Iranian hallucinogen to receive visions of the netherworld and thus promote their evil ways. In his poetry Zoroaster condemns such practices (Yasna 48.10):

“When, O Wise One, will (some) honorable persons take up their positions side by side with the reciter? When will (someone) kick over the (vessel of) urine of that (demon of) intoxication [meaning the drink Haoma] with which the Karapans [pagan priest] harmfully cause racking pain, and with which the bad rulers of the countries (do that as well), (inspired) by their (bad) intellect.” (Humbach 1991; I.178)

Although there are no uniform opinions, most scholars have suggested that the “urine of that intoxication” in this passage refers to Haoma (Humbach 1991; II.203). The word used for this intoxicating drink in the passage is (Avestan) *madu* which in Middle Persian and Modern Persian renders *may*, “wine,” but originally meant any intoxicating drink or substance. It was probably this intoxicating drink which gave visions to pagan poets who were able to journey to the netherworld and see the gods or demons (*ahuras* & *daivas*), speak with them and return to tell the adheres of their conference with the gods. Now then, Zoroaster appears to have condemned such practices, not only because of the way the Haoma was prepared, but also because it promoted the worship of pagan deities, the most prominent being Mithra. Zoroaster formulated

his thoughts in poetic form, which are some of the most profound ideas in the history of humanity, but his reforms were not to be long lasting even among his followers. His poems today are known as the Old Avestan Hymns.

A series of other poems were added to the Avesta after Zoroaster’s passing. These sacred Zoroastrian hymns are called the Younger Avestan hymns. But in reality the Younger Avesta contains many of the pre-Zoroastrian concepts, gods and practices. This means that some of the pagan gods and rituals were reintroduced into the Zoroastrian religion and were placed in the Younger Avesta as the word of the prophet. While we know that the important Indo-Iranian god Mithra was demonized and set aside by Zoroaster, in the Younger Avesta one of the longest hymns is dedicated to the worship of this very god (Gershevitch 1959).

Following this, the cult of Haoma was again introduced into Zoroastrianism. It is not clear if Zoroaster condemned its usage altogether, but certainly its burning or different ways of preparation was condemned. The epithet of Haoma in the Avesta is *duraosha* which now appears to mean “difficult to burn” and consequently “death-resistant” or “providing immortality” (Humbach 1991; I.70). This idea suggests that the sacred Haoma induced visions of immortality where its usage was popular among the Indo-Iranian priests. In fact in the Younger Avesta a hymn known as the *Hom Yasht* (Haoma Worship) was inserted where it is stated that the plant of Haoma was mixed with milk by Zoroaster. By this time, Haoma had achieved a status of deification as a drink, and it is possible that this was an old tradition. Its burning may also have been practiced against the injunctions of

Zoroaster. Still today, the Iranian people use what is known as *Isfand* which was the epithet of Haoma in the Avesta (*spenta* “sacred”). By using Isfand, they believe it will deter evil from one’s dwelling and destroy the evil eye, an Avestan idea today in an Islamic garb (Schwartz 1985; 141-142).

The use of intoxicants to induce visions was then to remain in the Zoroas-

Yasn 1995; 3.6). This meant his vision was so strong that he was able to see the minutest details of every living being.

Others would also partake in these practices. Zoroaster’s patron and king, Wishtasp, is also said to have been able to receive visions with the aid of Zoroaster. In this episode of the Shamanistic journey, Wishtasp received wine (one is reminded here of the Avestan word for

While Zoroaster may have had banned the specific burning and abuse of the Haoma plant, after his passing away pagan ideas and ceremonies reentered the Zoroastrian tradition to defend its tenants.

trian religion, against all the warning that the prophet had made to its adherents in the Old Avestan hymns. Even in the later tradition other visionary/hallucinatory substances were used either to make the journey to the future or to have the knowledge of the netherworld, heaven and hell. Zoroaster himself did not have a part in the pagan reintroduction of vision and journey into the netherworld, but now it was assigned to him and his adherents. In an apocalyptic text it is stated that Zoroaster was given the (Middle Persian) *xrad i harwisp agahih* “all-knowing wisdom” in the form of water poured onto his hands to drink which induced a deep sleep for seven days and nights. By doing this Zoroaster was able to see the future and what would come to be, how the end of the world would appear and finally the victory of righteousness over evil. This drink was so strong that one texts states he was able to see and count each hair of men and animals on their backs and their heads (Zand i Wahman

intoxicant: *may*) with a narcotic substance known as *mang* which has been suggested to have been hemp, probably hashish (Bartholomae 1904; 1447; Nyberg 1974; 125). After drinking the concoction, he fell into a deep sleep where his soul journeyed to heaven and returned (West 1897; 70-73). This drink which gave visions became so popular that other later Zoroastrian personages also took it, and it received the name *mang i Wishtasp*, “hemp of Wishtasp.” The most famous personage to take this “hemp of Wishtasp” is a man by the name of Wiraz. The *Arda Wiraz Namag* (The Book of Righteous Wiraz) is about the journey of Wiraz into heaven and hell, which comprises the second function of Shamanistic voyage. This was done at the behest of the Zoroastrian priests who had become weary of the truth of the religion and were plagued by heresy. Someone was needed to make the journey to the netherworld to see for himself and to bring back the news. He was placed 30

steps away from the fire-temple, where he was cleansed, clothed with clean cloths and perfumed on a bed. He was then given the "hemp of Wishtasp" in a cup, which after drinking caused him to fall into a sleep for seven days and nights. While he was sleeping, the priests at the fire-temple recited the liturgy to keep his soul safe during the voyage (Arda Wiraz Namag 1986; 193). During that time

and takes him to the pits of hell and peaks of heaven, where he learns about the truth of the religion (Skjærvø 1983; Gignoux 1991; 73-77). He also has another inscription in which he tells us that he visited heaven and hell and found out about the Zoroastrian religion and how to correctly perform rituals. He warned the readers that those who do not believe that there is a heaven and hell

In an apocalyptic text it is stated that Zoroaster was given ... "all-knowing wisdom" in the form of water poured onto his hands to drink ... his vision was so strong that he was able to see the minutest details of every living being.

Wiraz visited heaven and hell, seeing those who were enjoying the afterlife and those being tormented in hell, each telling him their pious work or their sins which caused their fate.

The last episode under consideration is in regard to the 3rd century Zoroastrian priest, Kerdir. During the Sasanian period (224-651 CE), Zoroastrianism became the official state religion and Kerdir is credited as the person who furthered Zoroastrianism at the expense of other religions. He has left us several inscriptions which have very interesting narratives about his visionary journey, demonstrating the vigor of the shamanistic tradition even in the late antiquity in Iran. It is not said that he specifically took a hallucinogen, but from the context we can make this assumption. He asks the gods to give him the ability to visit heaven and hell, which is granted by them. His double in the form of a beautiful lady appears to him

should now do so, because Kerdir had made the journey and was now back on earth to share it with the people (Gignoux 1991; 36-39). Upon becoming certain of his ideas, he proceeded to persecute other religious groups such as the Jews, Christians, Manichaeans, and Buddhists. Interestingly, here he applied the word Shaman (Middle Persian inscription) *shmn* to the Buddhists. He also forced the Zoroastrian priests who did not agree with his ideas to reform themselves and take on his position. There are other episodes of visionary journeys, but the examples mentioned will suffice to demonstrate that it had a long tradition in the Iranian world.

