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The Sacred Feminine

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THE SACRED FEMININE



In this issue of the *Rosicrucian Digest* we celebrate the Sacred Feminine, exploring how She has been revered throughout history and around the world and how embracing the Sacred Feminine can contribute to a healthier, more balanced future for our species and our planet.



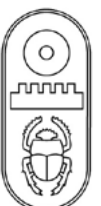
On the front cover: *Mother of the World* by Rosicrucian artist, peace activist, writer, and philosopher Nicholas Roerich (1874 - 1947). Displayed in the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York City.

Nicholas and writer and philosopher Helena Roerich (1879 - 1955) played important roles in the founding of AMORC. Helena wrote, “The approaching great epoch is closely connected with the ascendancy of woman. As in the best days of humanity, the future epoch will again offer woman her rightful place alongside her eternal fellow traveler and co-worker, man. You must remember that the grandeur of the Cosmos is built by the dual Origin.”



On the back cover: *The Appearance of Clemence Isaure [the Golden Isis] to the Troubadours* by Henri Martin (1860 – 1943). Displayed in the Hall of the Illustrious in the Capitole (City Hall) of Toulouse, France.

In 1909 a young H. Spencer Lewis stood before this painting contemplating its mystical meaning when the Grand Master of the Rosicrucians of Toulouse presented himself and directed H. Spencer Lewis to the next step in his initiation into the Rosicrucian Tradition, which eventually led to the founding of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC.



AFRICAN DARK MOTHER – OLDEST DIVINITY WE KNOW

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, PhD

In this article, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, PhD, links the oldest deity of human culture, the dark mother of Africa, with Isis and the Black Madonnas of Europe and elsewhere. In accord with the latest findings of anthropology, she emphasizes the African origins of all humans and the legacy found on African migration paths – namely, the values of sharing and caring, justice with compassion, equality, and transformation – which were transmitted to all continents from 60,000 BCE to the present, as part of the Primordial Tradition.

Please note that Dr. Birnbaum deliberately writes in a style using very few capitals, emphasizing essential equality.

An image of the bird-headed african snake goddess in the orant position (arms upraised in celebration) dated 4,000 BCE, has been called an image of our creatrix. Angeleen Campa's doctoral study of Sophia has taught me that *generatrix* is the more appropriate term. The image is held in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities of the British Museum. Preceding this anthropomorphic image were her signs—the color ochre red and the pubic V. Her characteristics are those of a bird and a snake, yet she is a woman. With legs firmly planted in the earth, her arms celebrate the universe, and her breasts offer nurturance to all life. Why hasn't she been acknowledged?

Slave traders, slaveholders, and imperialists (european, arab, and north american) enslaved Africa's peoples. African resources were stolen, african treasures sacked, icons

and other art objects were looted and taken away. African traditions were appropriated, destroyed, distorted, or suppressed. What remains in Africa today is what could not be stolen: the memory of the dark mother

in rock engravings, cave paintings, other art, and rituals.

Along with her early signs connoting generation of all life, african prehistoric art associates the dark mother with the earth's fruitfulness; she is depicted with corn showering down between cow's horns. Women are often depicted dancing. Men are painted running with antelopes, elephants, rhinoceroses, lions, and giraffes. In regions of the Hoggar, Tadrart Acacus, and above all in the Tassili, "we have some twelve thousand paintings done between the

fifth and first millennia, which includes the most beautiful renderings of the human form that prehistory can show."¹



This clay model of a Female Figure in the Brooklyn Museum is from ca. 3500 - 3400 BCE, and was found in El Māmariya, Egypt. Photo by the Brooklyn Museum.

In the neolithic era, a black-topped, red-polished ware appeared in Nubia and elsewhere. “These vessels (nearly all open bowls) have a dark red exterior and a shiny black interior, the black extending also to the outside for half inch to an inch below the rim.

The red was achieved by painting the surface with red ochre before firing, while the black seems to have been imparted by placing the vessel, directly after firing, rim downward, in a mass of densely smoking material such as leaves or straws.”² This technique, characteristic of the pottery of northeastern Africa, was subsequently known as far away as India.³

During the millennium before Jesus, continuing into the first five hundred years thereafter, the major divinity of the mediterranean world appears to have been Isis of Africa, dark mother of many names. Great mother of the mediterranean, Isis inherited a long matristic tradition of Africa whose signs were the color red ochre and the pubic V, as well as spirals and circles, and human identification with animals. Scholarship since the 1960s has recovered what the ancients knew: Isis was an african deity, whose origins were in Nubia, or upper Egypt. Nubia, at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, was an african region whose civilization flourished for “more than five hundred years before the building of the great pyramids of Egypt.”⁴

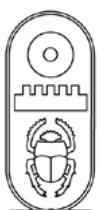
In her sanctuary at Philae in Africa, Isis was black. Metaphor of the dark mother of humanity and precursor of black, as well as church-whitened, madonnas of Christian Europe,⁵ her tradition at Meroë, Nubia, from 100 BCE to 400 CE conveys her values. A region of inner Africa well-known to the ancients, it was called Ethiopia, a name given in antiquity to “all parts of Africa occupied by dark-skinned peoples.” Egyptian artists utilized a “red-brown paint for the skin color of Egyptian



This is an example of black-topped pottery, fired upside down with the top buried in sand, from the Naqada II culture (3500-3200 BCE). This deprived the clay of oxygen and resulted in the distinctive coloration. This example was excavated from a grave at Badari, and was probably used to hold grain. An image of a hunting dog attacking an ibex was scratched onto the vessel in ancient times. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, RC-3066.

men, yellow for Egyptian women, and a dark brown or black for all Nubians.” Greeks and romans called Ethiopia (the area south of Egypt) the “Land of the Burnt Faces,” and called the Sudan “Land of the Blacks.”⁶ Ethiopia today comprises Nubia.⁷ Although Nubians resemble other peoples of the Sudan, they are unique in speaking an ancient group of languages unrelated to the arabic of their neighbors.⁸ Egypt built some of its massive monuments in Nubia, notably the great rock temples of Abu Simbel, but Nubia gave the dark mother Isis to Egypt, and the rest of the world.⁹

The little island of Philae in Nubia was known as “Holy Island,” as well as “Interior of Heaven,” and “City of Isis.”¹⁰ In the 1960s, William Y. Adams, leading nubilogist, anthropologist, archaeologist, and UNESCO expert, supervised the salvaging of Nile artifacts and treasures during the construction of the Aswan



dam. Adams considers veneration of Isis to be “one of history’s most important ideological transformations.” Within the microcosm of Nile lands, worship of Isis became “the first truly international and supra-national religion, no longer claimed as the proprietary cult of any one ruler but sanctioned by and conferring its blessings upon several. Philae became a holy city and place of pilgrimage alike for all classes and all nationalities: Meroites, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and desert nomads.”¹¹ Worship “of the age-old fertility goddess of Egypt,” for Adams, anticipated the role of “Christianity and Islam on the larger stage of the Middle Ages.”¹²

The city of Meroë, site of the kushite royal court, was the center of an empire “that included not only much of Nubia, but also regions far south of modern-day Khartoum. Meroitic culture was strongly connected with central African traditions, although it made use of Egyptian styles, to which it added graeco-roman elements.”¹³ Study of nubian archeology and history has established the centrality of the dark mother Isis, who is considered to have exemplified african matrilineal traditions. “It was only through the royal women that Nubian rulers inherited the throne. All kings and queens had to be born to a queen, usually the ruler’s sister.”¹⁴ The seamless fit between religion and daily life in Africa is suggested by the fact that an african woman, as priestess of the dark mother, was “Mistress of Heaven,” as well as “Mistress of the House.”¹⁵

Eyes of Isis inside tombs of Egyptian pharaohs looked to eternity; e.g., that of Khnumnakht (ca. 1850-1750 BCE), whose sarcophagus is now in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her eyes can be seen on the many amulets worn to this day by mediterranean peoples to ward off the “evil eye.” The ubiquity of the belief

in the “evil eye” may convey the wide-spread popular appeal of the dark mother, as well as patriarchal anxiety before the mother’s riveting gaze.¹⁶

Veneration of Isis, according to R. E. Witt, spread from her center in Nubia to Afghanistan, the Black Sea, and Portugal, to northern England.¹⁷ By the first century of the common era, one of her largest temples outside Africa was located in Rome, while others were located at Ostia and

Pompeii. At Philae in Nubia, Isis is invoked: “Hail Queen, mother of god.” At Ostia, outside Rome, Italy, she was celebrated on the 5th of March, when sailors returned to the sea, naming their boats and ships for her. Women of Rome, after immersing themselves in the icy Tiber, proceeded on their knees all along the river edge to the Pantheon, today a gathering place for feminists.

The image of Isis most popular at the height of the roman empire appears to have been that of Isis nursing her child, Horus. Besides queen of the sea, Isis was considered queen of heaven and of earth, and was easily transmuted into the christian holy mother. Legions of the roman empire, whose ranks were drawn



In a detail from the Coffin of Tahure (Twenty-sixth Dynasty, Saite Period, 685-525 BCE), the eyes look toward the east, and the rising sun. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, RC-1677.



This statue depicts Isis nursing Horus, and comes from either the Ptolemaic or Roman periods. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, RC-12.

from subordinated dark peoples of three continents, carried images of african Isis, as well as images of Isis melded together with west asian divinities Cybele, manna, and Astarte all over the known world, from Africa to Asia, to Rome, France, England, to the Danube.¹⁸ At Benevento, where a great iseo flourished in the roman epoch, her followers were later called witches.¹⁹

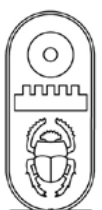
In October 1999, when Wally [ed: the author's husband] and I visited the sanctuary of Isis at Philae, I remembered Lucius Apuleius' description. A roman citizen of Athens who studied at Carthage and lived in the interior of Morocco, Lucius said he was awakened by "all the perfumes of Arabia," when Isis appeared and said, "I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are."

Worshipped by many names throughout Africa, Asia, and the greek and roman empires, she was known as Isis, Hathor, Ma'at, Artemis, Demeter-

Persephone, Hera, Mother of Corn, Juno, and Hecate. She was Lilith of west Asia and Kali of India. Hymns invoked her as "the one who rises and dispels darkness," solar ruler who "smites her enemy," whose radiance "fills the earth with gold-dust."²⁰

The memory of the ancient african mother is recalled today in the poetry of Luisah Teish, african american poet and writer who traces her heritage to Egypt, which she calls the "mystical cradle of civilization" and finds Isis in yoruba goddess Yemonja, mother goddess who "nurtures us through the cycles of Life." She also finds Isis in yoruba's Oshun, goddess of love, art, and sensuality who "represents the Erotic in Nature." Africa, for Teish, is a continent where "deities walk among human beings and dance is worship." Acknowledging african diasporas, Teish finds reverence for the earth in african ibo beliefs and in the native american "need to walk in balance." Teish's poems praise yoruba Yemonja as "mother of the night, the great dark depth, the bringer of light" who is related to Isis and Hathor. She considers the implications of the many manifestations of the dark mother: "The Horned Cow, the many-teated Sow, the queen bee, the Mother tree, the Pregnant Womb, the Grain-seed broom, the candle's wick, the matrix, and woman, you are my daughter."²¹

The civilization of the dark mother of Africa is glimpsed at Meroë in Nubia, region of upper Egypt in the area called Ethiopia. Egypt, despite eurocentric misconceptions aligning the country with the "Orient" or the "Near East,"²² is an african country shaped by the Nile, the river that carries african peoples and products back and forth along a north-south axis, particularly between Egypt and Nubia. In the ancient civilization of nubian Meroë, matrilineal succession was the custom, yet genders coexisted peacefully. Some queen mothers ruled alone, many ruled with husbands





These pyramids just outside Meroë, seen here in modern-day Sudan, were built over a period of 1,000 years, beginning in about 720 BCE.

or sons. In mother-centered cultures of Africa, religions also coexisted peaceably. At Meroë, the religion of Isis honored the religion of the lion-headed god called Apedemek as well as that of Amun. Priests and priestesses of each religion shared in the political and economic administration of Meroë.

An egalitarian civilization that nurtured all life, Meroë was a noted center of learning and commerce that spread its prosperity to all peoples. Every day, in the temple called Table of the Sun dedicated to goddesses and gods, africans offered food and other life-sustaining goods. “Those in need could come at any time and take freely of the offerings.”²³

The Table of the Sun at Meroë was the precursor of roman temples to Cerere (Ceres), grain goddess of Rome, where the poor would come for free wheat. This ultimately african celebration of wheat is kept to this day in Italy in mid-August at the christian festival of the assumption of the virgin into heaven. On August 15, when we were in Sicily, we went to her festival at Gangi, in the mountains of northwest Sicily, when many hundreds of emigrant workers come with their family on this date every year. In Rome, the temple of wheat goddess Ceres became the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, a church with a black madonna. In an early

historic epoch, a sculpture that connotes the roman male appropriation of Isis was placed at the entrance to this church. The legend of this sculpture (called Bocca della Verità or Mouth of Truth) has it that the mouth of truth will bite the hand of anyone who tells a lie. Contemporary Italian feminists, enacting the dark mother’s legacy of truth and justice, have placed replicas of the Bocca della Verità in theaters where people can deposit written denunciations of corrupt mafia chiefs and political officials.

Italian evidence of veneration of the african dark mother may be found in icons of Isis in the national museum at Naples, and icons at Pompeii, Benevento, Palestrina, Aquileia, Verona, and in Rome. Much of the evidence of the widespread veneration of african Isis in the roman epoch was destroyed by the volcanic eruption that laid waste to Pompeii.²⁴ In 1997 the Isis exhibit at Milan documented the vast arc of veneration of Isis in late antiquity and early christianity, an arc that extended from Africa to Europe, to the Ukraine, to India.

After christianity was established in 323 CE, church fathers, aiming to obliterate pagan beliefs, destroyed Meroë in 450 CE. What was it they found so threatening in this african civilization that identified so strongly with nature, particularly the Nile?

Every year the land arose from the watery flood richer and more full of life; every year the migratory birds swooped down into the marshes for food and rest. A great order, ancient and ever renewing, sustained Egypt while nations rose and fell all around it.... Nature worked patiently, bore richly, and sustained continually. The human order which grew out of that great original natural magic was as unique as its setting.²⁵

This grounding in a constant and sustaining earth may help us understand why egyptians attained an extraordinary level of artistic, architectural, and moral excellence. “The ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ of Egypt literally sprang from the soil and the water of the river, and literally were one with the air and the creatures which flew through it, all interweaving into the phenomenon of the country itself.” Everything, and every creature, was imbued with the force of life: “The hieroglyphic word for beetle means ‘to be.’ The beetle and sun are both analogs of the same force, not symbols.” For the earth-bonded person, in Africa, Sicily, and elsewhere, “The name of the thing and the thing itself are the same.”²⁶

Earth-bonded theology is not ponderous. In one egyptian creation story, the creator Amun runs around honking after laying an egg. Africans, who regard their deities familiarly, call Amun the “Great Cackler.” Similarly, africans attributed

animal characteristics to humans, and human characteristics to animals, identifying divinity with animal and human forms.²⁷ Sometimes the goddess was a cow named Hathor; other times she was a woman with a Hathor headdress. Horus, son of Isis, could be a hawk, sometimes a man with a hawk’s head, or a child in the arms of his mother.²⁸ Harmony between humans and animals characterized ancient Africa, as did harmony between men and women, a contentment visible in many depictions of

embracing couples. Seeing life as a spiral, africans believed new life came from death.

Isis melded with Ma’at, african goddess whose name connotes mother,²⁹ and with Sekhmet, whose name means “powerful one.” Ma’at had a feather on her head that signified justice. Many representations of Isis (as well as of Ma’at) have feathers. Feathers, an Egyptian guide advised us, connote equality, since they are the same, back and front. When a person died, his or her heart, the seat of intelligence, would be weighed on a scale balanced by the feather of Ma’at. If the heart was not as light as the feather, the soul would be lost to Apet, the devourer.

Ma’at, or mother, embodied truth, ethics, justice, and righteous behavior.³⁰ Sekhmet, the fierce aspect of the african dark mother, was a woman with a lion’s head. Hundreds of statues of Sekhmet were found in the temple of Mut in Karnak. Like Isis, Sekhmet originally carried a sun disk on



Pharaoh Amenhotep III ordered that up to 730 images of the goddess Sekhmet be created and installed in his mortuary temple to beseech her healing help for his illnesses. The images were later moved to Karnak, and this is presumed to be one of them. In her right hand Sekhmet holds an ankh; in the left, a lotus. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, RC-1605.



her head and an ankh, signifying life, in her hand. The ankh is said to prefigure the christian cross, although the christian symbol has no female oval.³¹

African Isis melded with Anatolian Cybele, sumerian Inanna, canaanite Astarte, and roman Diana. Isis' distinguishing images were a throne, a boat, sails, and the annual flooding of the Nile. Often depicted with outstretched wings, Isis harks back to the paleolithic bird and snake goddess of Africa. Attesting to african migrations carrying african beliefs to all continents, a contemporary native american figurine is that of a venerated woman with wings. A twentieth-century sicilian artist depicted comari, women who bonded together in memory of the mother, sheltered by protective wings of Isis.

In antiquity, at Byblos in west Asia, african Isis was identified with the Canaanite goddess Astarte. With hellenization, Isis became the great mother; her consort Osiris, or "the great black," became Zeus, Pluto, and Dionysus. The enduring truth of Isis, whose civilization centered in

nubian Meroë, may be that she embodied veneration of all life... trees are sacred, so are birds, crocodiles, the dung beetle, the hooded cobra, and all living creatures.