What can we conclude from these journeys by Zoroastrian personages? What are the implications for Zoroastrianism? We can state that Zoroastrianism used what can be called pagan ideas which were prevalent in the Indo-Iranian

period, i.e., the shamanistic voyage, to justify its position against opponents who also made these voyages and took on induced visions through the burning/drinking of the sacred Indo-Iranian hallucinogen, Soma/Haoma. While Zoroaster may have had banned the specific burning and abuse of the Haoma plant, after his passing away pagan ideas and ceremonies reentered the Zoroastrian tradition to defend its tenants. This included the worship of pagan gods, such as Mithra, and the making of the journey through the taking of Haoma, but later also other substances such as *mang*, *bang* and *may* (also note that some Sufis in the Islamic tradition in Persia and Pakistan drink a vision inducing drink called *Dugh i Wahdat* which its basic substance is probably *bang*). These substances were used to justify the position of the Zoroastrian church against the group of priests who used these drugs for visions to compose poems which had been rejected by Zoroaster. These voyages later were also taken to uphold the Zoroastrian religion during late antiquity, when other confessional religions such as Christianity and Manichaeism in the 3rd century were popular. This is especially true of Manichaeism where its prophet, Mani, also received his revelations from his "twin-spirit" and was able to make similar types of journey to establish the truth of his ideas (Russell 1990; 185; Skjærvø, 1994: 282).

Thus in late antiquity different religious groups were making shamanistic journeys to establish their religions and to compete with each other. While paganism was being attacked by the very same religions, pagan ideas were used for this struggle. One of the last groups of people who held out against these competing

religions were the Sabians of Harran. They were pagans who had been able to practice their ideas and rituals freely in this town at the center of the Fertile Crescent (Fowden 1993: 62-63).

Others, however, were sucked into the monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Manichaeism and the dualism of Zoroastrianism. For the Zoroastrians to hold their own, they had to innovate and introduce new ways of making this journey and while propping up a tradition that Zoroaster also had taken part in these ceremonies, taking the hallucinogenic drinks, as did his patron, King Wishtasp. "Wishtasp's hemp" became an important means of inducing voyages. Two journeys (those of Wishtasp and Wiraz) we know of for certain, and Kerdir probably took the same drink. Thus the Zoroastrians had to take *mang*, "hemp", which in modern Persian has come to mean "giddy" with its alternative form, *bang*, "hashish." Later Wiraz was sent on the voyage which King Wishtasp had made to reaffirm the religion of Zoroastrianism, and finally Kerdir also made a shamanistic voyage (Gignoux 1981; 245) in the same tradition, in order to combat the competing religions.

Now this may be a hard medicine for modern day Zoroastrians to swallow. How could the prophet of the religion and its most important religious figures have partaken in pagan or shamanistic activities? Well, we can not say that Zoroaster took part in these activities and it is only the later Zoroastrian tradition that makes such an attribution to the prophet. The same is true for bringing back the pagan gods of the Indo-Iranians into the Zoroastrian pantheon and the reintroduction of the Haoma ceremony. These voyages ensured that pagans would

be warned of what awaits them in the other world. Some of these voyages, of course, were geared towards those pagans who did not believe in heaven and hell and the idea of an afterlife. In the Zoroastrian texts, no real term exists for a pagan, only those who practice evil religions, ie,

The second group were experts in ancient languages and religions, as was Nyberg himself. W.B. Henning made the most fierce attack among this group which accused Nyberg of making Zoroaster into a witch-doctor who took drugs and composed poetry in that mental state (Hen-

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heretics or devil worshiper. It is under the latter term that we find a host of religious groups and in one Zoroastrian text of late antiquity we realize that this meant pagans who did not believe in an afterlife (Meno-ye Xrad 1364; 41.59-60):

The wise asked the Spirit of Wisdom, how many types of people are there? The Spirit of Wisdom answered: There are three kinds; one the man, another half-man and one half-demon ... Half-demon is he who with the exception of the name of man and being born from humanity, in every other matter resembles the two legged demon. He neither recognizes the material world, nor the spiritual world. Neither knows good work, nor sin. Neither recognizes heaven, nor hell and does not even think of his deeds for the sake of his soul.

In the 1930s, S.H. Nyberg attempted to give the outlines of the shamanistic tradition and its influence on the Zoroastrian religion. He was bitterly attacked from three different fronts. The first group were the Zoroastrians who only latter were exposed to his ideas, because the book was published first in German.

ning 1951). The last group were spearheaded by the Nazis of the early 20th century who were infatuated with the pure Aryan race theory. For them, putting Zoroaster and the Avestan tradition in its historical context and discussing aspects of the religion within the parameters of shamanism was not only impossible, but down right blasphemy for their race and history (Wüst 1939-1940; 248-249). Still, some of Nyberg's basic ideas seem to have withstood the test of time and that is that Shamanism was an important aspect of the Iranian priestly world.

I think it is time to look at the issue of the shamanistic voyage in the Zoroastrian tradition afresh, especially when much ground breaking work has been achieved by the scholars of Indo-Iranian languages and religions. It is time to give credit where credit is due, and sift the different elements which helped this religion to survive and produce some of the most interesting literature in ancient times. Zoroastrians will have a difficult time

reading these words, but it is time to separate the message and ideas of Zoroaster from that of the later Zoroastrian tradition which survives till today and is the product of the pagan Indo-Iranian elements along with the reforms of the prophet of that religion.

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Touraj Daryaei was born in Iran and studied both there and in Greece. He received his PhD in History from UCLA, concentrating on both Ancient and Medieval History and Indo-Iranian Languages and Religions. He is now Assistant Professor of Ancient and Medieval History at California State University, Fullerton, and his current project is on a 9th century Middle Persian text which deals with history, geography and mythology.

Mirra Alfassa: A Western Occultist in India

by Christine Rhone

Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973) was a Parisian who spent thirty years in India with Sri Aurobindo, a major figure in Indian literature and spirituality, honored as one of the country's early freedom fighters. Together they created a synthesis called the Integral Yoga. Alfassa, today revered by thousands as an incarnation of the Divine Mother, had previously trained in Algeria as an occultist and psychic with Max Theon and contributed many of his teachings to the Integral Yoga. Auroville, the idealistic community in South India begun by Alfassa in the late 60s, is still thriving.

The last quarter of the 19th century and the first of the 20th saw many fertile cross-seedings between the spiritual and esoteric traditions of Europe and India. Pivotal in these was Mirra Alfassa. She was born in Paris in 1878, and today is revered as an *avatar* or incarnation of the Divine Mother by thousands of people East and West. She spent more than fifty years in India working to realize a synthesis called the Integral Yoga with Sri Aurobindo, who is honored today as an early freedom fighter and a giant in the fields of spirituality and literature. An extraordinary temple, the Matrimandir, stands in South India as a monument to Alfassa's achievement: a piece of visionary architecture that is unique in the world.

The Western esoteric seeds that Mirra

Alfassa brought to India, where they were implanted in Sri Aurobindo's mystic philosophy, had come to her through contact with Max and Alma Theon, the moving spirits behind two important occultist groups in Europe, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and the Groupe Cosmique. Mirra, who had had spontaneous psychic and spiritual experiences from childhood, trained intensively with the Theons during two long stays at their home in Tlemcen, Algeria. The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, known as the H B of L, went public in England in 1884 as a school of practical occultism. In this it differed from the Theosophical Society, whose teachings were more philosophical, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was more social and ceremonial. The Groupe Cosmique evolved at the turn of the century as a continuation of the H B of L and had a profound influence, especially in France. Through Mirra Alfassa it has left its imprint on the Integral Yoga, whose teachings are closely connected with the Theons' philosophy of the period around 1900.

Max Theon was a shadowy figure, so elusive that the best scholars today remain unable to identify his precise origins or name. Of all the variants that appear on official documents, his original name was most likely Louis Bimstein, probably born in 1847 in Poland or Russia. He himself always said he was Jewish. It is definitely known that Theon was active in Poland toward the time of the insurrections of 1863, when many Jews were demonstrating against Russian dominance. Theon must have spent much of his life under false names and identity papers to escape Tsarist or Austrian repression, but when exactly he left his country, and whether he had to flee

because he was Jewish or else wanted to avoid military conscription is unresolved. His work suggests that he was an initiate of Hasidic circles; it is entirely impregnated with Kaballah. There are important theoretical and practical elements of sex magic in the H B of L, whose source was Paschal Beverly Randolph's teachings in The Brotherhood of Eulis and more distantly, the *Zohar*. Theon declared that he had

received full initiation at the exceptionally young age of eighteen. Presumably, he travelled widely, although information on this is not explicit and comes from accounts by his successors in the Groupe Cosmique. After Theon's initiations in European or Hasidic circles, he must have received initiation into Indian or Tibetan-Indian wisdom. Mirra Alfassa said that he knew the *Rig Veda* in depth and Sanskrit and that he claimed to have been the heir to a tradition antedating the Kaballah and the *Vedas*.

Theon's marriage to Alma, formerly Mary Ware, who was English, took place shortly after the first public notice of the H B of L. Alma was a medium, an occultist, and a successful lecturer, whose own Universal Philosophical Society, founded under the pseudonym Una, anticipated the future Philosophie Cosmique. Mirra Alfassa was lavish in her praise of Alma's immense occult powers,

“Pathotisme”, which Theon said meant magnetism in antiquity, is a practice where two persons, one psychically sensitive or a medium, and the other a protector and guide, work together to obtain occult knowledge.

which she said were even greater than Max's.

The Philosophie Cosmique is thus a synthesis of esoteric streams issuing from Hasidic Kaballism and Indian or Tibetan-Indian sources, blended with knowledge of Western spiritualism that the Theons probably gained primarily from their own explorations of magnetism. So, in moving from the H B of L to the Philosophie Cosmique, the elements of sex magic were dropped, and Indian ingredients were added along with mediumistic activities which Max Theon termed “pathotisme”.

“Pathotisme”, which Theon said meant magnetism in antiquity, is a practice where two persons, one psychically sensitive or a medium, and the other a protector and guide, work together to obtain occult knowledge. This operation works best when the force of polarity is used, one active and the other receptive, or male and female. The information and visions channelled by the sensitive, who speaks in trance while exteriorized from her body, is subjected to intellectual control by the protector, who also ensures that the sensitive is not endangered by encounters with diabolical forces and does not lose her way while voyaging in the subtle planes. The Theons collaborated in this way for many years and used the material thus obtained to write the texts of the Philosophie Cosmique, which

total more than 10,000 pages. Among their contemporaries were other couples who used similar methods, such as S.L. MacGregor Matthews and his wife Moina Bergson, whose collaboration produced the rituals of the Golden Dawn in 1891-92. This was a process that Mirra Alfassa also trained in, according to passages in her transcribed conversations. Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, *Savitri*, which runs to 800 pages, is, among other things, a description of Mirra's spiritual experiences as she travelled in the subtle realms.

The keystone of the whole system of the Philosophie Cosmique is the concept that physical mortality of the human being is not inevitable. One of its basic axioms is, "Mortality is the result of imbalance: it is accidental and temporary." Nor is immortality something for the far distant future, after a long wait for some form of resurrection of the dead. It is something to be attained right now. Closely associated with this is a concept of evolution, stated in another axiom that says, "The perpetual evolution toward perfection is the eternal and natural means to arrive at earthly Immortality." The "glorious body", which is immortal and made of spiritual light, is our birthright. The Theons supported these concepts with examples taken mainly from the Bible and the Kaballah, since they were

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writing for people brought up in Judeo-Christian traditions, but also had recourse to quotations from their translation of the *Rig Veda*. Marshalled for support were the esoteric currents of Alchemy, Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, plus Socrates (Theon's name, incidentally, was a reflection of Alma's predilection for ancient Greece). When Alma unexpectedly passed away from illness in 1908, Max was deeply shaken and never fully recovered. Their *Revue Cosmique* ceased publication that same year.

When he himself reached old age, some of his disciples, perhaps intimidated by the boldness of their leader, must have tried a cover-up, because the words "earthly Immortality" in the aforementioned axiom, meaning physical immortality, were changed to "Immortality of the earthly consciousness", which is much more limited.

Mirra first met the Theons through her brother, whose good friend was a close associate of theirs. The Philosophie Cosmique came as a deep affirmation of her inner experiences, for which she had been starved in her upbringing in a materialistic and rationalistic household. The Theons' occult knowledge and techniques provided her with the tools she needed for her psychic and spiritual development, which proved invaluable in later years when she was in charge of the Sri

Aurobindo Ashram and School. An apt and eager student, within a couple of years Mirra became an editor of the *Revue Cosmique*. While later recognizing that the Theons' philosophy had followed the same lines as Sri Aurobindo's and arrived at the same conclusions by different paths, she also qualified Max Theon as an *asura* (demon) and incarnation of the Lord of Death.

It was indirectly through the *Revue Cosmique* that she eventually met Sri Aurobindo. Mirra first went to India in 1914 with her second husband, Paul Richard, a barrister in Paris who had interests in politics and philosophy, and a reader of the *Revue Cosmique*. His reason for going was two-fold: he wanted to meet an authentic Indian yogi, and he had political interests in the elections to be held in the French territories. It was in the sleepy seaside town of Pondicherry that they met Aurobindo Ghose, who had already made a name for himself as a fiery revolutionary against the British Raj. In fact, Aurobindo was in French territory to get away from the British, who had thrown him in jail for a year, and had already retired from the political field to concentrate solely on his spiritual work.

In her youth, Mirra had received teachings from guides seen in her dreams. She instantly recognized Sri Aurobindo as the main guide she had been in contact with. The three had many long conversations and began to publish a review, *Arya*, in which Sri Aurobindo laid many of the foundation texts of the Integral Yoga. World War One soon broke out, and the Richards had to leave. Mirra was not to return to India until 1920, but when she did go back, it was for good. She separated from her husband and stayed with Sri Aurobindo, working with him for

more than thirty years until his death in 1950. A few years after she came to stay, she became known as the Mother.

The two contributed the best of their knowledge and experience to their philosophical synthesis, adapting the Theons' Philosophie Cosmique symbol for their own organization and making use of some of its terminology. Sri Aurobindo found little to reject in these teachings, and recognized Max Theon as a remarkably intuitive pioneer. Educated at the best schools in England, Sri Aurobindo wrote prolifically in a complex and rich English style to reinterpret the heritage of Vedanta and Yoga traditions. The motto of his synthesis is, "All life is yoga." He rejected the doctrine of *maya* (illusion), and embraced a concept of the evolution of spirit in nature and history. Other thinkers of his generation also treated the concept of evolution, an influence from science, although classical Indian thought contains similar ideas. Powered by an aspiration that is inbuilt, humanity is inevitably progressing toward a higher form of consciousness, which will finally result in the divinization of humanity and matter. The aim of yoga is not liberation for one single individual, but the integration of all people, the Earth, and matter itself with highest consciousness. The race that is evolving will be a new species whose immortal bodies are made of supramental light.

From at least 1958 on, Mirra concentrated on something she called "the yoga of the body" or "yoga of the cells" and underwent many physical disorders and psychic attacks in the process. From the Integral Yoga perspective, Mirra was working on the spiritual and occult planes for the benefit of all humanity and of matter, to hasten the process of evolu-

tion toward the new species. From the perspective of the history of Western esotericism, this phase of her work was an extension and development of the Theons' teaching that the human body can be made immortal. Regardless of Theon, there was enough misunderstanding and confusion among some of her disciples on this issue anyway to cause a wave of disillusionment to ripple through their ranks when she physically died in 1973, at the ripe age of ninety-five. Mirra's biographers often devote some discussion to reconciling the upheavals of this period. The experiences and visions of her last years are recorded in the *Mother's Agenda*, a collection of conversations transcribed by her disciple Satprem which make fascinating reading.