R.E. Witt, historian, following the transformation of a "purely African faith into a world religion," points out that african veneration of Isis became greek, then graeco-roman³² as greek and roman empires swept through Africa, Europe, and Asia. After 332 BCE, when Alexander of Macedonia conquered Egypt, Alexandria in

Africa became the capitol of an empire that stretched from the Nile to the Danube, a city where africans, asians, europeans, jews, and greeks mingled, where Osiris became Aesculapius, or Serapis, healing deity of Greece and Rome, and Isis, blending with anatolian Cybele, canaanite Astarte, and graecoroman goddesses, became great mother of the Mediterranean.³³

All over the known world in the first centuries of the common era, slaves and noblewomen venerated african Isis as a divinity who "prevailed through the force of love, pity, compassion, and her personal concern for sorrows."³⁴ Before christianity did so, the religion of Isis promised life after death. Isis centers have been found throughout the roman empire: in Gaul, Portugal, Spain, Britain, Germany, and Italy, particularly in places that later became sanctuaries of black madonnas.³⁵

In Italy, Isis was a mother divinity associated with healing; the sixth-century BCE temple to Isis at Pompeii is located next to a temple of Aesculapius, or Serapis.³⁶ A significant characteristic of Isis, one later associated with the christian madonna, was that she

was a compassionate mother. In the christian epoch her son Horus was represented as a christ figure. Isis is often depicted with a laurel wreath and two prominent ears, symbolizing that she listened with both ears to the prayers of all those who came to her, an image that can be found to this day in italian folklore.

Water, always associated with Isis, held a sacred quality: holy water, holy rivers, and holy sea. The serpent, identified with Isis;



*The Black Madonna of Toulouse, France.
Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.*

was always sacred. Hathor, was associated with regeneration. The cow, another image of Isis, became sacred in India. Music, associated with Isis, was conveyed by the image of Isis carrying a sistrum, a rattle still heard in some african music today. Isis and wheat, in the roman epoch, became Ceres and wheat. In the christian epoch Isis became santa Lucia, whose images always carry a sheaf of wheat. The olive tree, associated with Isis, has today become symbol of nonviolent transformation. Italy's contemporary nonviolent left political coalition is named: L'Ulivo, or the olive tree.³⁷

Mistress of religion in Egypt, Isis was deity as mother, yet in Isis there was no division between feminine and masculine. She was beloved by women and men, young and old, and all social classes. Her statue at Philae, created between the second and first centuries before Jesus, carries the sistrum in one hand and the ankh in the other. In her 600 BCE image in the Museum of Cairo, Isis is figured as a black nursing mother, who bears a startling resemblance to christian images of the nursing madonna.

Veneration of Isis, her spouse Osiris, and son Horus persisted in all the pharaonic dynasties, a 3,000-year-old history when belief in Isis spread from Meroë and Alexandria to “the whole Mediterranean basin.”³⁸ In Italy and other latin countries where the holy family is a focus of devotion, the trinity of Isis and her husband and child became the popular christian trinity of Maria, Joseph, and Jesus, a popular trinity that differs from the motherless trinity – father, son, and holy ghost – of canonical christianity.

At african Memphis, hymns praised Isis as a civilizing, universal divinity who had ended cannibalism, instituted good laws, and gave birth to agriculture, arts and letters, moral principle, good customs, and justice. Mistress of medicine, healer

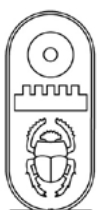
of human maladies, sovereign of earth and seas, protectress from navigational perils and war, Isis was “Dea della salvezza per eccellenza...veglia anche sulla morte,” divinity of salvation par excellence, who also watches over the dead.³⁹

The signal relevance of the dark mother Isis to our own time may be that she signifies nonviolent transformation. The cosmology and psychology of this value of nonviolence may be realized if we understand that in Isis, who gave “light to the sun,” there was no division of female from male, and no separation of one female from another. Her sister Ma’at, with whom she melded, was goddess of truth. Isis and Ma’at epitomized order in nature, a principle carried forward by Pythagoras and his followers in the greek



A statue of Isis nursing Horus in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Photo by Zeinab Mohamed via Flickr.



period, and by scientists thereafter. In the african civilization of Isis, human beings and social justice were joined.

Each human was judged at death by Ma'at's feather of justice, and by the negative confession: "I have not committed iniquity... I have not oppressed the poor... I have not defaulted... I have not caused the slave to be ill-treated... I have not murdered... I have not made any to weep... I have not falsified the beam of the balance."⁴⁰ Values of the isiac negative confession suggest why, in the 20th century, Simone Weil held that hebrew scriptures were indebted to egyptian sacred writings.⁴¹

Isis was appropriated by Greece and Rome in cults of Hera, Demeter, Fortuna, Ceres, and Juno, and by christianity in cults of saints – notably Lucia.⁴² Roman emperors and christian fathers destroyed her temples, but the legacy of the african dark mother, despite attempted obliteration and suppression, has persisted in art. The memory may be glimpsed in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, african in appearance, who bear a startling resemblance to Isis and to the many black madonnas in this region of France.⁴³

For Jean Leclant, egyptologist at the Academy of France, "Isis, mother of Horus, triumphant, but at the same time broken-hearted, prefigures the Madonna col Bambino of the Christian religion."⁴⁴ Black madonnas of Europe, and other dark female divinities of the world, may be the most tangible evidence we have of the deep and persistent memory of the african dark mother. Her

continuing legacy is marked by passionate identification with the oppressed and with values of justice with compassion, equality, and transformation. In the christian epoch, Isis' temple at Pompeii was succeeded by many sanctuaries of black madonnas. At Pomigliano dell'Arco, rituals venerating the black madonna are fervent. At Montevergine, suggesting how her icons carry the history of the subaltern, the black madonna is called black slave mother. At Foggia, where peasant communists would come in pilgrimage to her, the black image is called l'Immacolata.⁴⁵ Black madonnas may be found throughout Italy, as documented in my book, *Black Madonnas*, and throughout the world...

In Sicily, on many first migration paths from Africa, the memory of Isis is everywhere. Dozens of icons of Isis along with Bastet, her cat familiar, may be seen in sicilian museums. At carnival time, throughout the christian epoch to the present, figures of Isis and her cat express the laughter of subaltern peoples at church and state.

In Africa in the fifth century of the common era, nubians and their neighbors took up arms to prevent forced dedication to christianity of temples of Isis at Philae. Yet by the middle of the sixth century, byzantine emperors had imposed a patriarchal version of christianity as state religion on Nubia. When, less than a century later, Islamic invaders

took Egypt, nubians resisted but finally negotiated a treaty in which they kept christianity and political sovereignty. In the



In this painting by fourteenth-century artist Niccolò di Segna, Lucia, the Christian saint known for surviving tortures after her conversion, is seen holding the dagger that would eventually be her undoing.

fifteenth century, when Nubia fell to arab nomads, islam became the state religion. Yet, in Africa, underneath patriarchal religions of christianity and islam, the memory persists to this day of the ancient dark mother.⁴⁶

Glimpsed in daily and festival rituals, the memory may be closer to bodily resonance than to cognitive remembrance. The memory has persisted in Africa in contemporary rituals, as well as in rituals in all lands reached by african migrants, which is to say all continents of the world. Victor Turner, in fieldwork among the ndembu, a mother-centered culture of northwest Zambia, describes a girls' puberty ritual when a young woman is separated from her mother and her childhood dies. The ritual is enacted under a milk tree that exudes milky white latex. Echoes of this ritual of the separation of mother and daughter may be found in many of the world's myths, notably the myth of Demetra and Proserpina. For the ndembu, the milk tree is said to be – not symbolize – milk, lactation, breasts, and nubility. It is also the place “where the ancestress slept,” where the novice's grandmother, mother, and all ndembu women were initiated into womanhood, and where the tribe began. For the ndembu, the milk tree is the principle of matrilineage, mother-centeredness, and is the whole ndembu nation.

The memory of the dark mother also persists in contemporary african popular beliefs. For the yoruba of Africa, the spiral, sign of the mother, determines life. Everything is constantly moving in a spiraling motion. “The whole life span of a man or a woman is a journey. That is our belief.... All movements are journeys. We are progressing, we are moving.”⁴⁷ In this movement, yoruba women have a strong sense of their own power, enabling them to accommodate to male insecurities. For example, two wives wrap the hair of



An African milk tree.

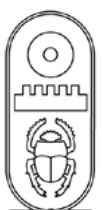
a transvestite priest of Agemo in female style.⁴⁸ Yoruba women are economically independent, and become dramatically so when they reach menopause, or when they become grandmothers, at which time they declare independence from domestic work.

The civilization of Isis has bequeathed to contemporary africans, and to other earthbonded peoples, a “high degree of tolerance towards the gods and the religious practices of those they encountered.” It has been common practice in Africa simply to incorporate the gods of others into their own pantheon “with an all-inclusiveness that saw all deities as one more manifestation of the same overarching principle.”⁴⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Burchard Brentjes, *African Rock Art*, Anthony Dent, trans., (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1965), 71.

² William Y. Adams, “Ceramics,” in *Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum,



1978), 127. The priority of africans in making tools was underlined in the recent discovery of a 2.3 million year old “tool factory” in Kenya. See “Ancient tool ‘factory’ linked to pre-humans,” *Vancouver Sun*, May 6, 1999.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Adams, *Africa in Antiquity*, “Foreword,” by Michael Botwinick. See Jocelyn Gohary, *Guide to the Nubian Monuments on Lake Nasser* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1998). See page 14 for Meroë, where women held high status. On our 1999 visit to Nubia in Upper Egypt, we noted that in the small temple to the queen at Abu Simbel, she is of equal stature with the king. She wears the Hathor headdress of cow horns surmounted by a sun disk with the two plumes (connoting equality), and holds the sistrum against her breast.

⁵ See Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ Adams, *Africa in Antiquity*, “Geography and Population of the Nile Valley,” 17.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ See “Goddesses,” in *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*, Anne K. Capel and Glenn E. Markoe, eds., (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with Cincinnati Art Museum, 1996), 121ff.

¹⁰ See John H. Taylor, *Egypt and Nubia* (London, The British Museum Press, 1991).

¹¹ William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 338.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Capel, *Mistress of the House*, 9

¹⁶ See Lawrence DiStasi, *Mal Occhio (evil eye), the Underside of Vision* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

¹⁷ R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World, Aspects of Greek and Roman Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). For the higher respect given to women in ancient

Egypt than to women in the high culture of Greece, see Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer, eds., *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (London, British Museum Press, 1992). 196.

¹⁹ “Guardate bene Iside sembra una Madonna,” *La Curiosità, la Repubblica*, 29 agosto 2000.

²⁰ Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: The Transformations of Lucius... A New Translation by Robert Graves from Apuleius* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 264-266.

²¹ See Luisah Teish, “Introduction,” in *Carnival of the Spirit: Season Celebrations and Rites of Passage* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 22. See also, Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press, 1992), 22.

²² See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

²³ D. Jean Collins, “The Message of Meroë,” *Gnosis* (magazine), Spring 1990, no. 15.

²⁴ Stefania Adamo Muscettola, “La decorazione architettonica e l’arredo,” Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Province di Napoli e Caserta, *Alla ricerca di Iside. Analisi, studi e restauri dell’Iseo pompeiano nel Museo di Napoli* (Napoli, Italia: Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, 1992).

²⁵ Michael Crisp, “The Spirit of Egypt,” *Gnosis* (magazine), Spring 1990, no. 15.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Sylvia Schoske, ed., “Votive Figurines,” in *Egyptian Art in Munich* (München: Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst München, 1993), 4.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., “Figure of the goddess Mut,” 52.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., “Standing statue of Sekhmet,” 38.

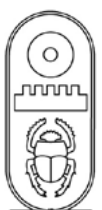
³² Witt, *Isis*. See also, Muscettola, *Alla ricerca di Iside, Analisi, studi e restauri dell’Iseo pompeiano nel Museo di Napoli* (Roma, Arti S.p.A., 1992).

³³ Witt, *Isis*, 69. Although Witt echoes some eurocentric notions (“Our western World’s Graeco-Roman and Christian civilization has emerged and taken shape out of the cultural melting pot of the Near East.”), he presents a great deal of evidence for the theme of this book that Africa was the origin of modern humans whose demic migrations left a significant african legacy to world civilization; e.g., “From Memphis and Alexandria the cult of Isis and her Temple Associates shed an incalculable influence on other rival faiths, including even Christianity” (Preface). Witt, a lecturer in Classics at Queen Mary College, University of London, where he specializes in greek and roman religion, has written an indispensable book, first published in 1971, for the education of contemporary classicists and others who denounce “afro-centrism.” A Witt sampling: “Egypt for its inhabitants was the Black Land” (14). “Throughout the 4,000 years of Egyptian history every Pharaoh was the incarnation of the youthful Horus, and therefore was the son of Isis, the Goddess Mother who had suckled and reared him.” (15). “Herodotus, [who] had earlier stayed in Egypt and had written about its religion... concluded that its gods had been appropriated by the cities of Greece” (16). “Later antiquity could think of Isis as the Egyptian soil which the Nile commingles with and fructifies” (19). “Already in the Ptolemaic age she was known at Philae as Isis of the Innumerable Names. Now, however, she was identified with all the purely anthropomorphic goddesses of the Graeco-Roman Pantheon...Demeter and her daughter Persephone... Pallas Athena... Aphrodite and Venus...Hera... Artemis... Wisdom (Sophia)...”(20). “In Italy itself the Egyptian faith was a dominant force. At Pompeii, as the archaeological evidence reveals... Isis played a major role. In the capitol, temples were built in her honor... obelisks were set up, and emperors bowed to her name. Harbours of Isis were to be found on the Arabian Gulf and the Black Sea. Inscriptions show that she found faithful followers in Gaul and Spain, in Pannonia and Germany. She held sway from Arabia and Asia Minor in the east to Portugal and Britain in the west and shrines were hallowed to her in cities large and small...

Beneventum, the Piraeus, London” (21). “The friend of slaves and sinners, of the artisans and the downtrodden, at the same time she heard the prayers of the wealthy...” (23). “The cult of Isis had its cradle in northeast Africa, in Egypt and Ethiopia” (23).

“To understand ancient Egyptian religion at all, and especially the religion of Isis, we must recognize the sacredness of life in all its forms for the whole Nile civilization” (25). “...the cult of animals doubtless followed after the worship of sacred tree...” (26). “Animals were generally symbols of divinity” (28). “...the ankh...a case of an Isiac symbol prefiguring a characteristically Christian token, the cross” (32). “Throughout the long history of Egyptian religion Isis and her brother-husband remained complementary deities” (36). “...Byblos in Phoenicia...where Egyptian antiquities have been unearthed was a point of economic and religious contact between Phoenicia and the Nile country. It was there that Osiris was assimilated to Adonis (Thammuz) and Isis herself into Astarte (Istar, Ashtaroth)” (43). “...rites of Dionysus and Demeter bore the closest resemblance to those of Osiris and Isis” (67). “...in the Cyclades Isis was blended with Artemis...” (68). “But Isis on Delos is even more than an Egyptian turned Greek. For besides her identification with Aphrodite, Tyche, Nike, Hygieia...and Artemis, she is also invoked as Astarte of Phoenicia, as the Mother of the gods, and as the Great Mother” (68 69). “The obelisks formerly belonging to the Iseum Campestre are now in the Squares called Pantheon, Dogali, Minerva, and Navona [in Rome]” (87). Among the holy servants of Isis, “The Synod of the Wearers of Black... paid particular devotion to Isis as ‘the black-robed queen.’” (97). “Isis and her companion gods from Egypt gained a foothold in Italian cities by a readiness to take a comparatively low rank...friend of the masses...her home hard by the business and trading center dear to the common man” (136-137).

“Herodotus states that the first people to institute festivals, processions, and religious presentations were the Egyptians...‘and the Greeks have got their knowledge from them’” (165). “Isis was an insidiously dangerous foe for



Christian theologians because she was believed to give her worshippers their daily bread” (180). “The ritual of the Christian Church owes a considerable and unacknowledged debt to the Egyptian religion that preceded it in the Graeco-Roman world” (184). “In the theology and art of Gnosticism Horus and Christ could easily be blended” (218). “In the middle of the first century AD Isiacism, far from being dead, was in the ascendant” (259).

“The evidence is unimpeachable that the places where Paul preached cultivated the faith of Isis” (261). “Augustine...remarks that no idolatry is more profound and more superstitious than that of Egypt” (262). “... agape is a cult name for Isis, who in Egyptian tradition as old as the Pyramid Texts personifies tenderness, compassion and divine love” (266). “Clearly the Pauline view of Isiacism was penetratingly critical. Paul’s world was a patriarchy, his religion was Christological and monotheistic, and God was found in fashion as a man. Isis was female, Isis was the champion of idolatry, and Isis was the lover of the Nile menagerie. And yet the Pauline and the Isiac faith had at least one common characteristic. Each swept aside racial and social distinctions. ‘There is neither Greek nor Jew... Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.’ Change Christ to Isis... and the words are still true” (268). “Giordano Bruno...was convinced that the wisdom and magic-born religion of ancient Egypt excelled the fanatical theology that burnt dissident thinkers as heretics... the unfrocked monk, perished on 1 February 1600 for his intransigent denial that Christianity was unique” (269).

³⁴ Schoske, *Egyptian Art in Munich*, 60.

³⁵ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *dark mother: african origins and godmothers* (Lincoln, NE: Authors Choice Press, an imprint of iUniverse, Inc., 2001), chapter 4.

³⁶ *Superintendenza Archeologica per le Province di Napoli e Caserta, Alla ricerca di Iside*. Analisi, 7.