Unlike other associates of Theon's who tried to found idealistic or utopian communities, such as Peter Davidson's ill-fated "colony" in Georgia (USA) in 1886, Mirra was successful in establishing an international township, Auroville, which has been growing fitfully but fruitfully since 1968. Its aims include echoes of immortality and an overt evolutionary purpose: "Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages"; "The whole earth must prepare itself for the advent of the new species, and Auroville wants to work consciously to hasten this advent."

More than a century has passed since the heyday of Max and Alma Theon. The influence of the H B of L on subsequent occultist groups has been profound, both in Europe and in the USA. Its threads can be traced through the activities of some its leading members, such as the Rev. William Ayton, F.-Ch. Barlet, Peter Davidson, and Thomas Henry Burgoyne. Its teachings were part of the esoteric core

of French occultism, whose driving force was Papus, head of the Martinist Order. Of all the students of the Philosophie Cosmique, the most illustrious is no doubt Mirra Alfassa, who became the Mother of the Integral Yoga: Auroville has achieved much, especially in ecology and architecture, while the Sri Aurobindo Ashrams in Pondicherry and Delhi are thriving.

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Christine Rhone is the author, with John Michell, of Twelve Tribe Nations (Thames & Hudson, 1991), the translator of Jean Richer's Sacred Geography of the Ancient Greeks (SUNY Press, 1994), and the translator of Antoine Faivre's Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition (SUNY Press, 2000). She is a contributor to many small press magazines and journals in the UK and the US and a priestess in the Fellowship of Isis. She resides in London.

BOOK REVIEWS

Two Reviews of *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future*. By Cynthia Eller. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. 276 pages. \$26.00 paper.

Revoew by Laurel Holmström
 Sonoma State University

Reviewed by Wendy Griffin
 California State University, Long Beach

CYNTHIA ELLER, WHO WROTE the first sociological study on the Feminist Goddess movement, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, now gives us her critique of the central mythos of the movement in her newest work, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*. The subtitle of the book alerts readers to her perspective immediately—*why an invented past will not give women a future*. Eller's main critique of the mythos is that its purported political agenda—the liberation of women—will not be gained through a revising of prehistory, as the myth makers claim. Eller's book critiques the archeological arguments associated with this mythos as well as the conclusions drawn from those arguments. She frames her discussion in the context of the entire feminist movement.

Eller does an excellent job of presenting the mythos of the Feminist Goddess movement in great detail through examples found in literature, art, music, group travel packages and scholarship. Eller is amazed at the proliferation of this mythology during the last fifteen years or so and the level of unquestioning acceptance it has received among many women and men participating in the Goddess movement. Yet she recognizes the myths' tremendous power to transform individual women's lives in the present. "Many women ... have experienced the story of our matriarchal past as profoundly empowering, and as a firm foundation from which to call for, and believe in, a better future for us all" (p. 7). In spite of this she believes it is useful to critique the mythos on the grounds

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SLIPPING OFF THE SACRED LAP

Cynthia Eller's latest book is intended to be confrontational, as can be seen in the title, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an invented past won't give women a future*. Eller begins by arguing that the sacred history of Goddess Spirituality, the myth of a golden matriarchal prehistory, is what unites an extremely diverse "feminist spirituality" movement. She refers to those who believe in this myth, regardless of their spiritual practice, as "feminist matriarchalists." Although she admits that the myth may function temporarily in a feminist way by empowering individual women, she posits that it leaves sexist assumptions unchallenged and ultimately works against women as a group. The approach used by Eller to support her arguments is both interesting and ambitious and, unlike the work of many academics, her excellent writing skills make her ideas accessible to both scholars and the lay public, if they can get past the book's title.

The book, however, is not without problems, beginning with her continued use of the label "feminist spirituality." If this term was ever a useful way to delineate Goddess Spirituality, it has long since ceased to be so. As has been argued elsewhere (for examples, see Griffin 2000; Gottschall 2000), there are many practitioners of this spiritual path who are not and would not call themselves feminists. The motives underlying and the goals of their practice may not even be feminist; they are

continued on page 48

continued from previous page

that "it is my feminist movement too, and when I see it going down a road which, however inviting, looks like the wrong way to me, I feel an obligation to speak up" (p. 7).

At the onset she provides a brief history of the term matriarchy (leaving a more rigorous analysis for her next book) and decides that matriarchy can be defined as "a shorthand description for any society in which women's power is equal or superior to men's and in which the culture centers around values and life events described as 'feminine'" (p. 13). She rightly reports that proponents of the myth of matriarchal prehistory do not, in general, use the term matriarchy themselves, but argues that this shorthand is useful for the discussion. What she terms Feminist Matriarchalists I and others see as Feminist Goddess religion. Here is an indication of the youth of Feminist Goddess discourse. We still do not agree on what to call this new religion.

Eller's critique encompasses two broad areas: 1) an analysis that the feminist matriarchalist mythos actually supports patriarchal gender roles, and 2) a concerted attack on the historical and pre-historical claims the mythos embodies. The first area is the most interesting and in my opinion, the most useful of her critiques. I was disappointed that this section of the book was the smallest. She reviews ideas in the field of sex differences to support her argument that there are actually more similarities

between men and women than differences. Eller believes such a finding undermines the Feminist Goddess movement's emphasis on the "feminine". She points out that the Feminist Goddess movement's use of traditional categories of femininity, such as motherhood, childbirth, nurturing, and women's association with the body and nature, though extolling these as positive, powerful aspects, are still using the same categories that have been associated with women for centuries. She questions whether using the categories ascribed by a patriarchal society should be used at all in the cause of liberating women from subjugation. She also places herself in the camp of feminists who argue for the abolition of gender altogether and even goes so far as to suggest that gender itself is a construct of patriarchal society and not an intrinsic aspect of human experience. She concludes that gender is a category that we might well do without.

After a short chapter describing the difficulty doing archeology with gender in mind and offering her scientific methodology for this discussion, Eller dissects the pre-historical and historical content of the matriarchal prehistory mythos. This material comprises the majority of the book. She organizes her "case against matriarchies" into the themes of reproduction and kinship; Goddess worship as evidence of matriarchy; work and the status of women; war and peace; prehistoric art and architecture; and evidence for a patriarchal revolution. These categories are drawn from the Feminist Matriarchalists' discourse itself. She draws on a substantial amount of material and research and, in general, her arguments about the sloppy use of archeological and historical data by matriarchalists are well-grounded.

In her conclusion she does suggest that we see the feminist matriarchalist

theories about prehistory as myth and not history, but offers why she thinks this proposal is unsound. Origin myths about sexism "are not tailored to specific cultural environments, but rather to a totalizing image of 'patriarchy'" (p. 183). Also, thinking about origins creates a notion of the "natural" state of human existence which she argues is a useless idea since no human experience is "uncontaminated" (her quotes) by culture. If prehistory is not going to be able to answer questions about the roots of sexism, then this myth, she states, must serve feminist political purposes. But myth that describes sexism through universalizing notions about sex differences will not serve those purposes according to Eller. Instead she proposes that "if we have no inherent barriers to women's equality" (p. 187) then moral choices are our best prospect for creating a more just society for women. She concludes that "we do not need matriarchal myth to tell us sexism is bad or that change is possible" (p. 188).

As a teacher of Feminist Theology and Women's Spirituality intimately involved for the past ten years with the subject of Eller's book, I hoped that her analysis of the central mythos of the Feminist Goddess movement would deepen the dialogue about Feminist Goddess religion. Unfortunately, my desire for this dialogue was unsatisfied, but Eller's book is not without value. Eller is a sociologist, but I approach her book as a theologian with a background in anthropology. I also situate myself as a former proponent of the myth of matriarchal prehistory who has since come to be skeptical about its historical accuracy, but am still fascinated by its tremendous theological power. I approach this work as a theologian as I believe we are witnessing the creation of a new religion in the Feminist Goddess movement. Certainly religions can be analyzed as social phenomena, but I suggest that her critiques would be better couched as theological

arguments. It will be easy for Goddess Feminists to dismiss her work as another "male-identified scholar". Additionally, feminist anthropologists have made similar critiques of matriarchal prehistory theories previous to Eller and this had not deterred the Goddess Feminists. What follows is a proposal for confronting Eller's critiques in a theological manner which I believe may be ultimately more useful to Goddess Feminists and the Feminist movement as a whole.

While Eller's argument that gender itself is a patriarchal construct is provocative, I do not find it convincing. Gender as a category of reality was recognized and constructed by feminists to critique patriarchal social values. Cross-cultural ethnographic evidence as well supports the notion that sex differences symbolized through gender categories are apparently a very human trait, despite the wide variation in the content of those symbols. Eller argues that it is through the performance of gender that patriarchy is expressed and women are oppressed. I counter that what is at the root of oppression is not gender categories themselves, but the value we place on them. The feminist challenge is to find ways to categorize without hierarchies. I would argue for multiple and more flexible genders as a possible solution to the sexist construction of the categories of feminine and masculine since gender *is* an intrinsic aspect of human experience. I also believe what we can learn from trans-gendered people may be key to resolving this very complex issue. Still, I agree that the feminist Goddess movement could benefit from symbolizing Goddesses and women themselves in broader categories than motherhood, etc, and I would welcome more discussion on this point from Eller and feminist theologians.

From a theological perspective, the feminist matriarchal myth's perspectives on gender difference show modern women's hunger for pos-

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itive images of women in the spiritual realm. Certainly in the history of Judaism and Christianity the supposed inferior spiritual identity of women has been thoroughly described. It is not unusual for oppressed people to re-value the words and symbols that have been used to oppress them into a positive light. Lesbian women reclaiming the word *dyke* is good example of this process. Can we argue that Feminist Matriarchalists emphasis on traditional "feminine" attributes gives us another example of the depths to which patriarchal culture has influenced us? Can we use this knowledge to find new categories, new attributes, new ways of talking about gender? Can the discussion move on from here? For myself, I have been seeking such a conversation for many years now and perhaps Eller's book will contribute to its genesis.

I do understand Eller's discomfort with the fact that the matriarchal prehistory mythos is so flimsy historically. From a theological perspective, if your faith is based on *history*, what will happen to it when people, such as Eller, are able to show that such a history probably never existed? As we look at all the religions that have had a strong influence on European and American cultures—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc—we find that all of them make claims to some sort of historicity

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for their mythos. Perhaps validating religious belief through history is not a tactic feminists should emulate. Can we *know* we are creating a sacred story and still have a meaningful emotional/spiritual experience when we hear it in ritual? How do we enter an unconscious and subconscious process as conscious feminists? This is an area Eller does not discuss, but seems to me one of the essential questions that Feminist Goddess theology needs to address. Current discussions about religious historicity among Neopagans might be useful here.

Further, the majority of Goddess feminists are white, middle class women of European ancestry. I suspect that women who identify as feminists have some notion of racism as well as sexism. For white women, racism can be an uncomfortable subject and the privileges of white people in the U.S. can become a source of guilt. The feminist matriarchal mythos projects back into the past a time when white people were tribal, peaceful, and essentially *good*. Thus this mythos may owe some of its power to the implicit redemptive quality it holds for white women conscious of racism. From this perspective, we can then ask, is the theological value of the mythos useful as it is, or could some other theological activity provide the same function? Should white women seek spiritual ease from the knowledge of racism? This example shows how a theological approach to the feminist matriarchal mythos opens up the possibility for a deeper dialogue about Goddess feminism while continuing to address feminist political concerns.

Eller uses the standard social scientific method to critique this myth (p. 91). I doubt any myth could withstand this sort of treatment. Science does not adequately deal with symbols and visions. Eller uses the biblical examples of the Passion narratives in the New Testament and the Exodus

story in the Hebrew bible to argue that myths need not be historically accurate, but *historically plausible*. The example of these stories is hardly worthwhile in this discussion since they have been related as historical events for almost 2000 years and thus carry enormous symbolic weight. If one wanted to argue their historicity, it would not be any more difficult than what Eller has done with the matriarchal prehistory mythos. The evidence for the existence of an actual person named Jesus who lived in the Middle East 2000 years ago is contained primarily in the gospels. Is that source sufficient for historical accuracy? And the Exodus story is only attested in the Hebrew Bible itself. If such a large group of people were migrating and wandering around for 40 years we might think we would find some remark about it from people living in the same area other than Hebrews. However, this is not the case. I recognize the amount of work and rigor Eller has put into her book, but she has set her sights on a easy target. It seems to me that scholars need to be careful with what techniques and perspectives they use to discuss this new religion.

What I find most disappointing about Eller's book is that she seems to downplay the fact that the Feminist Goddess movement is a *new religion*. Primarily what we are observing in the feminist Goddess movement is the creation of a *woman-centered religion*, not a new scientific theory of prehistory. This may be the *first time* such a religion has appeared in human history. While I am certainly not opposed to critiquing the movement theologically, as feminists we must also consider how to nurture this effort as well. Eller's proposal to base feminist goals for equality on moral grounds alone instead of spurious historical/mythical stories is missing the point of this new religion. Certainly, moral arguments are necessary for creating a more just society for all people. But the feminist Goddess move-

ment (and other feminist theologies) are an attempt by women to describe what is *real*. This aspect of the role religion plays in our lives is extremely important. We need to be cautious how we critique women's attempts to define reality for ourselves. I'm not proposing that we validate aspects of the mythos that are problematic. However, I can suggest that we look at the figurines from Neolithic times and affirm that they speak to us in the present, that the intention of the original carvers is not important. What is important is the act of women now validating their own inner authority and claiming it as a *modern* symbol of the Goddess.

Goddess Feminists argue that spirituality is an important component to a feminist life and many women, myself included, have found resourcement in feminist spirituality to continue our hard and frustrating political work. Even though I have rejected the matriarchal prehistory mythos as history in my own life I do not think that Eller's approach to critiquing the Feminist Goddess movement is ultimately helpful. Yes, we need to find a more solid basis for constructing mythology for the Feminist Goddess movement, but I believe alternative proposals are greatly needed before we completely destroy what has coalesced in the past fifteen years.

Laurel Holmström is a graduate student in History at Sonoma State University and has been teaching Feminist Theology/Women's Spirituality for the past 10 years at the same institution. She has been a Pagan since 1983 and is currently studying Stregheria. She is a reverend in the Church of Natural Grace which emphasizes knowledge of the spiritual (and physical) self through psychic awareness.

continued from page 43

simply people who believe in a primary female divinity. Feminism is not the point, and to label their practice as feminist spirituality is reductionist. To complicate matters, there are many profoundly spiritual feminists who have remained within the boundaries of their traditional religions, though they may stretch them a bit. Some of these women envision Deity as female, many as both female and male simultaneously. The needs, goals and methods of these individuals may be very feminist indeed (for example, see Northup 1993). While this may seem to be a minor point, it is not atypical of strategies that Eller occasionally employs here.