³⁷ Ibid., 16

³⁸ “Iside, Mito Mistero Magia,” *Archeologia Viva*, marzo/april 3 1997.

³⁹ Ibid., 43.

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⁴⁰ Quoted in Asphodel P. Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions, The Search for the Female in Deity* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1993), 85. See also David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses, Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1968).

⁴¹ For Weil, see Birnbaum, *dark mother*, chapter 2.

⁴² Birnbaum, *dark mother*, chapter 5.

⁴³ See Ladislav Segy, *African Sculpture Speaks*, 4th edition, enlarged (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., a subsidiary of Plenum Publishing Corporation, 1969, 1975), 7. See also Birnbaum, *dark mother*, chapter 4.

⁴⁴ “Iside in Mostra a Milano. Un’inedita rassegna a Palazzo Reale,” *Archeologia Viva*, marzo-april 1997. In the hostile protestant environment of the United States, it is remarkable that memory of Isis can be found at all; one significant source for the memory in the United States is Hilda Doolittle’s (H.D.) *Helen in Egypt*. I am indebted to Clare Fischer for presenting this theme to our women’s group.

⁴⁵ See Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* (see note 5).

⁴⁶ Quirke & Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*. For Egyptian interchange with sub-Saharan Nubia, see 39-41, 202-19.

⁴⁷ See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). 32.

⁴⁸ M. Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 72, 130.

⁴⁹ See Anna Joyce, “Dark Mother as Symbol of Resistance in Haiti, A Historical Overview,” term paper for class, Dark Mother, California Institute of Integral Studies, Spring, 2000.

THE HYMN OF ISIS

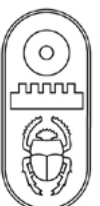
From “Thunder, Perfect Mind”

Found in the Nag Hammadi Library, which was unearthed in 1945, this selection from the poetic Gnostic text “Thunder, Perfect Mind” has often been associated with Isis, since it shares many characteristics of a typical Isis aretology. The praises of the mysterious Feminine Divinity evoke the universality of Isis in all her manifold forms.

I am the Beginning and the End.
I am honored and scorned.
I am the prostitute and the saint.
I am married and a maiden.
I am the mother and the daughter.
I am the limbs of my mother.
I am barren
 and my children are many.
I am she who married magnificently,
 and I have no husband.
I am the one who brings children and I do
 not bear children.
I am the consolation of labor pains.
I am the bride and the bridegroom,
 and my husband brought me forth.
I am my father's mother
 and my husband's sister,
 and he is my child.
I am the incomprehensible silence
 and the idea often brought to mind.
I am the voice sounding throughout the world
 and the word appearing everywhere.
I am the sounding of my name,
For I am knowledge and ignorance.
I am shame and bravery.
I am without shame; I am full of shame.
I am power and I am trepidation.
I am conflict and peace.
Listen to me,
For I am the scandalous and magnificent one.



Statue of Isis holding a sistrum and situla, ritual accoutrements used in her worship. Found at Emperor Hadrian's Villa (117 - 138 CE). Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.



THE ORACLES OF DELPHI

Grand Master Julie Scott, SRC

Imagine a culture that celebrates women as fonts of wisdom.

Imagine a tradition that values more than just intellectual ways of knowing, such as synchronicities and dreams and intuition.

Imagine teachers who encourage their students to anticipate the path ahead, not to just look for an immediate solution.

Imagine a Sage who requires the Inquirer to participate in his or her inquiry, in order to evoke deeper learning.

Imagine Shamanesses who invite us to be all we can be.

These were the Oracles of Delphi.

For thousands of years the Oracles of Delphi were consulted before any major decision was made. Kings, generals, and philosophers all sought her advice.

The average person was only allowed to approach the Oracle once in their lifetime. The petitioner had to cleanse himself or herself in the nearby sacred spring before approaching her. Then they would ask their question.

When you visit the temple of Apollo at Delphi today, you can see an underground chamber that goes beneath the adyton. This was where the Oracles entered. Ancient historians reported that there were fumes coming up through a fissure in the ground in this area, and the Oracle would sit on a tripod above these fumes. She would hold a sprig of laurel



*Priestess of Delphi (1891)
by John Collier.*

and look into a bowl of water as she answered the petitioners' questions.

Recent research has shown that there are two major geological fault lines that cross like an X under the adyton in the temple of Apollo. There is evidence there of gases, such as ethylene, that could induce a borderline state.

The Oracle would prepare herself. She would fast and would only meet with petitioners on certain days. It's believed that this might have been when the gases were safe enough for her to be able to be seated above them.

The women who served as Oracles were chosen for their natural abilities. They were called Oracles, and their prophecies were also called oracles. Sometimes

the women were also called Pythias. Pythias were associated with the mythical python from this area. Serpents were associated with the Divine Feminine. Sometimes the



*The omphalos or navel of the world at Delphi.
Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.*

Oracles were called Sibyls. In Greek, sibyl comes from theobule; theo, which is the deity, and bule, which means to sing. So, she's singing from the Divine.

The Oracles presented their oracles for thousands of years, possibly as early as 5000 BCE. The Oracle Tradition ended in the year 394 of our era, when the Roman Emperor Theodosius forbade any of the ancient traditions.

There was a special stone placed in the temple area at Delphi called the omphalos, which means navel or belly button. It was

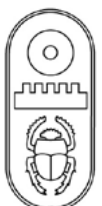
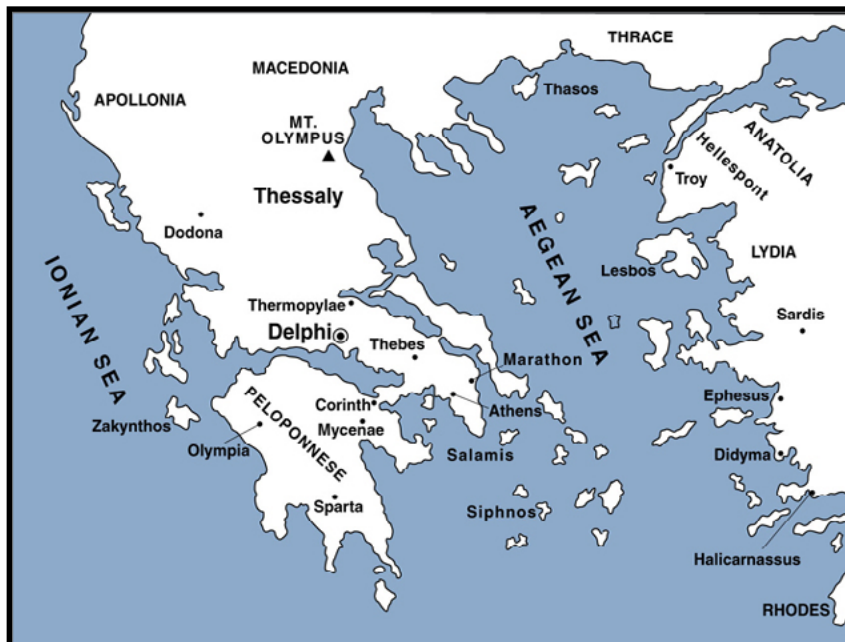
believed that Delphi was the center of the world and that it was connected, through its navel, to the mother goddess. What closer connection have any of us had to our mother than through our navel?

Now, let's look at how the Oracles were celebrated as fonts of wisdom.

In ancient Greece, no major decision was made without first consulting the Oracle. On the path leading up to the Temple of Apollo there are stone treasuries. These are small buildings that were filled with riches given in thanks for the Oracles' advice.

The Oracles were able to see beyond the usual limits of time and space, again, through synchronicities, intuition, and dreams. You may be familiar with one of the most famous oracles associated with Delphi, that of King Croesus and his request for war advice.

Croesus was the richest man in that part of the world and was very powerful. He was the King of Lydia and had everything he wanted. The Persians were not threatening Croesus, but he felt that they could in the future, so, he asked his representative to ask the Oracle if he



should wage war on the Persians. The Oracle replied that if he did, he would destroy a mighty empire.

Croesus interpreted this to mean that he would destroy the mighty Persian Empire, but it didn't turn out that way. The Persians soundly defeated Croesus's army and captured him.

After his defeat and eventual release, Croesus sent his representative back to the Oracle to ask where her error had been. She pointed out that when he had previously asked if Croesus should wage war on the Persians, she had said – if you do, you will destroy a mighty empire. She said that this was true, but he never asked the second, and more important question, which would have been – which empire? It proved to be Croesus's.

The Oracles expected inquirers to participate in their own learning. They often responded in riddles so that the person would have to participate in the response themselves, not just have it handed to them.

You
may be

familiar with the Oracle's connection with Socrates, as related to us by Plato. Before his famous trial that involved the Oracle, Socrates said that if we can understand something through learning, we should learn it, and if something is common knowledge, don't ask the Oracle. In the same way if there is something we can do in our own lives with the powers that are already available to us to improve our lot, we should do it. He said we should not count on the deities or some magical formula to do it for us.

The Stoic Epictetus said that inquirers of the Oracle should consider whether they are motivated by fear and desire or by a detached wish for truth. When someone asked the Oracle a question, Epictetus wondered, were they expecting a certain answer and did they just want her to confirm it for them, or were they really looking for the truth? Epictetus said that we should

treat the Oracle's response like
we treat the perception

that we get from our
eyes. We don't

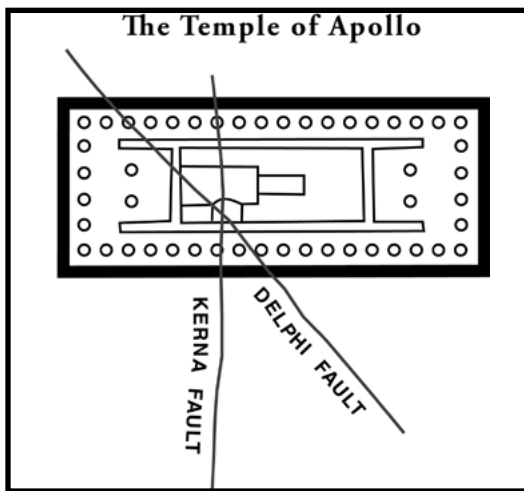
tell our eyes:

"I want
you to see
this." We

l o o k
at and



Aegeus, the mythical king who founded Athens, consults the Oracle.



perceive what the eyes send to our brain. In the same way, Epictetus said, people should look at what the Oracle said to them very impersonally and, whatever it is that they are told, they should put it to good use, even if it's not the response that they wanted.

The Oracles also invited people to be all they could be to embrace their destiny. Before Pythagoras was born, his father (or in some versions of the story, his mother) visited the Oracle of Delphi. She knew that Pythagoras's mother was pregnant and said that she would give birth to a man who was supremely beautiful, wise, and beneficial to humankind. This is how Pythagoras got his name; he was named after the Pythia, the Oracle who predicted his birth.

Later, when he had established his famous school, Pythagoras taught in three degrees. The second degree included moral and political laws. He said that he learned what he taught about moral laws from the Oracle at Delphi.

Socrates's advice regarding approaching the Oracle was previously mentioned. You may also be familiar with the story of Socrates and his famous trial that involved the Oracle.

Socrates was put on trial for corrupting the youth of Athens and introducing false deities. However, when Socrates chose to

defend himself at his trial, he said that this wasn't really the reason he was on trial. He then shared why he believed he was on trial.

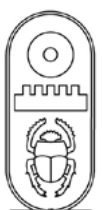
He said that his childhood friend went to the Oracle at Delphi and asked if there was any man wiser than Socrates. She said no. Socrates then said that he was sure that this couldn't be correct, so he started interviewing people whom he was sure were wiser than he was.

First, he interviewed a politician with a reputation for wisdom. He wanted to prove that the politician was wiser than him but after speaking with the politician he said that he was not wiser than Socrates because he thinks he knows something when he does not know it.

Then Socrates spoke with poets, dramatists, and musicians and found that they didn't really understand the sublime messages of their creations, so they weren't wiser than Socrates either. Finally, he spoke with craftspeople and found that, based on the strength of their technical proficiency, they claimed knowledge of all other subjects which they didn't really possess. As Socrates interviewed people to prove that he wasn't the wisest person, he created enmity from those whom he had interviewed, which led to the false charges against him.

Finally, Socrates said that the Oracle might be right because he alone seemed to be prepared to admit his own ignorance rather than pretend to know something he did not know. More than 2,400 years later this is reflected in the "Rosicrucian Code of Life" – "If someone asks you for advice on a subject you do not know well, humbly admit your ignorance."

Now let's participate in a meditation related to the Oracles of Delphi. Please close your eyes and take three deep breaths.





Michelangelo's Delphic Sibyl (1509).

Visualize the culture that you live in celebrating women as fonts of wisdom.

What does that look like?

Who are these women?

What are their roles in your society and your culture, and in your neighborhood?

What is your relationship with them?

Now, see your tradition valuing more than just intellectual ways of knowing, for example, seeing beyond the usual limits of time and space through intuition or dreams or synchronicities.

How can that manifest in your world?

How can it manifest in your life?

Now imagine teachers who encourage foresight to see not just an immediate solution, but to see the greater path ahead.

Consider some questions in your life that you hope to receive answers to.

How can you see beyond just the immediate situation?

Can you see how it fits with the full course of your lifetime?

For the most important activities that you participate in, how can you see that they fit with the full course of your

country's history or the future of our planet – beyond just the immediate solution?

How can your actions have a greater impact further down the path?

Now imagine a sage, either in your life or in your society, who expects inquirers to participate in their own learning. They don't just hand you the answer and, if it's something that you can do on your own, you do it. You don't expect someone to magically produce a result.

What is some action that you can take to be of service to others right now?

Imagine shamanesses who invite us to be all we can be, to step into our destiny.

What do you want to know about your destiny?

If you could speak with the Divine in order to live at your highest potential, what would you ask?

Open yourself to messages from the Oracles of Delphi, from your inner self, from your subconscious, from the Master Within to help you fulfill your destiny.

This can happen at any time, in any place.

So Mote It Be!

THE RITUAL PATH OF INITIATION INTO THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

Mara Lynn Keller, PhD

Mara Lynn Keller, PhD (Philosophy, Yale University) is a Professor of Philosophy and Religion and past Director of the Women's Spirituality MA and PhD program at the California Institute of Integral Studies. She is a philosopher, theologian, and the leading expert in the world on the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone.

The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone are the oldest of the Mysteries in Greece, sharing rituals and beliefs with Egypt, Crete, Anatolia, and Thrace, with roots deep in the Neolithic age and the agrarian revolution. The Mysteries at Eleusis, called *ta Mysteria*, lasted almost two thousand years, from approximately 1450 BCE to 392 CE. The Greater Mysteries were celebrated in the early fall at Athens and Eleusis, in the middle of the Greek month *Boedromion* (roughly equivalent to our September), near the time of the autumnal equinox.

The Greater Mysteries (as the Eleusinian Mysteries were also called) were presided over by the Mother Goddess,¹ but the story of both the Mother and Daughter constellates the center of the Greater Mysteries, serving as chrysalis and catalyst for the initiates' spiritual illumination and transformation. In these rites of initiation, initiates participated in a reenactment of the *mythos* or sacred

story of Demeter and Persephone, their unwilling separation and joyful reunion.

The myth and the rites are closely intertwined. Since the *mythos* of the Greek Mother and Daughter Goddesses is relatively well known compared to the details of the rituals celebrated in their honor, I will focus here primarily on the details of the ritual. The ritual

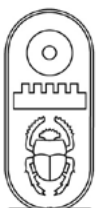
form was finely tuned over many centuries with the intent of manifesting an experience that itself was ineffable.

The rites at Eleusis were considered essential to the survival of humanity, and it was said that "the life of the Greeks [would be] unlivable, if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries, which hold the whole human race together."² Demeter's

rites enshrined the natural laws of the birth, growth, death, and regeneration of humans, the crops, and all nature. As British classicist Jane Ellen Harrison explained it: "These two things...food and children, were what...[people] chiefly sought to procure



The Ninnion Tablet (ca. 370 BCE), seen here, depicts Iacchus leading a procession of initiates into the Eleusinian Mysteries, being received by Demeter and Persephone.





Ruins of the Temple at Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

by the performance of magical rites for the regulation of the seasons.”³

I first came to celebrate the Demeter-Persephone *mythos* by welcoming the arrival of spring in spiritual circles with women friends, and then later, too, with men. This myth also spoke to me powerfully of the loving bond shared by mother and daughter, a closeness that my own mother and I had enjoyed; and it also spoke to my sense of great loss when we were separated by her death. I wondered how the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries had honored this mother-daughter bond, and how the ritual might bring me closer to an understanding of the role of the Sacred Feminine powers of the cosmos. I began to research and reenact these rites. I know others are interested in traversing the ritual path of the Mysteries as well, which were open to all, young and old, male and female, enslaved and free.⁴

The Power of Experience

The power of a ritual is transmitted through a person’s experiencing it. Classics scholar Carl Kerényi, guided by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, explained the experience of an initiate of the Eleusinian Mysteries by contrasting it with the experience of a person who views a tragedy performed in a theatre:

Aristotle investigated both what happened in the minds of the audience at a tragedy and the experience offered by the annually recurring venture of Eleusis. The spectator at the tragedy had no need to build up a state of concentration by ritual preparations; he had no need to fast, to drink the *kykeon* [communion drink] and to march in a procession. He did not attain a state of *epopteia*, of “having seen” by his own inner resources. The poet, the chorus, the actors created a vision, the *theama* [spectacle], for him at the place designed for it, the *teatron* [theatre]. Without effort on his part, the spectator was transported into what he saw. What he saw and heard was made easy for him and became irresistibly his. He came to believe in it, but this belief was very different from that aroused by the *epopteia* [the vision of the Mysteries]. He [the spectator at the theatre] entered into other people’s sufferings, forgot himself and – as Aristotle stressed – was purified. [But] in the Mysteries, a purification – *katharmos* – had to take effect long before the *epopteia*.⁵

In contrast to the cathartic experience of watching a tragic drama whereby (according to Aristotle) the spectator is purged of the negative emotions of fear and pity, an initiate of the Mysteries would undergo physical, emotional, and spiritual cleansing in preparation for the main part of the ritual – a spiritual identification with the Mother and Daughter in their separation and suffering and then joyful reunion, a transformation from death to rebirth. Through her or his own inner spiritual desires and participation in the rites, the initiate was prepared to receive a “seeing” into the deepest mysteries of life.

Initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries were forbidden by Athenian law, on penalty of death, from revealing the secrets of the Mysteries. It was feared that revealing the secret rites would profane the Mysteries. But these rites had originally been open to all. In the sixth century BCE, Herodotus, the father of Greek history, wrote: “Every year the Athenians celebrate a festival in honor of the Mother and the Maid, and anyone who wishes, from all Athens or elsewhere, may be initiated in the mysteries.”⁶

Aristotle also underscored the openness of the rites when he explained about the Greek tragic playwright Aeschylus (525-456 BCE), who lived in Eleusis: “[he] did not know it was a secret,” Aeschylus said of the Mysteries.”⁷

However, after the Persians attacked Greece in 490 and again in 480 BCE, foreigners who could not speak Greek were barred from the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁸

In the first century BCE, Greek-Sicilian historian and ethnographer Diodorus wrote of Demeter’s Mysteries on the beautiful island of Krete (Crete), that these remained open to all.

Elsewhere such rites are communicated in secret, but in Krete, in Knossos, it had been the custom since time immemorial to speak of these ceremonies quite openly to all and, if anyone wished to learn of them, to conceal none of the things which elsewhere were imparted to the initiate under a vow of silence.⁹

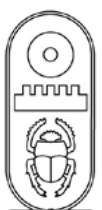
In keeping with the openness of Demeter’s rites in Krete rather than the secretiveness required by fifth century BCE Athens, I have chosen to present my own vision of the path of initiation into the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries, based primarily on the ancient Greek sources. I understand that the rites changed over time,¹⁰ and that no picture of the secret and ineffable rites can be definitive.

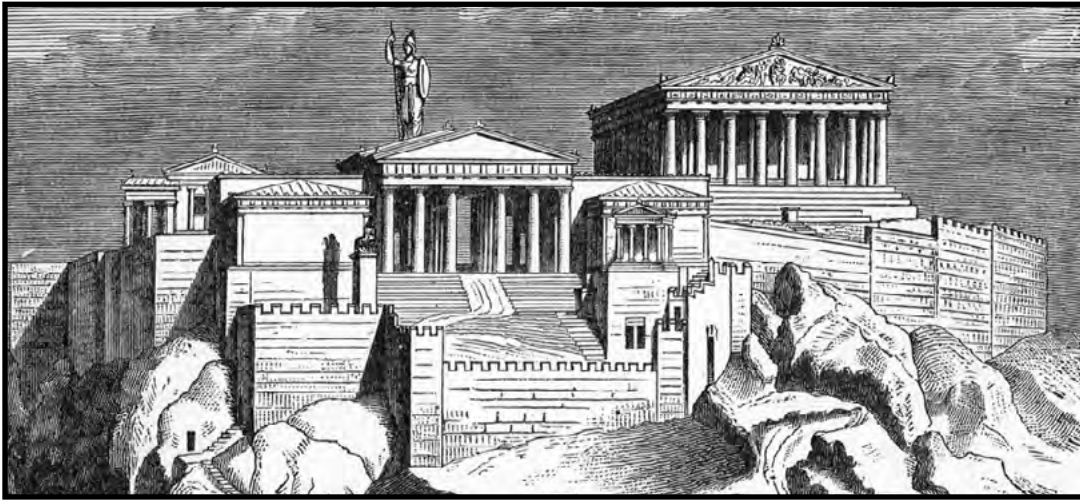
Rites Open to All

While the rites were open to young and old, male and female, enslaved and free, initiates had to prepare for half a year, or a year or more for initiation into the Greater Mysteries. Their instructions began with the rites of the Lesser Mysteries which celebrated the arrival of spring (in late February, in the Mediterranean



Thesmophoria by Francis Davis Millet, 1894-1897, depicts a group of women performing the Eleusinian Mysteries. Image via Brigham Young University Museum of Art.





A rendering of what the Acropolis might have once looked like, in a late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century drawing provided by Penn State University Library via Flickr.

climate). The Lesser Mysteries included a preparatory ceremony for the Greater Mysteries, consisting of rites of atonement, for no one with unatoned bloodguilt on their hands could be initiated into the Greater Mysteries.¹¹

In the middle of the month prior to the beginning of the Greater Mysteries (approximately mid-August), special messengers or heralds, called *Spondophoroi*, were sent from Athens and Eleusis across Greece to invite Demeter's worshippers to attend the festival of the Eleusinian Mysteries.¹² At each city or village, the messengers would pour out libations of peace which proclaimed the cessation of warfare and signaled the beginning of the two-month long Sacred Truce, to which the diverse Hellenic populations consented, in order to provide for safe passage for pilgrims travelling to and from the Mysteries.

The sequence of the ritual is important to the realization of its overall influence. It is also important to remember that each "day" begins in the evening after sunset, at first starlight. Nighttime began the new "day," with the possibilities of refreshing rest and revelatory dreams.

The Day before Day One

The day before Day One, on the fourteenth of the month called *Boedromion* (in mid-September), the priestesses of Demeter and Persephone took the basket of Sacred Objects (*Hiera*) of the Goddess from her temple in Eleusis to Athens, and carried it on their heads along the Sacred Way (*Hieros Hodos*) that initiates themselves would soon traverse in their approach to the Two Goddesses.¹³ Along the way they rested by a shrine of Demeter and Persephone near Demeter's sacred fig tree on the outskirts of Athens.¹⁴

The procession along the twelve miles of the Sacred Way, accompanied by an honor guard from Athens and villagers, would have arrived at Athens at the end of the day, no doubt being welcomed by celebrants already in the city. A priest of Demeter climbed up to the Akropolis to announce the arrival of Demeter's sacred objects and her entourage, to the priestess of Athena.¹⁵ In this way, the relationship of these two Goddesses and of their two, once-independent regions, were accorded mutual respect.

Day One: *Agyrmos*, the Gathering

According to the fifth century CE lexicographer Hesychios, the *Agyrmos*

was “of the Mysteries the first day.”¹⁶ The initiates, dressed simply, assembled with their teachers in the Athenian *Agora* or marketplace, in front of the *Stoa Poikile*, the Painted Portico, together with thousands of celebrants who came from all around Greece, and beyond. Very likely the blessings of Zeus and Athena, as well as of Demeter and Persephone, were invoked for the beginning of the festival.

As part of the proclamation (*prorrhesis*) of the Mysteries, the initiates, called *mystai*, were given a warning to refrain from initiation if one had unatoned killing on their hands.¹⁷

A vow of silence was required of the initiates, not to reveal the experiences of the rites.¹⁸ I interpret the initiate’s vow of silence also as a promise to remain silent during the days of initiation. Such a “fast” from speaking would have allowed the person to quiet the cognitive mind and to rest down into one’s deeper mind and spiritual center. I experience this sacred silence as nourishing and spacious, an opportunity for deeper explorations into Spirit.

Initiates were also instructed to fast each day from dawn until sunset, following the example of Demeter who would neither eat nor drink while searching for her lost Daughter.¹⁹ In the evenings initiates could eat and drink, except for the traditionally forbidden foods: meat, fowl, red mullet fish, red wine, apples, pomegranates, and beans.²⁰ Fasting, as we know, is a means of

cleansing the body, a time when the body’s cells and tissues dispel impurities.

To conclude the first evening of ceremonies, the procession of priestesses, priests, initiates, and other celebrants would have paraded through the *Agora* up to the sacred precinct of Demeter in Athens, called the *Eleusinion*, between the *Agora* and the north slope of the *Akropolis*. There, Demeter’s *Hiera*, her Sacred Things, would have been taken into her temple, with singing and dancing.

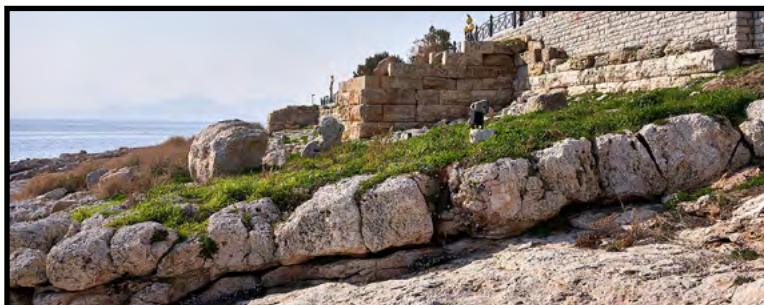
Day Two: *Alade! Mystai!* “To the Sea, Initiates!”

On Day Two, initiates were heralded early in the morning with the call, *Alade! Mystai!* “To the Sea, Initiates!”²¹ Initiates, with their teachers, families, and friends paraded the handful of miles to the seashore south of Athens, to the Bay of Phaleron. This day was also called the *Elasis*, a day for banishment or letting go.²² Likely the initiates saw their immersion in the sea as returning to the womb-waters of Mother Earth. This process of physical cleansing and spiritual purification was further preparation for the initiates’ pending experience of death and rebirth.

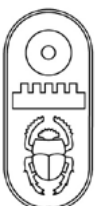
In Greece as elsewhere, the salt sea is believed to have healing properties. It was believed that, “The sea can wash clean all the foulness of [hu]mankind.”²³

Day Three: *Heireia Deuro!* “Bring Sacred Offerings!”

During Greece’s Classical Age, Day Three was called *Heireia Deuro!* or “Bring



Seen here in Piraeus, Greece, are some of the remains of Conon’s Walls, built on the Bay of Phaleron in 394 BCE.



Sacred Offerings!”²⁴ The official state ceremonies in Athens, on the evening following the day at the sea, included the sacrifice of a suckling pig by each initiate, as well as of other animals by officials, to be used for the evening’s feast.²⁵ The meaning of this sacrifice is not clear. Was it a sacrifice made from gratitude for the abundant gifts of the Mother Goddess? A symbolic gesture of purification from one’s moral mistakes and spiritual failures? A prayer for the success of a new harvest? Perhaps all that, and more.

Because there is evidence that in earlier times Demeter preferred “the gentler foods of fruit and grain”²⁶ to the blood sacrifice of animals, I expect there were also individual gift-offerings of grains and fruits, singing and dancing, and gratitude offered to “the Two Goddesses,” as Demeter and Persephone were called.

In addition, tithes of the grain harvests were brought by official delegations from various city-states. In the latter part of the fifth century BCE, these offerings of first fruits—which at first were an offering of thanks to Demeter for the ending of famine—became required by the Athenian city-state during its war with Sparta, to strengthen Athens’ alliances and security.²⁷ Demeter’s Priestess refused complicity with what in effect were war taxes.²⁸

Day Four: *Asklepia/Epidauria*, Healing Dreams

Day Four was named *Asklepia* and *Epidauria* in honor of Asklepios and his healing center to the south at Epidauros.²⁹ It was said that on this day, the cult of Asklepios and Hygeia joined the Eleusinian Mysteries rites in Athens.³⁰ Evening rites of sacrifices were held at Demeter’s Eleusinion temple in Athens to honor Asklepios, God of Healing; Hygeia, Goddess of Health; and Demeter



This statue of a sacrificial pig is in the Eleusis Museum. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

and Persephone, who also were revered as healing deities.

Special blessings were invoked for doctors and healers, and perhaps healing practices were offered at Demeter’s Eleusinion temple in Athens to all who came for them. Later that evening, initiates participated in a “night-watch.”³¹ I think that probably they spent an all-night visit at the Asklepieion precinct on the south slope of the Akropolis, using this time to focus on the healing of physical ailments, emotional distress, and spiritual limitations. The temple of Asklepios was built near the enclosure of a sacred spring in a small cave.³² There was a dormitory or *abaton* for sleeping.

As in the healing rites at the great healing center of Asklepios, Hygeia, and Apollo, on the Peloponnesos at Epidauros, where dream incubation played an important role,³³ this night too would have been a time for healing dreams. Since the ancients believed that illness stemmed from a person not being aligned with their divine destiny, those seeking healing would prepare for a night of dreaming by inviting a visitation of divine presence and purpose into their lives. Such a visitation in one’s dreams could bring a healing of soul and

body, providing the conditions for health and wealth, well-being and abundance.

After a night of dreaming, initiates would tell their dream to an attendant of Asklepios or Hygeia, called *therapeutes* (the source of our word for “therapist”).³⁴ It was incumbent on the initiate to follow the divine guidance and to perform some action, as directed by the deity, in order for healing to be fulfilled.³⁵

Day Five: *Pompe*, Grand Procession

On Day Five, many thousands of exuberant celebrants joined the *Pompe* or Grand Procession from Athens to Eleusis, led by the priestesses of Demeter and Persephone carrying the basket of the Goddess’s Sacred Things or *Hiera*. Celebrants left early in the morning from Athens’ Sacred Gate (at the northeast corner of the Agora) and proceeded along the Sacred Way to Eleusis.

The event places visited by the jubilant procession of celebrants were recorded by the second century CE Greek author Pausanias, himself an initiate of the Mysteries.³⁶ Just outside the Sacred Gate at Athens, celebrants stopped at the shrine of the Sacred Son, Iakchos, who joined in leading the exuberant crowds.³⁷ They paused at the River Kephisos, where youths offered a lock of hair (probably a coming of age ceremony).³⁸ The procession rested at Daphni at the temple precinct of Apollo, Demeter, Persephone, and Athena;

and then visited the nearby sanctuary of Aphrodite, where votive offerings could be made to the Goddess of Love, Laughter, and Beauty.³⁹ At the boundary between Athens and Eleusis, beside the river and lakes called *Rheitoi*, initiates were met by descendents of Krokos (the first inhabitant there), who tied a saffron-yellow strand to the right wrist and left ankle of each initiate, which signaled their connection to the Mother Goddess.⁴⁰

A high point of hilarity for the rites came just outside of Eleusis, when initiates crossed over the Bridge of Jest, mocked by masked jesters, led by a raucous old

woman named Baubo or Iambe.⁴¹ The procession finally arrived at Demeter’s sanctuary, with torches, rejoicing.

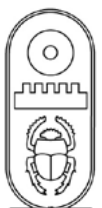
Day Six: *Pannychis*, Nightlong Revelry

Day Six began in the evening with a Nightlong Revelry, the *Pannychis*, with torchlit dancing by women around *Kallichoron*, the well “of beautiful dances” near Demeter’s temple at Eleusis.⁴² The revels included a *kernophoria*, a special dance led by women carrying First Fruits of the Harvest, using a ritual vessel worn on the head, called the *kernos*. They were joined in dancing by all the celebrants.⁴³

Probably the offering of sacred bread, the *pelanos*, was celebrated in front of Demeter’s temple at Eleusis, the *Telesterion*. It was baked from the first fruits of the grain harvest of wheat from Demeter’s sacred fields on the Rharian plain, the most fertile land of Attika.⁴⁴



In this detail from a water vase dedicated to the Eleusinian Mysteries dated to the fourth century BCE and currently housed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Demeter, at left, watches Persephone tilt two lighted torches towards Dionysus, seated on the right.



After this nightlong revel, the following morning and afternoon allowed time for rest, and for further dedications or sacrifices for the Two Goddesses and other Deities in the family of the Greek pantheon. At Eleusis there were shrines just outside of Demeter's temple precinct for Artemis of the Portals and for Poseidon, Lord of the Sea; and perhaps also for Hekate, triple-aspected Goddess of Crossroads; and Triptolemos, the hero of Eleusis, said to have taken Demeter's gift of agriculture throughout the known world.⁴⁵

**Days Seven and Eight:
Mysterioides Nychtes,
Nights of the Mysteries**

Days Seven and Eight were called *Mysterioides Nychtes*, the Mystical Nights or Nights of the Mysteries. Little is known with certainty of what happened during these culminating nights. The initiates, called *mystai*, together with their teachers, called *mystagogoi*, entered Demeter's temple, her earthly home. Perhaps, like the Orphics, initiates needed a password taught them by the teacher of the mysteries which allowed them entry to the Telesterion, the Hall of Completion.⁴⁶

Inside Demeter's temple, fragrant with incense, there were things said (*logomena*), things enacted (*dromena*), and things seen (*deiknymena*).⁴⁷ Probably the Homeric

Hymn to Demeter (or a similar hymn) was chanted by the Priestess of Demeter and the Hierophant, who was said to have a most sweet voice.⁴⁸ The priestesses and priests, along with initiates, reenacted portions of the sacred drama of the Mother and Daughter.⁴⁹ A communion drink called *kykeon*, made of boiled barley water and mint, was shared.⁵⁰ A brass gong sounded.⁵¹ A great fire blazed forth inside the temple.⁵² The highest stage of initiation—the *epopteia*, a vision, a special state of seeing—was received.⁵³

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* from the Archaic Age (ca. 700-600 BCE) is our primary source for the *mythos* which related the sacred drama of the Mother and Daughter's separation and reunion. It begins with the abduction of Demeter's Daughter by Hades, according to the plan of Zeus.