The book is an examination of widely diverse literature from different academic disciplines and non-academic scholars, as well as religious tracts, novels, popular magazines, videos, librettos, poetry, newspaper articles, how-to books, and catalogues of Goddess merchandise. Roughly speaking, the over 500 sources she cites can be divided into materials that support belief in the sacred history and the interdisciplinary academic scholarship she uses to critique it. In its challenging examination of the discourse of the myth and the review of scholarly literature across academic boundaries, this book is unique.

Eller acknowledges that religious truth claims are rarely worth arguing but makes the point that they must be at least plausible to be meaningful. Leaving aside the plausibility of Yahweh providing Moses with the ten commandments neatly carved in stone, the virgin birth and physical resurrection from the dead of Jesus, and the Angel Gabriel's gift of instant literacy to Muhammad, Eller claims that the myth of matriarchal prehistory is simply not believable. The myth consists of two major threads: what life was like in "pre-patriarchal prehistory" and what happened to that way of life and why.

THE MYTH ACCORDING TO ELLER:

The first part of the myth tells us that during the Neolithic Period in Old Europe, the Near East and the Mediterranean, human societies were matri-focal and matri-local, centering around values we describe today as feminine and worshipping a primary female divinity in a form of goddess monotheism. Eller is careful to stress that this is not strictly speaking *matriarchal*, although she says believers usually use the word matriarchal to describe their understanding of pre-patriarchal prehistory.

These cultures may have been fairly egalitarian according to the myth; however, when it came right down to it, mothers had the power and handled it "delicately and benevolently" precisely because they were mothers. Women invented agriculture and the relationship between people and nature was harmonious. Childbirth received central attention and all women were mothers to all the children in the community. Sexuality was sacred and not limited by age nor orientation, and men's contribution to reproduction unknown. Women, as a reflection of the Goddess, mediated between the Divine and humanity in the roles of priestess, healer, diviner, sage, etc.. Life was peaceful and relatively prosperous. Even men were happy during matriarchal prehistory, though their sense of inadequacy had to be carefully contained.

The second strand of the myth deals with what happened to this utopian prehistory. Believers claim that a patriarchal revolution overthrew the Goddess cultures about 3000 BCE and plunged the world into war and barbarism. This is typically explained by invasions by patriarchal warriors and/or critical changes within the Goddess cultures themselves. Indo-European warriors, usually understood as the Kurgans discussed by Marija Gimbutas, brought with them their pantheon of patriarchal deities. The "great matriarchal goddess" was split into lesser goddesses and married off

to Kurgan gods. Human women were removed from positions of religious leadership and eventually reduced to an oppressed class. The internal changes that helped to bring about patriarchy include men's discovery of biological paternity, their seizing of those aspects of reproduction they could control, and their demeaning of those they could not. An additional cause suggested is that the advent of plow agriculture required upper body strength that only men could provide. They then seized the means of production and began to amass property and social power. With the ascendancy of one male god, patriarchy reigned supreme.

As prehistory deals with human experience before the invention of writing, believers rely largely on traces in classical mythology, art, the work of Gimbutas, and the writings of 19th and early 20th century romantic writers to validate their myth. In so doing, they assume a relatively stable set of meanings attached to femaleness that spans cultures, geography and time.

THE EVIDENCE:

An examination of the discourse necessarily involves a tremendous amount of work and is long overdue. For that, Eller is to be congratulated. The myth may be controversial, but she believes it serves today as a cultural resource. At the same time, lumping together materials as dramatically different as novels, academic research and catalogues of Goddess merchandise is not unproblematic. Although scholarship may have been the point of departure for some of the materials from which Eller draws, most of these are untroubled by academic attempts at historical accuracy. She writes that she finds the differences among these sources to be minimized by the consistency of their narrative and has chosen to focus on offerings by those who have considerable invest-

ment in the myth. While I understand her logic, I believe this methodology oversimplifies the discourse, ignoring important contradictions and differences. Nor is it possible to judge in this manner how widely spread a particular belief is. For example, she cites a novel as evidence for the belief that women in "Goddess Cultures" pooled their children. However, in the 12 years since I began to study Goddess Spirituality, I have yet to meet a practitioner who actually believes that, or even to hear one mention it, and I have never encountered the argument about men's upper body strength.

The book presents considerable scholarship to disprove the existence of Goddess Cultures in the Neolithic. I will not go into details of Eller's critique of Gimbutas, as *The Pomegranate* has covered the Gimbutas debate in considerable depth within the last year. For those who missed it, a severe distillation of the arguments might result in one position that holds Gimbutas developed a new interdisciplinary methodology called archaeomythology that, unlike traditional androcentric scholarship, successfully examines the non-material aspects of prehistoric cultures, especially as these relate to gender. A second position argues that Gimbutas consistently ignored significant data that contradicted her ideas and constructed an extremely subjective methodology that fails to stand up to scientific study. Eller's position is along the lines of the latter. In a footnote, she

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notes that Gimbutas had an “impressive record of excavation and publication” (209), while in the text she argues that “Gimbutas’ status in archeology was peripheral” and her colleagues considered her “embarrassingly” passé (90). The omission of Gimbutas’ strengths in the text is, at the very least, misleading.

The author does a better job of reviewing literature that shows how data from the Neolithic have been selectively interpreted by believers to support the myth. For example, the fact that Mellaart found figures he identified as representations of “a male deity” in his excavations at Catalhoyuk is rarely mentioned by believers, and female figurines, usually identified as representations of Goddess worship, are present in the later levels but lacking in the early levels of this site. Supporters of the myth argue that the presence of Goddess worship is indicative of women’s high status in a society and, therefore, the female figures suggest a Goddess Culture with all the mythic trappings.

Here, I find Eller less successful in her arguments. She relies on the work of anthropologist Martin Whyte from the late 1970s to argue that the only variable in religion that correlates with women’s status is equally elaborate funerals for women and men. She does mention in another footnote that anthropologist Peggy Sanday (1981) had different findings. Sanday, in fact, found a strong correlation between the secular power of women and the cultures’ origin myths in her study of 150 tribal societies. To bury this

in a footnote suggests a consensus among anthropologists that does not exist. Instead she points to the status of women in lands dominated by Catholicism, Buddhism and Hinduism to indicate religious veneration of female figures, even goddesses, does not ensure women’s power. But to use as examples three religions, all of which began in times and cultures that were firmly under male domination, begs the question. She refers again to anthropologists in the 1970s who declared that the search for egalitarian culture had proved fruitless, that women’s secondary status was a true universal, a “pan-cultural fact” (35). In addition, she presents research that concludes that there is no reliable connection between forms of subsistence and women’s statuses, and that economics play no role in women’s status either. Regardless of what women’s work is in a particular culture and how much it is valued, there is no correlation between it and women’s social status in that society, according to this research presented by the author.

However, both archeologists and anthropologists have become much more sophisticated in their analysis of gender since Whyte published. There is considerable research to show that the undervaluing of whatever work to which women are assigned in any society can be both a cause and an effect of women’s lower status and power (see Burn 2000). Few, if any, significant social patterns are determined by a single variable, and the tendency today is to look for a constellation of variables to explain gender systems (Agarwal 1999). There are contemporary enclaves within larger male dominated cultures where women do have considerable power and their economic activities contribute to their status. For example, in the Zapotec town of Juchitan in Oaxaca, Mexico, and in the village of Lugu Lake in southern China, women run the local economies and are fairly

autonomous. Those who choose to marry exercise the power within the family, though many choose without censure to have children but no permanent husband. Men, on the other hand, hold most of the formal political posts and deal with the outside world. Although the women’s work is unlikely to be *the* causal variable, women in both locales point to their economic activities as making their status different from that of women in neighboring towns (Darling 1995; Farley 1998).

The book argues against a patriarchal revolution by examining the research on the supposed invasions of patriarchal Kurgans. Eller summarizes evidence from archeology, linguistics, genetics, early writing systems and mythology and argues convincingly that it is simply impossible to conclude from the available data that, beginning with the 4th millennium, warlike Indo-Europeans invaded and imposed their patriarchal culture on the peaceful, Goddess worshipping cultures of the Near East.

However, she does admit that social organization became more patriarchal, hierarchical and warlike in southeastern Europe and the Near East shortly after this time (157). Since she correctly dismisses the sudden womb-envy argument, we are left with wondering what on earth happened and why. She answers this primarily by saying there never were matriarchies as understood by believers. But in a fairly short time in human history, there were dramatic changes in the way people organized their world, in both material and nonmaterial culture. Her response to this fails to address the issue adequately.

One of the book’s major strategies and strengths is the exploration of contemporary understandings of gender. Some scholars focus on the official ideology concerning what is expected of members of either sex in a particular culture, others look at what actually goes on in day-to-day living. Gender is socially con-

structed, not biologically, which means that it is culturally and historically specific and exists only through constant reinforcement and repetition. At the same time, gender is very real in the power it has to shape our lives. Eller argues effectively that the myth presents a reductive notion of sex differences and is “rooted in a particular vision of female embodiedness” (56). Ironically, although gender may be seen as a social construct, femininity is not. It is seen as unbounded by time or culture, and is all that patriarchy sees as positive about women. But femininity cannot exist outside of culture. The myth’s limited view of what it means to be a woman is based largely on the positive aspects of middle class stereotypes from today’s Western and male-dominated world. That fact alone should be enough to make feminists question it.

And some have, even some who believe in the myth. But Eller glosses over these voices. As an example of her approach, she cites *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Sjoos’ and Mor’s 1981 epic that links the “Neolithic Great Goddess” with the Bronze Age “Mother Goddesses” to demonstrate the belief in the universal worship of “the Great Mother.” In one sentence, she mentions that the focus on childbirth has bothered “even” some feminist matriarchalists, but emphasizes that childbirth is the “hallmark of virtually all feminist reconstructions of matriarchal society” (45). The reader doesn’t learn that Asphodel Long, respected scholar and co-founder of Britain’s first Matriarchy Study Group, almost immediately published a critique of linking women’s spirituality and creativity primarily to her reproductive functions (in King 1989). This is a significant omission and shows there was a diversity of belief from the very beginning.

Eller’s final point is that the myth, even when accepted as sacred history and not historical truth, will not help women. It reduces prehistory to timeless archetypes, arranges the

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world into a duality which is “supposed” to be a patriarchal form of thinking, and tells an emotionally compelling story that simply raises new questions rather than providing answers for the future. We don't need a mythic explanation for sexism and other oppressions, she argues, in order to know they are wrong and to work toward ending them. Given that she admits the myth has inspired many women to make significant, empowering changes in their lives, and many of these women have gone on to empower other women, this chapter is regrettably short. Her passion for social justice is clear, but she doesn't tell us how to achieve it, just that the sacred myth is not the way. As all religions mythologize their origins, most contemporary religions are gendered, and religion is a key player in teaching and maintaining gender roles and social order, I wonder then what suggestions she would offer. Like the myth she critiques, Eller raises new questions rather than providing answers for the future.

Given that I agree with many of Eller's conclusions, I was surprised not to be more enthusiastic about the book. But in critiquing the metanarrative that she calls the myth of matriarchy, Eller comes perilously close to constructing a metanarrative herself. Although she acknowledges the diversity of belief even among those who hold the myth dear, she typically does this briefly in a footnote and goes right on to treat both the myth itself and the acceptance of it as monolithic. This strategy not only oversimplifies the myth, but it tends to overstate the evidence against it.

In spite of the fact that this book says nothing dramatically new, as the first to examine the discourse in any detail and bring together an extensive body of interdisciplinary scholarly research to do so, I believe it makes a significant contribution. Her first book, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* (1993), established her as one of a very few experts in the field of Goddess Spirituality today. In this book, Eller has taken

some risks and asked some important questions. Because she is a respected scholar, this book will be closely examined, and because of its scope and interdisciplinary nature, the dialogue has been raised to a new level.

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- Wendy Griffin is Associate Professor of Women's Studies at California State University, Long Beach. Her most recent work in this field includes Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Healing, Identity & Empowerment. 2000 (editor) AltaMira Press, and “Returning to the Mother of Us All: Goddess Spirituality in the West.” 2001, in Through Her Eyes: Women's Perspectives on World Religions. Arvind Sharma and Katherine Young (editors). Westview Press*

READERS' FORUM

continued from page 3

assertion of directness, Athanassiadi states that the transmission via Harran was a “clearly definable—if not direct—line” (“Persecution and response in late paganism: The evidence of Damascus”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (1993) 113, 1-29).

All quibbles aside, Mr Frew deserves great praise for doing more than reading and talking about Harran. He went to the site and is attempting to raise interest in saving it from imminent damage. I also enjoyed Mr Frew's deliciously restrained tone in his response, especially concerning Mr Walker. Bravo.

*Leonard George
Vancouver, BC*

CHAS CLIFTON WRITES:

To the Editors:

Don Frew (“Harran: Last Refuge of Classical Paganism” #9) provided an interesting insight into the survival of Neoplatonism in the Muslim world. Indeed, the persistence of Neoplatonic-influenced magical world views into the last two centuries is frequently overlooked by historians of religion, with the ironic

rightly points out that Frew's agenda is to establish a continuity from ‘Pagan’ Harran to ‘Pagans’ today. Frew responds by digressions on transliteration from Syriac and Arabic but misses the larger points. One might be that while the Harranians were—or presented themselves as—‘people of the book,’ many modern Pagans proudly do without official scripture of any sort. What has changed? How much continuity is there? Frew writes of a ‘gap’ between the 6th and 11th centuries, but what about the gap (or how much of a gap is there?) between Neoplatonism and much revived Paganism today?

When Frew writes, for instance, “The idea of Shi'ite Muslims protecting [medieval Middle Eastern Neoplatonist] Pagans from oppression will no doubt surprise many Pagans today,” he implies through his choice of words an equivalency that may or may not exist. I suspect that it does not, and that the Harranians would not pass the membership litmus test of, say, the Covenant of the Goddess. We could equally ask whether the ‘Paganism’ of Harran, especially of its Sabian intellectual elite, should be described as ‘Classical,’ a term more usually reserved for the polytheistic state cults of the

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exception of Mormon scholars such as D. Michael Quinn (*Early Mormonism and the Magical World View*) who must account for the divination and scrying of Joseph Smith.

Frew's response to critics such as Aaron Walker (Readers' Forum #10), however, tend to show a preoccupation with minutiae rather than a response to broader challenges. Walker

Hellenistic and Roman empires.

While I have no doubt that there is a “direct line of transmission ... from the Hermetic and Neoplatonic theurgy of late antiquity to the beginnings of the modern Craft movement in the 1930s” (C.R.F. Seymour, for one, openly admitted his reliance on Iamblichus), I see much of the Craft, particularly in its nativized

and shamanic forms, moving away from that theurgical model, a purge that began with Doreen Valiente's pruning of ceremonial magical forms from the Gardnerian Book of Shadows in the 1950s. Harran perhaps played a part in the conservation of Neoplatonic philosophy, but I doubt that its ruins hold traces of the Old Religion in Margaret Murray's sense.

Chas S. Clifton
University of Southern Colorado

DON FREW RESPONDS:

Chas Clifton makes interesting and challenging points about the Harranians.