Lord Hades, with his deathless
horses... seized her,
Unwilling, lamenting, screaming,
calling for help from Her
Father!

...

The peaks of the mountains
echoed and the depths of the
oceans rang
With the immortal voice of the
Daughter – and Her Holy
Mother heard her!



This image shows a detail of a statue by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, made in 1622, that is the Roman version of the Greek myth of Hades abducting Persephone.

...
 Anguish more bitter and cruel
 now struck the great heart of
 Demeter,
 Her rage against Zeus erupted,
 against the storm-clouded Son
 of Kronos.
 She abandoned the assembly of
 Gods and heights of Mount
 Olympos
 To live in human cities and fields,
 hiding her beauty for a long
 time.⁵⁴

When Demeter, desolate over the loss
 of her Daughter, withdrew her fertility
 from the Earth, humans were faced with
 famine. Zeus, having lost the gift offerings
 from humans, suffered the diminishment
 of half his powers.

According to the myth, after Demeter
 came to Eleusis, she was invited to the
 home of Keleus and Metaneira, where
 she was asked to nurse their new son,
 Demophoon. The following key passage
 from the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* can
 be read as indicating ritual actions which
 Demeter taught by her own example.

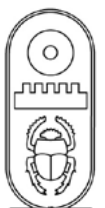
And Demeter, Bestower of
 Seasons and Bright Gifts,
 would not sit down on
 The glistening chair, but waited
 unwilling, her beautiful eyes
 downcast,
 ‘til thoughtful Iambe brought Her
 a low bench and threw a silvery
 fleece over it.
 Sitting down, Demeter drew Her
 veil across Her lovely face with
 Her hand,
 And stayed there on the bench,
 grieving silently, not speaking
 to anyone
 By a single word or gesture,
 unsmiling, tasting neither food
 nor drink.

She sat longing, consumed by
 desire for Her finely adorned
 Daughter,
 Until thoughtful and wise Iambe
 joked with the holy Lady,
 With bawdy stories making Her
 smile, and laugh, and have a
 gracious heart.
 And ever after, Iambe’s ribald
 humor brought delight to the
 Goddess’s rites.
 Metaneira brought Her honey-
 sweet wine, but the Divine
 Lady refused it,
 For it does not accord with sacred
 custom to drink such wine at
 this time.
 Demeter asked to be given instead,
 barley and water freshly boiled,
 Mixed with soft pennyroyal—a
 mintsweetened brew to end
 Her fast.
 Metaneira made the *kykeon* as
 asked, she gave it to the Lady
 to drink,
 And the Great Goddess Deo
 [Demeter] received it in
 affirmation of Her rites.⁵⁵

Reading this passage, we can also
 imagine the initiate sitting in the dark



*Demeter and Metanira are seen here in a detail on
 pottery dating ca. 340 BCE, currently in the Altes
 Museum, Berlin.*



temple at Eleusis at the beginning of the Nights of the Mysteries, veiled, fasting, silent, identifying with Demeter in her grief and anger, missing her lost child, the loss of love and happiness, of life itself.

After wise Iambe (Baubo) came to jest with the Goddess, and restored her to laughter and her generous nature, Demeter, her heart open again, agrees to care for the newborn son of Keleus and Metaneira. Probably the ceremony of the adoption of the “hearthchild” occurred at this point in the rite.⁵⁶ Perhaps it was then that initiates received the special potion, the *kykeon*, of boiled barley water, sweetened with pennyroyal mint – tasting like mother’s milk.⁵⁷ Perhaps now, each initiate was crowned with a chaplet of flowers and ribbons in confirmation of Demeter’s adoption of each one of them.

Finally, in order to regain the offerings of humans, Zeus ordered the return of Demeter’s Daughter Persephone to her. The high point of the ritual was the joyful reunion of the Mother and Daughter, following the Daughter’s sojourn and suffering in the Underworld. Persephone’s return from the realm of the dead symbolized the rebirth of all life. Since initiates identified with the Two Goddesses, they too would experience the return of the suffering soul to its loving source.

The Homeric poet writes of the reunion of the Mother and Daughter with these words:

Then all day long, Their hearts in communion, in this blessed presence,
Embracing and full of love, finally relinquishing sorrow,
Happy at long last together, held close in each other’s arms,
Each receives joy from the other, each gives joy in return!
Hekate comes near to embrace, with great love, Holy Deo’s Daughter.
Now to Her, this elder Queen will become priestess and devoted companion.⁵⁸

Demeter and Persephone reunited were then joined by the loving and devoted Grandmother, Hekate. This love among Mother, Daughter, and Grandmother has rarely been given its full place in our own mythic memories, our literature, or religious rites in the West.

Demeter then returned her fruitfulness to the world, and she went to the kings and princes of Eleusis and “revealed her rites for all.”⁵⁹ In the fourth century BCE, the Athenian orator and initiate Isokrates wrote: “Demeter bestowed on us two gifts, the greatest gifts of all: first, the fruits of the earth, thanks to which we have ceased to live the life of

beasts; and second, the mysteries; and they who are initiated thereto have brighter hopes both for the end of their life and for all eternity.”⁶⁰

Demeter’s agricultural rites included the laws or *thesmoi* by which crops



The Return of Persephone,
Frederic Leighton, 1891.

were successfully cultivated. Demeter's bestowing the gift of grain to humanity was depicted in a great marble relief which must have stood inside the Telesterion temple, of Demeter placing a stalk of ripe wheat into the hand of young Triptolemos, a prince of Eleusis, the hero of the Goddess who spread her gift to the known world.

Two important ritual elements not mentioned in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* were a Sacred Marriage and the Birth of a Holy Son. These elements may have been added at a later point, perhaps during the early Christian era. However, these two sacred events would have been in keeping with the rites of the Mother-Daughter Goddesses in Greece, in ancient Crete, and elsewhere, which were enacted to magically induce the procreation of the crops and the Earth. Perhaps there was a *Hieros Gamos* (Sacred Marriage) of Demeter, embodied by her Priestess, and the Hierophant, inside the Anaktoron, the stone-enclosed shrine inside the temple, to invoke the fertility of all life. According to Homer, there was a Sacred Union of Demeter and the hero/god Iason in Crete: "So too fair-haired Demeter once in the spring did yield/ To love, and with Iason, lay in a newploughed field."⁶¹

Perhaps this was when the great fire burned so brilliantly in the temple, atop the Anaktoron. Perhaps sometime after this, the birth of a Holy Son was announced. The Christian

commentator Hippolytus (third century CE) wrote that the Hierophant proclaimed, "Potnia [the Great Goddess] gave birth to a sacred boy. Brimo, Brimos!"⁶²

As initiates moved through a death-like experience to rebirth, they received a special vision. In the fifth century BCE, the Greek lyric poet Pindar wrote of this experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries and those initiated who pass on to the Elysian Fields:

...near them blossoms a flower of perfect joy.

Perfumes always hover above ...

From the frankincense strewn in the deep-shining fire of the gods' altars.⁶³

Happy is he...having seen these rites...;

for he knows the end of life and he knows its god-sent beginning.⁶⁴

In the fourth century BCE, Plato alluded to the culmination of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the *Symposium*, where one received a vision into the "vast sea of beauty"⁶⁵ all around. Plato also alluded to the Eleusinian Mysteries in the *Phaedrus*:

But at that former time they saw beauty shining in brightness, when, with...a blessed company...they saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of Mysteries, which we celebrated in a state of perfection, when we were

without experience of the evils which awaited us in the time to come, being



This marble votive relief was found in Eleusis and is dated ca. 440 BCE.

It depicts the Eleusinian deities of Demeter, at left, and Persephone, at right, offering wheat and blessings to Triptolemos, the son of the Eleusinian king. Image via the National Archaeological Museum Greece.





Demeter and Kore (Persephone) are seen here in a marble relief in the Archaeological Museum of Eleusis Museum, dated ca. 500 BCE.

permitted as initiates to the sight of perfect and simple... and calm and happy apparitions, which we saw in the pure light.... Beauty... shone in brilliance among those visions.⁶⁶

After the mysterious nighttime, daytime, and second nighttime within Demeter's Temple, celebrants probably emerged from the Temple at dawn and then walked to Demeter's fertile grain fields of the Rharian Plain, to invoke the rebirth of the crops and nature, reciting the ritual formula that invoked the fertility of Sky and Earth: "*Hye! Rain! Pour down! Kye! Conceive! Give birth!*"⁶⁷

What was the effect of these Mysteries? In the *Phaedo*, Plato (like Pindar a century earlier) indicated the shared belief that those who were initiated would experience a good life after death. "Those persons to whom we owe the institution of the mystery-rites are not to be despised,

inasmuch as they have in fact long ago hinted at the truth by declaring that all such as arrive in Hades...purified and initiated shall dwell with Deities."⁶⁸

Cicero, the first century BCE Roman political leader and author (initiated at Eleusis while a young man of seventeen studying philosophy in Athens) also indicated that a shared belief in a better life on Earth and hope for an afterlife was imparted to him during his initiation.

Among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which... Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than... the Mysteries.⁶⁹

We have been given a reason not only to live in joy, but also to die with better hope.⁷⁰

The Greek philosopher and public official Themistios, a pagan and probable initiate of Demeter's Mysteries during the fourth century CE, wrote an essay "On the Soul" which compared the experience of the soul at the moment of death to the experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries:

The soul [at death] has the same experience as those who are being initiated into great Mysteries... at first one wanders and wearily hurries to and fro, and journeys with suspicion through the dark as one uninitiated: then come all the terrors before the final initiation, shuddering, trembling, sweating, amazement: then one is received into pure regions and meadows, with voices and dances and the majesty of holy sounds and shapes: among these he who has fulfilled initiation wanders free, and released and bearing his crown joins in the divine communion, and consorts with pure and holy people.⁷¹

Day Nine: *Plemochoi*, Libations, and *Epistrophe*, Return

Day Nine was called both *Plemochoi*, Pourings of Plenty, and *Epistrophe*, Return. This day was a time for offering libations (to the deities? to the ancestors?), and it began the transition back to one's own home, family, community, and work—to the rest of one's life, with a new way of seeing.

Special ritual vessels called *plemochoi* were used for pouring libations.⁷² Perhaps these were libations to the dead, libations for the ancestors. The Athenians called those who had died, *Demetrioï*, the People of Demeter.⁷³ For me, this is a time to remember the beloved dead, to pour libations to the memory of deceased family and friends. I revisit memories and feelings both positive and negative, recalling our relatedness, our truths, and love.

Epistrophe implies re-crossing the boundary between the liminal realm of sacred ritual to return to the more ordinary experiences of daily life. I also find this a good time to reflect upon what inside me has died and been left to the past; what new life has found rebirth inside; and on what the future can be, what will be my life's calling, how this can be brought more into harmony with divine purpose, more akin to the Two Goddesses and to the miraculous divinity of life. I ponder what it means to embody the teachings of the Mysteries – *Gnoothi sauton!* “Know Thyself!” and *Meden agan!* “Nothing in Excess!”⁷⁴

In the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, a person could experience the renewal of his or her humanity and also the renewal of their connection to divinity, nature, community, and the cosmos. As the rites concluded, the initiates returned home with a new



A plemochoe with a lid dated to the late sixth century BCE, currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were designed with a curved lip to prevent spilling.

vision of life, blessed by the mysterious gifts of beauty and love.

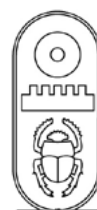
ENDNOTES

¹ Douris of Samos, cited by the Scholiast on Aristophanes *Ploutos*, line 1031; see also Athenaios, VI 253D; Hippolytus, *Philosophoumena* V.8; Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (London: Merlin Press, [1903, 1907 2nd ed., 1962] 1980.), 559; George Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 240.

² Zosimos, *Historia Nova* IV.3.3, ed. Ludwig Mendelssohn (Leipzig, 1887); see Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1967] 1977), 11-12.

³ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913), 50.

⁴ Franciszek Sokolowski, *Lois Sacrées des Cités Grecques: Supplement* (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1962) 13-18, inscription # 3; see Kevin Clinton, *The Sacred Officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Association, 1974), 12; Margaret Miles, *The Athenian Agora: The City Eleusinion*, vol. XXXI (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1998), 51; Helene P. Foley, ed. *The Homeric “Hymn to Demeter:” Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive*



Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66.

⁵ Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 113.

⁶ Herodotus, *History* 8.65, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, in *Herodotus: The Histories* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954); see Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 31.

⁷ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* (*Nichomachean Ethics*), 3.1111a 10-11, trans. W.D. Ross, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: The Modern Library, 1947), 351.

⁸ Isocrates, *Panegyrikos* 4, 157-158, trans. G. Norlin, in *Isocrates*, George Norlin and Larue Van Hook, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1928] 1980).

⁹ Diodorus V, 77, 3; see Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 24. I also use the Greek spelling for Crete (*Krete*).

¹⁰ Mara Lynn Keller, "The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality and Rebirth," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 27-54.

¹¹ Isokrates, *Panegyricus* IV.157-158; Theon of Smyrna, *Expositio rerum mathematicarum ad legendum Platonem utilium*, 14.23. Recension by E. Hiller (Leipzig, 1904); see also Lewis R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, vol. III (Wayne, NJ: Caratzas Brothers, [1906] 1977), 344-345.

¹² *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* 3 704E; see Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 23.

¹³ Plutarch *Lives: Phocion*, xxviii.2-4; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* II2 1078; *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum* III.5, see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 151 and note. 2; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 245, 246; Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 14, 69; H.W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 59; John Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York: Hacker, 1980), 198.

¹⁴ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece, Central Greece*, vol.1, I.37.2, trans. Peter Levi (London: Penguin Books, [1971] 1978), 104; Philostratos, *Lives of the Sophists* II. 20; see Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 40.

¹⁵ *Sylloge* 4 vol. 2, no. 885, l.16; see Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 95; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 236 and note 113.

¹⁶ Hesychios, see under *Agyrmos*; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 247-248.

¹⁷ Isokrates, *Panegyricus* IV.157-158; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* 34.4; Theon of Smyrna, *Expositio*, 14.23; Origen, *Cels.*3.59; Libanios, *Decl.* 13.19,52; see Farnell, *Cults*, 344-345; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 247- 248; Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 46 and note 263, 78 and notes 12, 13; Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 286, note 13; Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, 67.

¹⁸ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* 34.4.

¹⁹ Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," lines 200-201; Ovid *Fasti* 4.535.

²⁰ Porphyry, *De Abstentia/ Abstinence from Animal Food*, IV.16.

²¹ Hesychios, see under *alade mystai*; *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum* IV No. 385d, line 20 p 103; *Sylloge*4 vol. 2, no. 540; Polyaeus *Stratagems* III.11; Plutarch *Lives, Phocion*, 6.3; see Harrison, *Prolegomena* ([1903, 1907 2nd edn., 1962] 1980), 152 and note 3; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 249 and note 122.

²² Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon*. A new edition revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1843] 1953), 528. *Elasis* is related to the English term "elastic."

²³ Euripides *Iphigenia in Tauris*, line 1193, in Euripides' *Three Plays: Alceste: Hippolytus: Iphigenia in Tauris*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, and New York: Penguin Books, [1953] 1980).

²⁴ See Jon D. Mikalson, *The Sacred and Civil Calendar of the Athenian Year* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

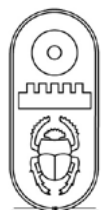
²⁵ Lysias VI, 4; *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum* IV, 2, no. 385d; *Sylloge*4 vol. II, no. 540; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 152-153; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 250 note 127.

²⁶ Porphyry, *Abstinence from Animal Food*, IV.16; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.14.3, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Litt. D., vols. III, IV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1935] 1975); Harrison, *Prolegomena* [1903, 1907 2nd edition, 1962] 1980), 147-149.

²⁷ *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* I2, 76 (= SIG 83 = LSCg #5); see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 67-68.

²⁸ Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 70; Ronald S. Stroud, *The Athenian Grain-Tax Law of 374/3 B.C.* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1998), 9.