I ignored Mr Walker's 'broader challenges' because they had nothing to do with my article. The evidence for a connection with the origins of modern Craft was not a part of that article and so was not presented. Its future presentation will require more consideration than is possible in a journal article

I did indeed focus on 'minutiae' in responding to Mr Walker, as his criticisms involved the

rate observation of the centrality of the Book of Shadows within the Gardnerian tradition. The core teachings of a tradition do not have to be considered 'scripture' per se to qualify as such a book. The Harranians presented the *Hermetica* as their 'book' and there is no evidence that the *Hermetica* was considered 'scripture'.

Prof Clifton is right to ask how much of a gap there is "between Neoplatonism and much revived Paganism today." The realization that set me on this path of research in the first place was that the theurgical practices and cosmological underpinnings of the late Neoplatonic theurgists were almost identical to the Gardnerian Craft that I learned from my teachers and from the Book of Shadows. The differences between them seemed largely superficial; Greco-Roman versus 'Celtic' names and terms. Upon further study of the earliest Gardnerian documents, I found that the shift from the former to the latter was easily explained by known historical events in this century.

Valiente's influence moved the Craft away from a theurgical model towards a more devotional and Celtic one. This ... has obscured the Neoplatonic origins to which I refer from the eyes of modern scholars

fine points of the etymology of some very unusual non-English words. Too much Neopagan scholarship has ignored or glossed over just such minutiae, resulting in poorly supported and erroneous conclusions.

The concept of 'people of the book' is not as foreign to many modern traditional Craft groups as it might appear. Certainly, Gardnerians are often kidded within the Craft for being 'people of the book', or called 'the Jesuits of the Craft'. Such comments are based on the accu-

My choice to use 'Pagans' with a capital 'P' to describe both the Harranians and modern Neopagans might imply an 'equivalency', however such was not my intent. The word *is* applied to both groups by most scholars, and I capitalized it purely out of respect for both traditions as religious paths, as one would 'Christians' or 'Muslims'.

Prof Clifton asks if the Harranians would qualify for membership in the Covenant of the Goddess. An interesting question! There are 9

criteria for membership in CoG. (see www.cog.org) The Neoplatonic theurgists of Harran would obviously not call themselves 'Witches' or use a term like 'coven'—at least not until the terms were explained to them, after which they might. None of the other 8 criteria would bar them from membership. So, yes, the Neoplatonic theurgists of Harran probably *could* pass the 'membership litmus test' of CoG. Certainly, as I said above, I see no significant difference between their theology and that of my own Gardnerian coven, and we qualify.

Modern scholarship uses 'Classical' to encompass a broader religious context than just the 'state cults', including popular piety, folk religion, and the mystery religions, all of which were present at Harran. The Pagans who fled to Harran from Athens were certainly 'Classical' Pagans, whose 'Classical' Paganism had been outlawed by the Christian authorities. I described the Paganism of late Harran as a fusion of the indigenous cult of the Moon God, philosophical and theurgical Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, *and* the Classical Paganism brought by the Athenians and Alexandrians.

It is interesting that Prof Clifton should pick C.R.F. Seymour as an example of a connection between "Hermetic and Neoplatonic theurgy of late antiquity [and] the beginnings of the modern Craft movement in the 1930s", as there is strong evidence that Seymour was directly involved with those beginnings. Seymour's unpublished private magical papers from the 1930s include shared passages with the then-unpublished Charge of the Goddess. Who was quoting whom is unclear, but is also irrelevant to prove the basic point that Seymour was in close contact with the New Forest group, if not a member.

I completely agree that Valiente's influence moved the Craft away from a theurgical model towards a more devotional and Celtic one.

This, more than anything else, has obscured the Neoplatonic origins to which I refer from the eyes of modern scholars, leading to statements such as Prof Clifton's doubt "that ... [Harran's] ruins hold traces of the Old Religion in Margaret Murray's sense." An over-reliance on Murray has misled investigators into Craft origins for many years. I discuss this at some length in "Methodological Flaws in Recent Studies of Historical and Modern Witchcraft" (*Ethnologies*, vol. 20, no. 1-2, 1998). Suffice to say here that the oldest documents and accounts of the 'Wica' that Gardner joined in 1939 betray absolutely no influence from Murray! A connection with Murray's 'Old Religion' of the British Isles was first speculated by Gardner, then adopted wholesale as an origin myth by those after him, eventually becoming the basis for Valiente's widescale, often 'Celtic' revisions and rewrites.

Before one can intelligently investigate and discuss the origins of a thing, one must have a clear idea of what that thing is. In the case of (Gardnerian) Craft origins, a fuzzy idea of Craft based on its current, popular, 'Celticized' forms is hopelessly muddling the search. It is essential to get back to the 'Wica' practiced by the group that Gardner joined before one can even begin a reasonable inquiry.

I would like to thank Leonard George for his very kind words and his eloquent explanation of some of the fine points of Neoplatonic theurgy and doctrine. I, too, heartily recommend all of his cited sources to all Neopagans.

Dr George's comments about the fluid nature of the Neoplatonists' approach to terms and categories are well taken, but another important viewpoint is that of the Qur'an. As Qur'anic scholar D. Gimaret notes in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (CD-ROM Edition v. 1.0, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1999, vol. IX, pp. 484b-485b), Qur'anic scholars clearly distinguished between unacceptable polytheists, i.e. idolators, and acceptable polytheists, i.e.



'people of the book'. Qur'anic scholars of the time considered Christians to be polytheists due to their assertion that God was fundamentally three: the Trinity. What made the Christians 'acceptable' polytheists was that they *also* asserted that God was One. I have already pointed out in my earlier response to Dr Kassis that Muslim scholars of the time distinguished

this 'direct line' indeed leads to many, if not most, other Western occult groups. To the extent that it remained adamantly non-Christian, as asserted by its practitioners, it leads to modern Craft. With all due respect to Prof Athanassiadi, I doubt that she has studied the origins of modern Craft sufficiently to be aware of the connections between it and

An over-reliance on Murray has misled investigators into Craft origins for many years. ... the oldest documents and accounts of the 'Wica' that Gardner joined in 1939 betray absolutely no influence from Murray!

between two Pagan groups at Harran, loosely described as the idolators and the philosophers, the latter being the Neoplatonists/Hermeticists—the 'Sabians' of my article. These Sabians, therefore, through their focus on the One beyond the Gods, could easily have been listed among the 'people of the book' in the Qur'an.

I echo Dr George's comments about Panopolis, but still believe that Harran played a more central role to this particular transmission. I discussed this with Kingsley, who also pointed out the similar role of Jundi-Shapur and Borsippa, but as I recall he agreed that Harran was most prominent for the transmission of Neoplatonic/Hermetic material to the West.

As I mentioned above, it was never my intent to present my argument for a 'direct line of transmission' from Harran to modern Craft in this article. That argument and its supporting evidence forms the body of a substantial book on Craft origins on which I am currently working. However, I do believe there is a specific 'direct line of transmission' from Harran to modern Craft in a particular sense. To the extent that Christian mysticism and Jewish Kabbalah were added to the material over time,

Harran. At any rate, I am unclear what distinguishes a 'clearly definable' line from a 'direct' one.

Once again, I would like to thank Dr George for his thoughtful and helpful comments and Prof Clifton for his probing remarks and questions. I am very glad to see discussion of these topics opening up in the Neopagan community.

*Donald H. Frew
Berkeley*

Don Frew represented the Craft at the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town South Africa and was a delegate to the 2000 Global Summit of the United Religions Initiative, attending the URI Charter signing ceremony in Pittsburgh last month. He has recently joined the Board of Directors of San Francisco's Interfaith Center at the Presidio. In August, he will be at the annual meeting of the North American Interfaith Network in Fullerton CA, discussing how interfaith groups can best relate to New Religious Movements.