- ²⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, II.26.8, Philostratus *Vita Apollonii*, IV, 18, see Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios* (1945), 316, #565; C.A. Meier, *Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy*, trans. Monica Curtis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 118.
- ³⁰ *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, xxv. 226, 10-12.
- ³¹ Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 56.1, 4;
- ³² Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.21.4.
- ³³ Solinus *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, Cp. 7, 10; Strabo *Geographica* VIII.6.15; see Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios*, #735, #738, 380, 381.
- ³⁴ Strabo, *Geographica* VIII. 6.15; see Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios*, 380.
- ³⁵ Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios*, #441, 254; Charitonidou, A[nge]liki. "Epidauros: The Sanctuary of Asclepius" in *Temples and Sanctuaries of Ancient Greece: A Companion Guide*, ed. Evi Melas. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 94, 89-99.
- ³⁶ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, I.36.3-38.1
- ³⁷ Dikaios quoted by Herodotus VIII.65; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 340-353, 395-396; 325-335, Scholium on Aristophanes' *Frogs*, 326. Plutarch *Phocis* 28.2, Plutarch *Kamil*. 191; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 254-255, 238; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 8-9; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 287 note 13.
- ³⁸ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, I. 37.2; Plutarch *Alkibiades* XXXIV.4; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* II2 1078.29; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 252- 258; Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 102-113; Nanno Marinatos. *Art and Religion in Thera: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society* (Athens: D. & I. Mathioulakis, 1984), chaps. 4 and 5.
- ³⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.37.6, 7.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., I.38.1; Bekker *Anecdota* I, 373; see Paul Foucart, *Les Mysteres d'Eleusis* (Paris: Auguste Picard, Editeur, [1914] 1978), 337; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 256; Nanno Marinatos, *Minoan Religion: Ritual, Image, and Symbol* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 141.
- ⁴¹ Scholiast on Aristophanes *Plutus* 1014; see Allair Chandor Brumfield, *The Attic Festivals of Demeter and their Relation to the Agricultural Year* (New York, Arno Press, 1985), 195 note 16; Kerényi (1967), 65 note 6; Winifred Milius Lubell, *The Metamorphosis of Baubo: Myth of Women's Sexual Energy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), 33.
- ⁴² Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I. xxxviii.6, trans. Jones; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 72-73, 97-99.
- ⁴³ Aristophanes *Frogs*, lines 327-352, trans. Rogers; in Aristophanes, *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Bantam Books, 1962).
- ⁴⁴ *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* I 2nd ed. 76 line 35; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* II 2nd ed. lines 280, 284; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.38.7; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 68.
- ⁴⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I. xxxvii.6; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* I2 5; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 168-9; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 70.
- ⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus/Exhortations to the Greeks* II.18.
- ⁴⁷ Galen, *de Usu Partium* VII. 14 #469, emphasis in original; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 569 and note 2.
- ⁴⁸ Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonnus*, lines 1049-1053, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, in Sophocles, *Sophocles, I: Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene; *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald; *Antigone*, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff, Edward Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Philostratus, *Apollonius* IV, 18; *Lives of the Sophists*, ii, 20. The first Hierophant, Eumolpos, who came from Thrace, defended Eleusis from conquest by Athens during the Bronze Age. His name means "good song" or "good music."
- ⁴⁹ Clement, *Protreptikos*, II. 18.
- ⁵⁰ Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," lines 208-209, 211; Ovid, *Fasti* IV, 531-548.
- ⁵¹ Pindar – citation not given in Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 561; Apollodoros, *Fragment* 36; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 264 and note 170; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 288 note 29.
- ⁵² Apollodoros, 42.2 F 110; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 288, fn 20.
- ⁵³ Plato, *Symposium*, 210d, Plato, *Phaedrus* 250 B-D; Milan Papyrus no. 20.31, in *Papiri della R. Università di Milano* I, 177; Hippolytos, *Refutatio* V.8.39; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 305-310; in Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 84 and note 20, 94 and note 50.
- ⁵⁴ Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," 2.90-94, trans. Mara Lynn Keller, in Mara Lynn Keller,



“The Greater Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, Mother and Daughter Goddesses of Ancient Greece” (unpublished manuscript), 194.

⁵⁵ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” lines 193-211, trans. Keller, in Keller, “Greater Mysteries,” 200.

⁵⁶ See N.J. Richardson, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 231; Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, 50-51. Since the hearth-child was chosen for this occasion by Athens, this part of the rite was probably added after Athens gained hegemony over Eleusis, at some time during the seventh or sixth century BCE.

⁵⁷ This is how the *kykeon* tastes to me when I prepare it for reenacting the Mysteries.

⁵⁸ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” lines 434-440, trans. Keller, in Keller, “Greater Mysteries,” 218. See also *The Homeric Hymns: A Verse Translation* by Thelma Sargent (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1973] 1975), 13.

⁵⁹ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” 2.475-476, trans. Keller. See also Foley, *Homeric Hymn*: “...she revealed the conduct of her rites and taught her Mysteries.”

⁶⁰ Isocrates, *Panegyrikos* 4. 28, in Norlin, *Isokrates*.

⁶¹ Homer, *Odyssey* 5.125, trans. Harrison, in Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 564.

⁶² Hippolytus, *Refutation omnium haeresium/Refutation of All Heresies*, 5.8.40; Clement, *Protreptikos*; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 561, 563; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, appendix; Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult: The Iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Stockholm: Distributor Paul Åströms Förlag, 1992), 92.

⁶³ Pindar cited in Rodney Castledon, *Minoans: Life in Bronze Age Crete* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

⁶⁴ Pindar, *Fragments* 102 (Oxford); see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 285.

⁶⁵ Plato, *Symposium* 210D, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Plato, *Symposium* (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, [1948] 1977). Diotima taught Socrates about the lesser and greater mysteries of erotic and universal love (*Symposium* 207a-212a).

⁶⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250 B-D, trans. William S. Cobb in Plato, *The Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, trans. William S. Cobb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁶⁷ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.38.7; Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai/The Learned Banquet* XIII, 71, in *Ephemeris* 1885: 150; Hippolytos *Refutation of All Heresies*, V.7.34 Proklos, In *Timaios* 293 C. Kleidemos, fr. 27; (*Bulletin ee Correspondence Hellenique* 20, 1896: 79-80; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 161 and note 1; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 231, note 30, 270, notes 113-116, 186; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 141-142.

⁶⁸ Plato *Phaedo* 69 in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (New York: Bollingen Series LXXI, Pantheon Books, 1961); see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 266.

⁶⁹ Cicero, *De Res Publica de Legibus*, 2.14.36, trans. C.W. Keyes, (1928).

⁷⁰ Cicero, *The Laws*, 2.14.36, trans. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: Penguin Group, 1969); see Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 15; Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2001), 65.

⁷¹ Themistios fragment 168 (= Stobaeus *Anthologium* 4.52.49), trans. Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 91- 92; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 264-265, note 171; Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, 70. Themistios' essay was preserved by the anthologer Stobaios in the fifth century CE.

⁷² Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, translated in C. B. Gulick, *The Deipnosophists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927-41. 7 vols.) vol. 1933: 211-213); see Miles, *Athenian Agora*, 95.

⁷³ Plutarch, *De facie in orbe Lunae*, 28; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 267, 599.

⁷⁴ Plato, *Protagoras* 343A, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Hamilton and Cairns; Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, X.24.1.

VESTALS

Christina d'Arcy, SRC

Colombes are girls and young women in the Rosicrucian Tradition, between ten and eighteen years of age, who serve in our Lodge and Chapter Temples. Women who serve when they are older are called Vestals.

The positions of Colombe and Vestal are based on the role that existed in ancient Rome in the Temples of Vesta. These girls and women were the caretakers of the hearth where the divine flame lived.

Vesta was a goddess in Roman mythology. She came from the Greek goddess, Hestia, who had a similar role. In the earliest times, Vesta wasn't shown as a woman. She was simply depicted as a flame. She was the flame. The vestals took care of the hearth – the gateway between worlds. This was the place where the divine and our world merged.

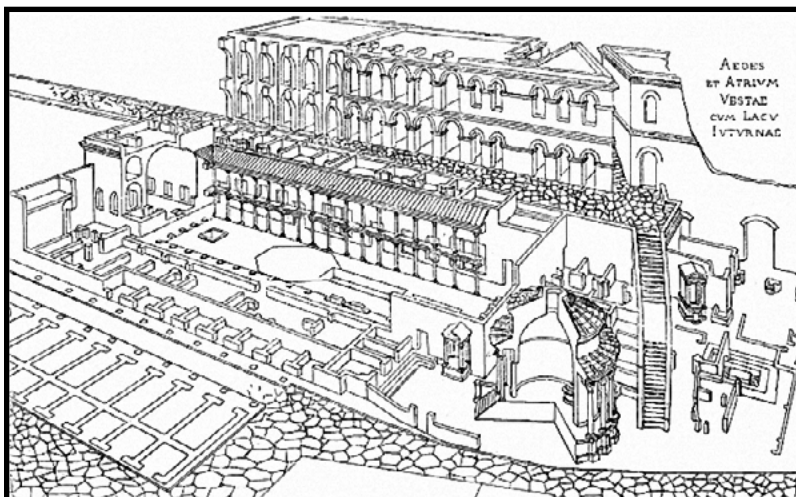
Vestals, who had an important role in Roman spiritual life for hundreds of years, served for thirty years. Once they committed, they had to serve the entire thirty years. The first ten years they participated in training. The next ten years they served in the temple. In the last ten years they trained others who succeeded them.

The vestals were the most revered women in ancient Rome. During this period women had very few rights. Women were legally the property of their husbands and before that, of their fathers. Women were much like slaves. However, the vestals had extraordinary rights, along with their duties.

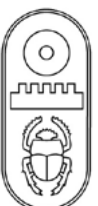
Only six vestals served at one time. As some were finishing up their thirty-year term, others were just beginning. Today, in the Forum in Rome, the Temple of Vesta has been partially reconstructed. It's circular, which is uncommon. Roman temples were usually rectangular. The circle is often associated with the Divine Feminine and eternal life.

Just above the Temple of Vesta in Rome was the House of the Vestals. This was a fifty-room building where the Vestals lived, along with those who assisted them.

These girls and women had an extraordinary opportunity, but, more than that, they had an extraordinary duty. It was believed that the existence of Rome depended on the eternal flame, which they tended, always burning. They were responsible for keeping the hearth, the eternal flame, alive.



The House of the Vestals in the Roman Forum, above the Atrium of the Vestals and the Temple of Vesta (the circular building on the right).





A hearth in an Ainu house.

If we imagine the time when early nomadic people may have first settled in a cave or a hut, the hearth, having a fire within their home, would mean everything to them. They couldn't turn on a heater or a stove like we do today. It meant life to them. It brought light and warmth into their homes. This was the beginning of the hearth, of having a place of fire in the earliest homes, often when it was very challenging to start a fire.

This developed as communities grew. There would be a central hearth. If you joined that community, you would get the fire for your hearth from that central hearth and bring it to your home. This connected you with your community. Eventually this became a way to connect with your republic or empire. Again, Rome depended on this eternal flame to be ever-burning.

At the 2015 AMORC World Convention, Frater Atsushi Honjo, Page 38

Grand Master of the Japanese Grand Lodge, presented [a fascinating program on the Ainu indigenous people of Japan](#). Their ancestors were originally part of the Cave Bear clan. In their traditional homes today, there is a big square hearth in the center, with an eternal flame. This is the place where the spirit beings enter our world. When someone in their family goes through transition, it's believed that their soul goes through this gateway to the other world, and they believe that they can communicate with their ancestors through this hearth.

The Ainu goddess of the hearth was named Kamui Fuchi, which means Rising Fire Sparks Woman.

She is the goddess who is the caretaker of the sacred flame. She is the keeper of the world between humans and spiritual beings.

Often the hearth is associated with the threshold. Perhaps you've heard of

the tradition of a groom who picks up the bride and carries her across the threshold into their new home. Originally, this was to invoke the blessings of the divine fire that existed within the hearth or the threshold.

There are other traditions that tell the story of a goddess of the hearth or fire itself, such as the myth of Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, in ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks believed that when humans died, they did not have a complete soul. The deities lived forever but humans were more like phantoms in the underworld. One version of the myth says that Persephone was abducted to the underworld by Hades, the god of the underworld, against her will. Another version says that Persephone went to the underworld on her own, out of compassion, like a bodhisattva, to help the people there, so they wouldn't be so afraid.

When Persephone disappeared into the underworld, her mother, Demeter, didn't know where she was. Demeter searched all over Earth, but she couldn't find her beloved daughter. In despair she went to Eleusis, twelve miles from Athens, disguised as an old woman, not like the goddess that she was. The three daughters of the king of Eleusis saw Demeter and felt compassion for her and invited her into their home. They convinced their mother, the queen of Eleusis, that it would be a good idea for this woman to take care of their little brother.

Unbeknownst to them, in gratitude, every night Demeter covered this boy with ambrosia, the food of the deities and placed him in a fire, in order to make him immortal. She was protecting him with the ambrosia as she put him in contact with the divine flame.

One night the queen saw the baby in the fire and screamed. Demeter took the baby out of the fire and handed him to the

queen, saying, "Witless are you mortals. You don't know the difference between good and bad!" The boy remained mortal.

Something similar happened to Achilles. A goddess covered him with ambrosia, but the process was interrupted and she missed one part of his body that remained vulnerable forever – his heel. He would have been immortal forever, but the process wasn't completed.

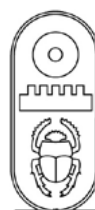
The ancient Egyptian goddess,

Isis, did something similar. She covered a child with nectar (the ancient Egyptians' version of ambrosia) to make this human immortal and she placed the child in the sacred flame. Humans can't stand the sacred flame directly – the ambrosia or the nectar protects us so that we can experience the divine energy directly.

Alchemy uses fire in a similar way as a primary agent of transformation. In alchemy, the sacred flame burns away the dross and reveals the hidden essences.



An ancient statue of a Vestal in the Roman Forum. Photo from the Rosicrucian archives.





A Shakti statue.

In Hinduism, the most powerful goddess of all is Shakti. She is radiance – the light of creation, the Hindu mother goddess. The word that perfectly describes Shakti is POWER. She is the power of creation, beyond the physical, and the universal source of energy and creativity.

In Kabbalah, the esoteric teachings of Judaism, the word shekinah means “dwell” and refers to the divine presence dwelling in our midst. We often refer to the altar that is in the center of a Rosicrucian Lodge or Chapter temple as the shekinah, however it is actually not the altar or the three candles on it. It is the receptive space just above the candles. The Jewish tradition has many different names for the Divine. Most of them are masculine. Shekinah is a feminine name for the Divine and it is this receptive holding place just above the candles. It is where the divine dwells, where the sacred flame exists among us.

People in the Zoroastrian tradition pray towards a flame. They believe that fire represents the light of the Divine. They also believe that there is a spiritual flame within us which is fed through our pure acts and good thoughts.

This is similar to the training for our Colombes, our vestals, – How do you

prepare to be the caretaker of the hearth where the sacred flame lives? How do you approach that place?

The Doric stand in our Lodge and Chapter temples is our hearth. It is a flame in the East of the Temple. The Colombe sits next to it during our rituals and tends it.

At the beginning of every convocation, the Colombe takes the light from this hearth and lights the three candles on the shekinah in the center of the temple. This activates the shekinah – that Divine Feminine energy in our midst. Again, the word shekinah means “dwell” and it is this divine presence dwelling in our midst.

Some Colombes prepare for their important role by prescribing a character for themselves before they approach the hearth, when they enter the temple. They enter in reverence. They are very particular about what thoughts they allow into their minds and are very careful with their words and actions.

In one of our initiations we learn that the Colombe represents our conscience. This reminds us of how we can act when we are in the presence of a divine flame, which, of course, is ever-burning within us.

Now let's practice a meditation together.

Please sit comfortably. Take three deep breaths, becoming more relaxed with each exhalation.

Imagine that you are in a Rosicrucian temple.

See the Colombe rise from her seat and light her candle from the flame on the Doric stand, which is next to her.

Visualize her walking reverently toward the altar in the center of the temple.

She lights the three candles on the altar, activating the energy of the Shekinah, just above them.

The Divine Presence dwells in our midst.

Just as the shekinah is at the heart of the temple, attune the energy of your heart with the shekinah. Connect your heart with the light in this temple.

Feel your heart center vibrating with this energy—see a yellow radiance extending from your heart center throughout your entire being.

Your heart, your being, is gently enfolded in hands above the candles on the altar.

You exist in the shekinah.

You exist in this place where the Divine Feminine dwells.

Now let us intone the vowel sound EH seven times, feeling this heart center growing stronger, more radiant, and extending throughout your entire being.

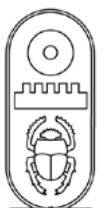
The flame dwells within your heart.

So Mote It Be!

May we ever be aware of the sacred flame with which we are entrusted.



Shekinah in the Grand Temple at Rosicrucian Park.



MARY, GREAT WOMAN INITIATE

Hélène Bernard, SRC

This article is a chapter from the Rosicrucian book entitled Great Women Initiates by Hélène Bernard, SRC.

Download the book here: www.rosicrucian.org/rosicrucian-books-great-women-initiates.



Virgin and Child (1663) by Elisabetta Sirani. National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Anne, the wife of Joachim, the High Priest of the Essene Temple of Helios in Jerusalem, was expecting a child.

“If, as foretold by the magi, a daughter is born to us, we shall consecrate her to the holy sanctuary....”

The Sun rose in the sign of Libra, and Anne gave birth to a little girl, whom she named Mary. As early as six months old, Mary was introduced to the dignitaries of the high temple to have her previous incarnation revealed. Seated in the sanctuary facing the East, Mary looked at her mother standing by the vestal fire and listened to her renewing her promise to make a “Colombe” of her child in this holy place. At home, Anne set up a small Sanctum where Mary rested, shielded from the impure and the vulgar, under only her surveillance or that of the temple virgins.

The name of Mary was officially given to her on her first birthday, under a shower of rose petals, while her mother and the high dignitaries of the great Essene Brotherhood, the representatives of the twelve temples of the twelve kingdoms, sang a hymn of joy.

At the age of three, Mary, accompanied by Anne and the vestals’ radiant torches, proceeded once again to the threshold of the sacred Sanctum where she was greeted by the officers of Helios. A heavenly chant rose, and, by the light of the symbolic fire, Mary knelt before the “Shekinah.”

Years passed, and Mary reached her thirteenth birthday. It was now time for her to fulfill her parents’ wish, which was also hers. Mary became a sacred Colombe in the great temple of Helios. In keeping



This detail of a sixteenth-century painting by Catharina van Hemessen depicts Mary visiting Elizabeth.

with tradition, the new Colombe was placed under the care of a widower of the Essene community. His name was Joseph the Galilean, a carpenter by trade. Time passed; one day, the High Priest entrusted the weaving of part of a curtain for the temple to Mary. Chosen by fate, she wove purple and scarlet, while her lady companions were busy working on fabrics and silks of different colors. While she was weaving, a Master appeared to Mary and announced that the time had come for her to fulfill the prophecy of the magi:

“Thou shalt conceive through the word of the Divine.”

For many days, the master of the temple talked with Mary, and she decided to go to her cousin Elizabeth’s home. On a small hill, not far from Jerusalem, stood the house of Elizabeth and Zachariah. In this secluded spot, the couple waited in peace and silence for the coming of the prophet; then she returned to the intimacy of her family sanctuary where she rejoined Joseph, whose work had kept him away from home for a few weeks. Joseph’s anguish and remorse were great when he saw Mary’s condition. He believed he had failed his mission as a “guardian angel,” but a voice confirmed what Mary and the high officials of the community were trying to explain to him. In order to better protect this precious gift, Joseph and Mary preferred to leave. Feeling the great moment was near, they reached a cave-hospital in Bethlehem, one of the many shelters that the Essenes owned in various parts of Palestine. Protected by

heavy stone walls, Mary waited. Suddenly, a bright light pierced the darkness and illumined her whole being before slowly fading away.

“Thus was the Word born.”

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God [the Divine], and God [the Divine] was the word.

The word was in the beginning with God [the Divine].

Through it everything came about and without it not a thing came about.

What came to be in the word was life and the life was the light of the people and the light in the darkness shines and the darkness could not apprehend it.

There was a man sent from God [the Divine].

His name was Yohanan [John].

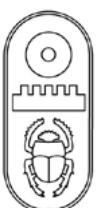
He came as a witness in testimony of the light so that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to testify about the light.

The light was the true light which illuminates every person who comes into the world.

He [Yeshua] was in the world and through him the world was born, and the world did not know him.

—John (1:1-10)



SEARCHING FOR THE SECRET OF THE BLACK VIRGIN

Jean Donohue, SRC

In 1978 I moved to Paris. My intention was to finish my Bachelor's Degree in Art History, focusing on iconography. My independent studies were to be in French Late Renaissance art. I shared an apartment with a friend from college. On the first part of the journey, I met up with one of my art history professors, two researchers, and a group of art history students from Geneva, Switzerland. Our brief was to visit and photograph potentially significant early Christian sites. We set out in three cars across the Alps toward Italy. My head spun from travel, cultural shock, and my failing French lessons. We stopped in Lake Como and stayed in a decaying chateau overlooking the lake. We spent one day hiking up an excruciating penitential trail to an early Christian church high above Milan. The next day was spent in the ancient center of Milan. We took notes and photographed a mural languishing in the dining hall of the fifteenth-century Convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie. The damaged and fading mural was Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Little did I know that in twenty-five years Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* would bring that painting into a global spiritual furor about the sacred feminine, and, that I was embarking on a life-long spiritual journey into the mysteries of the black virgin.

In addition to having the privilege of viewing Leonardo's masterpiece on the first leg of the trip, a memorable moment occurred in a field outside Milan. It was a warm, sunny day, and a welcome change from the cold damp of the Alps.



*Our Lady of Rocamadour.
Photo by F. Debaisieux.*

Our group was led by a crusty old farmer across a pasture when he suddenly stopped and pointed down. The group started disappearing into the ground. Stone steps led to an underground chamber hewn from the rock and soil. It was simple construction with two rooms joined by an arched doorway, and was surprisingly well lit with sunshine pouring in from hidden portals in the ceiling. The deepest room had a bowl-like receptacle carved into

the floor. After years of visiting churches, this was the first time in my life I felt the presence of something sacred. It was described as an early Christian site, but now with more informed hindsight it may have been a Cathar site or a secret underground sanctuary of the Knights Templar. The next day we moved on to Naples, in another month I was in Paris.

I stayed with a friend named Jean-Louis and his parents in their apartment below the Montmartre area. In late October, they invited me to go with them to the south of France. Along the way, we kept stopping at churches where his mother, Mme. Truel, would get out of the car and

go in. Eventually we pulled up alongside a very large cathedral in Lourdes. As she got out of the car one more time, I asked my friend what she was doing. He replied she did this pilgrimage every year, and that a lot of people in France, particularly women, visited these sites to pray to the Virgin Mary. I knew about that through my art history training, but had not seen anyone actually do it. He explained that the water at Lourdes was supposed to be special. Parked practically under the eaves of the great cathedral Our Lady of Lourdes, we didn't even bother to get out of the car. We dozed in the warm autumn breeze under the soft rattle of the leaves of the great sycamores that lined the street. She finally returned with a bottle of water.

Our final destination was a forest in Languedoc on the edge of the Grands Causses. As we drove through the landscape, I kept looking for signs of a town. Nothing broke the horizon, no church steeples or chimneys. Suddenly, we descended through a dark tunnel, which threatened to jettison us off into the sky like a rollercoaster. A sharp turn to the right and we skittered along a narrow lane cut out of limestone cliffs. We then entered the village of Rocamadour, an ancient town built on a sacred spring dedicated to Isis. It was in rubble and being rehabilitated; the main street was still dirt.

The main gate was an arch of stone, narrowly built, to allow for horses and wagons. The fortress and chateau loomed

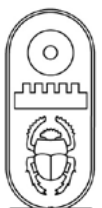
over the narrow main street and clung to a sheer rock face high above. My friend told me: "The town was built by a military order of monks." I wasn't Catholic; this did not mean anything to me. All I knew about religion was how to identify Christian saints in art. A rocky path to the sanctuary led to a steep, stone penitential stairway. Mme Truel was quite heavy. She slowly and painfully made her way up these stairs. We waited at the top beneath rows of sculptured disembodied heads of bearded men along the roofline. I was thinking to myself: what a strange place, why was it built in such solitude and secrecy, and why would she put herself through this?

Climbing yet another steep stairway, we entered a small, dark, rock-hewn room. The silence was thick and palpable. The space was more of a cave than a chapel. At the center of the room was a little icon, no more than twenty-four inches high. Our Lady of Rocamadour was a rough, burnt-looking, older female figure, painfully thin and her face distorted and strange. The child on her lap was weird, with a serious adult visage. Hers was a look of desolation and sadness, yet it was also emanating solace and power. She didn't look like anything I'd seen in art history books. Astounded, I wondered:

What is this? It was not the Virgin and Child I had studied in art history. Something shot through me at that moment; I too felt loss and grief. I connected with her on a fundamental level.



*Our Lady of Rocamadour.
Photo by F. Debaisieux.*



The whole experience left a mark, a door had opened. I didn't realize at the time but, I had been given a peek at an ancient mystery. Long denied by the Church, over seven hundred black virgin icons point to the existence of the sacred feminine, and their role in ancient initiatic ritual, and, a potentially explosive alternative history of Christianity and Western spirituality.

The memory of Our Lady of Rocamadour dwelled inside me for years. It was as though an alchemical spiritual change had occurred. At the same time, I was personally struggling with questions of spirituality and authenticity. My brothers, sister, and I grew up more or less unchurched. My mother was raised in a moderate Protestant church in Horse Cave, Kentucky, and my father was raised by Irish Jesuit priests in a boy's home outside New York City. To say the least, they did not agree on how we were to be raised in regard to religion. They were both intuitive. My mother saw auras and my father took dreams seriously.

Many of my generation rejected mainstream religions. To some, they were too contradictory, misogynistic, untrustworthy, and they regarded nature as something to control and exploit. We were asked to accept wild, Bible-based edicts as truth. Most importantly, most mainstream religions didn't offer practices that gave direct access to the Divine, something that I knew as a child was possible. I spent the next years secretly pursuing esoteric studies – Druidism, Merlin, the Grail legends, Anthroposophy, as well as Lakota

and Yoruba spirituality. All the while, Our Lady of Rocamadour endured in my heart. Questions were fermenting and bubbling to the surface: Why was she black? Who were these military monks? It wasn't until the late 1980s that I started to find some clues and direction as to why she was kept in that lonely room sheltered by the great cliffs of Rocamadour.

It seemed important to reconcile my interest in Egypt, its pyramids and temples, as well as Europe's indigenous traditions. Author Caitlin Matthews, in her book *The Western Way*, wrote: "The Knights Templar were the guardians of the Black Virgin." Reading this quotation took my breath away, as the memory of my encounter with the Black Virgin at Rocamadour rushed back to me. Were the Knights Templars the same monks that Jean-Louis had mentioned? Why would

they be interested in the Black Virgin? It's easy to take for granted the amount of literature that is currently available about these matters. In the 1970s and 1980s there was very little, and scholarly work on the topic was not being generated by academia. It was considered too fringe and it could lay a scholar open to ridicule.

I am not one of those lucky seekers who have dramatic revelatory moments when the Cosmic drops an important book on my head. I have to pay attention. While in London, I visited Cecil Court, where Watkins Books, my favorite esoteric bookseller, was located. Poking around thousands of books about all kinds of spiritual traditions. I spotted Our Lady of Rocamadour; her image was the cover art



*A Madonna statue above a doorway to a church in Marseille.
Photo by Jean Donohue.*

for Ean Begg's *The Cult of the Black Virgin*. At last!

Reading his book was like standing in a whirlwind, a crash course in prehistory, the pantheon, philosophy, Gnosticism, astrology, Christianity, and Jung. By 1985, Begg, a Jungian analyst and classics scholar, had documented, gathered oral histories, and published the locations of more than 500 Black Virgins. He'd found them in villages and towns throughout Europe, North Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas. He associated Mary Magdalene and Isis with the Black Virgin. He pointed out that the Church denied them and attributed

their blackness to candle wax, dirt, and soot. He used the term "Divine Feminine," sometimes called "Sacred Feminine," in a meaningful way. He introduced the idea that Yeshua and Mary Magdalene were married following ancient traditions of the Divine Consorts. I knew I didn't understand the images exhibited in Begg's book. My iconographic training didn't penetrate the hidden meaning of Medieval and Renaissance art. My search had suddenly become bigger.

The more I pulled the threads, the more there were, and they were leading me further and further. By 1998, the magnitude of the challenge was becoming clear. There were so many mysteries that I decided to make a film. What are the Black Virgin Mysteries? What purpose do they serve? If I had these questions, so did others.

I needed to cover a lot of ground to fill in my knowledge gaps in history and

prehistory. I became a forensic spiritual detective. I wanted to establish the provenience of the Black Virgins (the material, local and historical context of the icons), as well as the provenance (the chain of custody) of the traditions, teachings, and practices related to them. Over time there was a growing foundation of scholarly work that shed light on the history of Christianity based on the Nag Hammadi library (Gnostic Gospels), the history of the Knights Templar, and the Black Virgin, particularly by French researchers. I am grateful for all of them. Ean Begg's early and original approach resonated

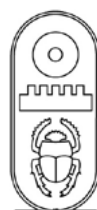
with me and was key for understanding the occult meaning of the Black Virgin.

I knew at the beginning that it was going to be a long road both as a seeker and a filmmaker. When I began writing and planning the film, it felt daunting and I knew it was going to be expensive. It was during this early period that I was first visited by the Divine Feminine. I was in my attic office writing and struggling with how to convince someone to help out. The subject matter was thought by many to be "too fringe

and too religious." Sitting at my desk, I felt a presence. In my mind's eye, I was looking over my left shoulder. A feminine figure bathed in a dark light was there. She didn't speak or gesture. She emanated peace and calm and made me feel that I was on the right track, perhaps *called*. This occurred a couple of times in the next few months, providing encouragement. Ever since I've called her Lady of the Dark Light and, if



Our Lady of Tindari in Sicily, Italy.



asked, she continues to assist at critical moments in my search.

In 2001, I realized that I needed to get back on the ground of southern France. It was the cold, grim winter after my mother had gone through transition. I decided to start at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the reputed place where Mary Magdalene, Mary Salome, Mary Lazarus, possibly Yeshua, and forty-two apostles had landed after fleeing Jerusalem via Alexandria. This first visit provided a valuable lesson in history and geography. I drove into the Camargue, a tidewater area famous for Black Sara, Roma gatherings, flamingos, and indigenous white horses. The mistral, a cold, damp wind that comes across the mountains from the north, was ever present. This tourist and pilgrimage destination, with its bullring, seafood restaurants, and sandy beaches, presented a desolate winter scene.

I found a small hotel at the water's edge called Hotel La Plage (Beach Hotel). I was the only guest. The quiet would offer the peace I needed from being on the road. As I came up the stairs to find my room, I noticed the ease of the incline and the worn steps. I arrived on the second floor and was startled to find a woman's face peering out from a stone wall. It was Minerva, the Roman virgin goddess of poetry and wisdom! I realized this was an ancient Roman building that would have stood here when the three Marys arrived. This could have been the very same hotel they stayed in. People traveling for commerce or even vacationing in the ancient world

had been an unfamiliar concept for me at that point in time. In fact, the Romans were very fond of traveling for recreation and are documented to have had popular vacation spots in Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia. The paradisiacal weather of Southern Gaul made it a preferred place for wealthy Romans and Jews alike. The remains of vineyards, sumptuous houses, and elaborate baths attest to it. The family of Herod Antipas even had a great estate up in the hills above Avignon.

The Camargue region had, for millennia, been part of the trade routes of the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans. They also moved inland and settled in the fertile valleys throughout Gaul. They brought and kept a great diversity of spiritual practices, including that of the cults of Isis, Cybele, and Artemis. They mingled with the local indigenous traditions of the Druids,

and even older Neolithic venerations of the Great Goddess. I thought, "Of course, why wouldn't Yeshua and Mary Magdalene choose Occitanie as their refuge?" As I stood on the sandy beach facing Africa, I could see the tired, sunburnt Essene family easily disembarking from their boat into the shallow waters of Ra, now called Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. I should not have been surprised that there was an ancient hotel in this tiny beach town.

The question still remained, what did the Black Virgin icons have to do with Isis and Mary Magdalene? While studying maps and driving the country roads of France I realized I could trace Mary Magdalene's



*A Black Virgin above a doorway in Les Baux-de-Provence, France.
Photo by Jean Donohue.*



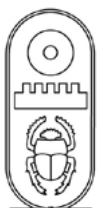
Our Lady of the Pillar (1508) in Chartres Cathedral, France. Photo via Flickr user Walwyn.

ministry by cross-referencing pilgrimage routes with Black Virgin sites listed in Ean Begg's gazetteer, and with the location of sacred springs and caves dedicated to Isis. I believe she used the pathways between some of these same places which became early Christian or more likely Gnostic settlements. Sites like Sion-Vaudemont and Saint-Germain-des-Prés housed black statues of Isis, and Roman Emperor Julian reported seeing a sculpture of a blackened mother and child statue called the *Virgo Paritura* (the virgin who will give birth), which was venerated by Druids at the pre-Christian site at Chartres. For the seeker, Black Virgin icons are most often found in churches and cathedrals that include "Our Lady" (Notre Dame) in the title, referring to the Dark Lady of the Knights Templars. They are also found in Templar commanderies scattered throughout France. At some sites, like the hot springs of Rennes-les-Bains, Mary Magdalene's visit is still recounted by locals. This overlap of place and time indicates a continuity of beliefs and practices.

Visiting many Black Virgin icons, I learned they are not always black in color; they can be brown, beige, and even white. Some are difficult to differentiate from

the Church's preferred white Virgin Mary and Child. Since Black Virgins were often created during periods of suppression, myriad symbols and visual references were used to distinguish them, to communicate their message. But it was not enough for me to view the icons and study their iconography. I needed to know what she was pointing to. What did she want me to know? What are her secrets?

The Black Virgin stands at sites where adherents to the teachings of "Our Lady" and Mary Magdalene once gathered and perhaps still do. Sometimes called the "other church," "Church of Light," or the Cathar "Church of Love," they indicate the presence of Gnostic and initiatory teachings. Their Sacred Knowledge flowed from the Egyptian mystery schools, the Essenes, the ancient "Temples of Love," through the Greek mystery schools and the Isis cults that lingered alongside the Druids, to an amalgam of Gnostic sects. Worshippers of the Black Virgin believe the human soul fell from "paradise" into matter in the far past, and that human consciousness was split: the Divine Feminine is consciousness that is of Divine potential/Heaven, and the Divine Masculine is consciousness that is of the

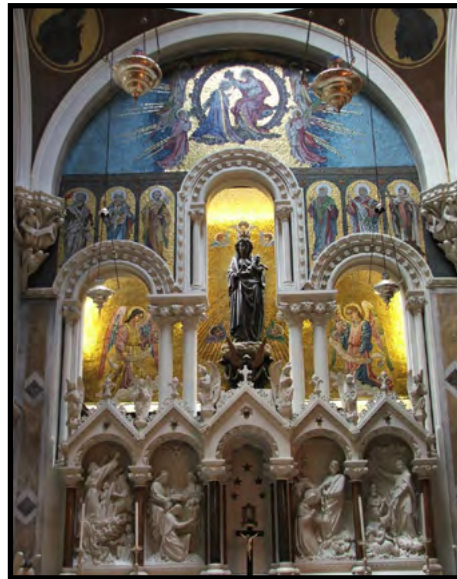


material existence/Earth. The Sacred Feminine seeks reunion with its earth-bound consort, the Divine Masculine; this is called Hieros Gamos, the divine marriage of these two potentials.

From deepest time, spiritual traditions included the Divine Consorts – Isis and Osiris, Shiva and Kali, Rosmerta and Wotan, Yeshua and Mary Magdalene. It is important not to get entangled with the idea of gender. Even though the Black Virgin is a female figure and references the Sacred Feminine, it refers to the energy of the Divine Source or Spirit. The Sacred Hermaphrodite is key to understanding the sacred union. Gnostic ritual and spiritual practices aim to attain the grace of the Sacred Feminine with the purpose of achieving liberation from the darkness of ignorance, to experience selflessness and immortality. A hermaphroditic figure found at an old Gnostic site had an inscription, “Love, you have made us one instead of two with higher virtue through wedlock.” This is what the Rosicrucians call Sacred Androgyny.

By the twelfth century, Occitanie was the light of Europe, a vibrant center of learning and science, philosophy and spiritual practices that were core to the evolution of human consciousness in the coming millennia. Many of the spiritual communities of Occitanie were anathema to the Church and were subjected to centuries of persecution and brutal suppression, driving them underground.

Despite the efforts of the Church, Gnostic and initiatory groups such as the alchemists, troubadours, Le Consistoire du Gai Savoir, L'Académie des Jeux floraux, Sufis, Kabbalists, Freemasons, and the Rosicrucian Order, as well as the Roma (Gypsies), have hidden, protected, and kept the Sacred Feminine mysteries at their heart and continue to perpetuate its traditions.



The shrine of Our Lady of Dublin, the representative of the Black Madonna of Ireland, in Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church in Dublin, Ireland.

My encounters with the Sacred Feminine mark a path illuminated by the dark light of the Black Virgins from France, Italy, Egypt, Spain, England, Ireland, Malta, Ethiopia, and Mexico. What I know is that there is a hidden underground stream flowing from an ancient fountainhead of Sacred Knowledge. The Sacred Feminine is real. It has been here, underneath the surface, percolating, giving signs, and pushing the

seekers along. The guardians of the Sacred Feminine did their work well. They hid just well enough in hopes that we would see the proverbial light piercing the veil. My encounter with the Black Virgin was spiritually alchemical in effect and called me onto a path to unlock her secrets, to find what happened to Western spirituality, and to discover my true spiritual roots and practice.

Jean Donohue recently retired as AMORC's Grand Councilor for Washington and Oregon. Her film, *The [Terrible] Secret of the Black Virgin*, is a documentary.

GRANDMOTHERS OF THE LIGHT

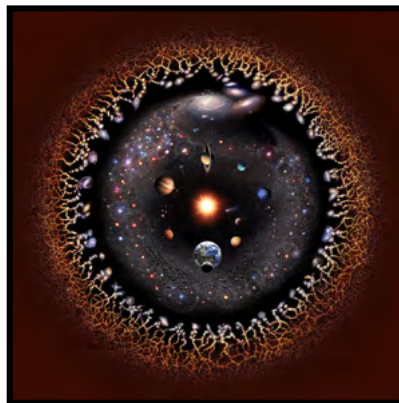
Paula Gunn Allen, PhD

*At a time when academia still denied the existence of Native American literature, Paula Gunn Allen (1939 - 2008) recognized its importance and dedicated her career to proving its merit. The daughter of a Lebanese-American father and a Laguna-Sioux-Scottish mother, Paula Gunn Allen was raised in New Mexico on the Laguna Pueblo where she was deeply influenced by matriarchal Pueblo culture. She offered that many Native tribes were “gynocentric” - with women making the most important decisions - while other tribes stressed a balance between male and female, rather than domination. This article is the Introduction to a section in her book *Grandmothers of the Light*, a collection of goddess stories from Native American civilization across North America. In it, she shares myths that have guided shamanesses and shamans toward an understanding of the sacred for centuries.*

Cosmology is the study of the ordered arrangement of the universe, and in an arcane sense this section is a cosmology. The cosmogony that unfolds is essentially laid out in the eight stories that compose this section, and they combine to provide a multifaceted picture of concepts the preceding stories introduced, knitting them to ritual as the mediating principle between human and supernatural. As we have seen, in the void there is energy, and it is an energy that is self-aware. It is thinking. Nor is it a singular phenomenon, but multiplicitous, for intelligence cannot arise from the absence of intelligence, nor can variety arise from uniformity. The singular can no more give rise to the many than the many can become the singular. However we look at it – the multiverse that surrounds us, there is no such thing as only, no such thing as one. That we think otherwise is testimony to the depth of our patriarchalization. Snowflakes, leaves, humans, plants, raindrops, stars, molecules, microscopic

entities all come in communities. The singular cannot in reality exist.

The void, or the Great Mystery (Great Mysteries would be more accurate), is not an object but a period; it consists of events.

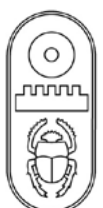


A logarithmic scale conception of the observable universe with the Solar System at the center, by artist Pablo Carlos Budassi.

The events that transpire have neither beginning nor end. They simply are always and everywhere. (Location or place is also event, verb, not noun, process not product.) The events of the void have names or intelligence-locations (processes) and action. All is mind – or perhaps it is more exact to say everything is intelligence-bearing. But that can't be said in English, a monotheistic

language structured in terms of hierarchy, individualism, objectification, and stopped motion. “Everything is intelligence” is ungrammatical, nonsense. Yet however ungrammatical the construct may be, it is accurate.

The essential nature of the cosmos is female intelligences, that is, goddesses. There are several rather than one,



indicating that multiplicity is a fundamental characteristic of all that is. The primacy of relationship is also expressed in the kinship of the creatrix intelligences, pointing to the basic organization of the multiverse or cosmos. As the multi-intelligences think in relationship contexts, ritual magic operates. Out of the particular mode of thinking – the primal, the cosmogynological, the ritual magic – all that are continue to exist enduringly, continuously. What changes or transformations occur are simply vast energy/intelligence fields doing what they do, doing it in concert, in harmony, and in significance.

The fundamental order of the multiverse thus is ritual, magical, transformative, and it is enduring because change is a basic characteristic of thinking. Further, relationship and thinking are basic characteristics of change. You might say that ritual magic is a three-way street, a three-legged process, a journey along a three-pronged road, and that three-part structure is eternal and infinite.

With the goddesses, the sacred twins or brothers are entities and expressions of this tripartite process, and they remind us that the masculine expression of multiversal energy/intelligence is movement of a dual, but not oppositional, nature. The duality

that the masculine (which is a special case or subset of the feminine) embodies is complementary in essence, though that complementarity sometimes takes a form that appears adversarial or polar. The most notable characteristic of masculine intelligence is its periodicity, especially when considered against a background of endurance which is feminine. The warrior sings: I die, but the earth continues forever. Beautiful Earth, you alone remain. Or the Anishinabeg claim: Woman is forever, eternal. Man comes from woman and to woman he returns.

Thus male energy is a certain kind of movement, as divine or mysterious in nature as female energy, but arising from it and returning to it. It is that kind of motion. Movement, motion, is all that is (all that are); matter is a special case of motion, and all motion is material because verbs are *names* at base. The Lakota say “God is moves.” They characterize the Great Mystery as Skan, Sky That Moves, Wind. White Buffalo Woman is She Who Sends and Calls Back the Winds. The Navajo put Wind into the tale of creation and Wind, (Nilch’i) who moves, is the intelligence-being of Changing Woman, who is herself of the Air Spirit People.



Native American symbol for wind.



Dignity of Earth & Sky, a statue in South Dakota honoring the Lakota and Dakota peoples.

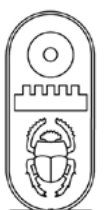
Yellow Woman is taken by Whirlwind Man to his mother's home where she grinds corn as is the duty of a bride, to make a gift of her skill to her groom's mother. Whirlwind takes her and so she is possessed of power; not that he gives her power, but that he recognizes her power and therefore takes her home. Yellow Woman is ritual magic, and the story, like its companion tale, explores some of the meanings of her identity, as well as that of her sisters and their four-way relationship as it pertains to the working of magic and the place of ritual in magical operations.

The Yellow Woman stories and the other stories in this section explore the significance of ritual magic as a female identity, and they do so in a sacred manner. They explore sacred thinking, demonstrating that to think in a sacred manner is to participate in the ritual that is the time or location of a magical event. The story of Yellow Woman and Whirlwind Man, like the stories of how Grandmother Spider brought the light, Older Sister and Younger Sister, and the rest included here, is a magical event – not only as told but simultaneously as enacted. Both, not either, are necessary if the exploration is to bear the fruit of intelligence, if its significance is to be adequately conveyed. The stories

in this section are all ritual-magic-stories (ritual AND magic AND stories). They are not stories about pretend beings such as populate children's literature, cartoons, and popular films. They are stories for pilgrims along the path, for those who are students of the woman's medicine way. When these stories are entered as a room is entered, as wilderness is entered, as the surf (and self) is entered, one moves into mythic space and becomes a voyager in the universe of power.

This section is concerned with the roles supernatural female intelligences play as mediators between the mortal and supernatural worlds. These goddesses and demigoddesses are agents of negotiation and as such inhabit the borderland between the purely supernatural and the purely mortal, two energy-modes that are connected at certain points along their respective spectra. When Yellow Woman mates with Sun Man, the twins result. It is fairly evident that this story is about planting. It is less evident that a connection between planting seeds in soil and planting seeds in Woman have analogous results: the bestowal of supernatural life that provides nourishment to the people.

The arcane implications of the story (of which my rendition is a fragment of



a long cycle) are clarified in the story that follows. Yellow Woman, who in the first story is an outcast who lives with her mother outside the community, is in this narrative one of four sisters. The energy of female intelligence takes on many guises, reminding us that identity is formed by context and is a function of ritual purpose rather than of self-will or individuation. As an abductee, captive of holy forces, Yellow Woman effects the ritual her sisters devise to find her. Her return is contingent on her familial connection, which is the intelligence that renders the ritual the story embodies potent.

Community imparts power to Grandmother Spider's magic in the next story – one in which she operates as a supernatural or immortal rather than as a goddess or creative principle; while in the story of Oiyó Kepi we see the creative power of a full-fledged medicine woman at work. In her hands, water is a sufficient curative because her powers are enormous. She can shake her moccasins and populate the terrain with a variety of creatures.

White Buffalo Woman is a priestess; she is *wakan*, that is, sacred, powerful. The magic she manifests is not as important as the power of the teaching she brings. Rather, magic underscores the teaching, contextualizing the nature of right relations between the people and the mysteries, enabling them to navigate the borderland path that runs along the boundaries of the mortal and immortal domains.

Another kind of ritual magic is addressed in the story of Older Sister and Younger Sister, despite its echoes of the stories of Yellow Woman and Whirlwind Man and Oiyó Kepi. Like the former, the abductions result in a gift from the immortals to the people, though the gaining and giving of the gift necessitates the transformation of the women into immortals and entails their final separation from their community.

Each of the stories speaks to the isolation of the sacred women from their human communities in one way or another, indicating that the pursuit of sacred power requires the sacrifice of belonging, the loss of the familiar, and the attendant loss of identity and place. In a number of regards, the stories and the rituals they embody tell us that sacrifice of deeply personal needs is required of all who walk the path of power. The stories of Oshkikwe and Matchikewis, which I wove together for the story that appears here, contain the poignancy of sacrifice but also much

of the humor and balance that accompany experiences of the sacred.

With Clear Sky and Fair Maiden, the poignancy of transformational operations, manipulations whereby beauty and sorrow combine, becomes the empowering agency of creative ritual magic. In this story the creative prowess of female intelligence becomes once more the theme, drawing this section to a close that mates it with the section preceding it.



White Buffalo Calf Woman, by Jay Bell
Redbird and Halina Stopyra. Image via
Dennis Jarvis/Flickr.

CLEMENCE ISAURE: THE ROSICRUCIAN GOLDEN ISIS

Grand Master Julie Scott, SRC

Isis, in one of her many manifestations, was present at the transmission of the Rose+Croix Tradition from the Rosicrucians of Toulouse to H. Spencer Lewis and the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, in August 1909. Grand Master Julie Scott traces the fascinating story of this Golden Isis from the Middle Ages to the beginnings of this phase of Rosicrucian work.



*Henri Martin. The Appearance of Clemence Isaure to the Troubadours (detail).
Reprinted with the permission of the Capitole, Toulouse, France.*

In 1909 a young H. Spencer Lewis stood before this painting, *The Appearance of Clemence Isaure (the Golden Isis) to the Troubadours*, contemplating its mystical meaning, when the Grand Master of the Rosicrucians of Toulouse presented himself and directed H. Spencer Lewis to the next step in his initiation into the Rosicrucian tradition, which eventually led to the founding of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC.

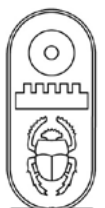
Why in this place, the Hall of the Illustrious in Toulouse's Capitole (city hall), and before this painting, did the Grand Master choose to present himself to the American mystic who would later re-establish the Rosicrucian tradition in America as the Ancient and Mystical Order

Rosae Crucis? The answer goes back to the ancient mystery traditions, perpetuated by our Order and so beautifully symbolized in this painting.

Who Was Clemence Isaure?

The name *Clemence* means clemency or mercy, and *Isaure* means Isis of gold, or Golden Isis. Several sources describe Clemence Isaure as an actual person, who lived in the Territory of Oc in the late 1400s and early 1500s, whose beauty and talent were rare and inspiring. Others say she was a fictional character created to perpetuate the feminine traditions of earlier times.

According to legend, following the death of her troubadour love, who praised her through his beautiful songs and whom



she adored, Clemence Isaure took a vow of chastity and silence. Before doing so, however, she established an endowment for the city of Toulouse to re-establish the poetry contests of the *Gai Savoir*, a poetry society established in 1323, through a new group called the *Jeux Floraux*.

Clemence Isaure symbolized noble action, beauty, and wisdom inspired through poetry. Above all, she represented the perpetuation of the ancient mysteries, especially those associated with the feminine and particularly with the goddess, Isis.

The Mysterious Territory of Oc

In the Middle Ages, the southern half of what is now France, parts of Spain, and Monaco were called Occitania or the Territory of Oc. Today this region is referred to as the Languedoc (the language of Oc) or L'Occitanie. The vibrant Occitan culture allowed equal rights for women and men, encouraged understanding and dialogue between all faiths, provided excellent education for its citizens, and was very peaceful and prosperous.

Drawing heavily on older mystical traditions, the first versions of Kabbalah emerged from this area in the early twelfth century. The Cathars, a sect of Christian mystics whose beliefs most likely originated from the traditions of Old Europe and Manichaeism (Persian Gnosticism), also lived in the Languedoc and other parts of Europe beginning in the eleventh century.

The kings of northern France (a separate country at the time) and the Roman Catholic Church wanted the wealth, land, and converts of the Languedoc, especially of the Cathars, so these two powerful forces plotted against the people of Oc, resulting in their persecution and the near extinction of the Occitan traditions, at least their public presence, in the 1200s. As many as 500,000 people of the Languedoc,

including Christians, Jews, and other mystics, may have been murdered during the twenty-year Albigensian Crusade and the century-long Inquisition that followed.

The troubadours, who sang in the language of Oc, found a veiled way to perpetuate the Occitan traditions and their source, the ancient mysteries, through poetic symbolism. While the troubadours appeared to be singing about the love of a man for a woman, they were really referring to the laws of spiritual love. They were expressing the bliss of union with the Divine and the peace that results from this communion. One of the symbols the troubadours used to represent the inner desire of the soul for this mystical union was the rose.



The Troubadour Singing to His Love (*detail*). *The Hall of the Illustrious in Toulouse's Capitole displays a series of three murals depicting a troubadour singing to his Love—as a young man, as a middle-aged man (as illustrated here), and as an elderly man. The woman, representing the eternal tradition, remains forever young in the series. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.*



The First Meeting of the Jeux Floraux, the Very Joyful Company of the Seven Troubadours, May 3, 1324, by Jean-Paul Laurens, 1912. Exhibited on the Grand Staircase leading up to the Hall of the Illustrious in the Capitole, Toulouse, France.

The Gai Savoir and Jeux Floraux

Following the intense persecution in the area, in 1323 seven individuals in Toulouse, known as the seven troubadours, founded a mystical society called the Gai Savoir, meaning “happy knowledge.” The exoteric mission of this society was to make the world a happier and better place through poetry. Though veiled, the esoteric meaning of their poetry was clear for those with eyes to see.

The seven troubadours circulated a letter to all the poets in the Languedoc, inviting them to present their poetry at a contest the following May (1324). The panel of seven judges chose the winners, who were awarded a violet (its color symbolic of the highest mystical degree), a marigold (representing the philosophical gold), and the wild rose.

The Gai Savoir operated as an Order, with a philosophy and rules that they called “the laws of love.” They gathered together the ancient mystical traditions that had been scattered over the centuries, preserved and discreetly perpetuated them.

During the Wars of Religion in France during the 1500s (a century of horrible wars between the French Catholics and Protestant Huguenots), the Gai Savoir became dormant. The group later reappeared in the form of the Jeux Floraux, with the allegorical discovery of a tomb, similar to the way in which Christian Rosenkreuz’s tomb was found and opened.

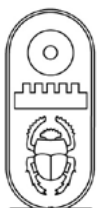
The tomb, which was discovered in Toulouse, was that of Clemence Isaure, the allegorical founder of the Jeux Floraux. Flowers were also found in this tomb, alluding to the floral prizes earlier awarded by the Gai Savoir. The basilica where the tomb is said to be located, called *La Dourade*, is on the site of the first Visigoth temple in Gaul, a previous temple to Minerva (Isis), and today is dedicated to “the black Madonna,” with a beautiful statue of her overlooking the main chapel.

The Rosicrucians Announce Their Presence in France

In 1623, following the publication of the three Rosicrucian manifestos in 1614, 1615, and 1616, the Rosicrucians announced their presence in France by plastering the walls of Paris with mysterious and intriguing posters.

We, the Deputies of the Higher College of the *Rose-Croix*, do make our stay, visibly and invisibly, in this city, by the grace of the Most High, to Whom turn the hearts of the Just....

He who takes it upon himself to see us merely out of curiosity will never make contact with us. But if his inclination seriously impels him to register in our fellowship, we, who are judges of intentions, will cause him to see the truth of our promises; to the extent that we shall not make known the place of our meeting in this city, since the thoughts attached to the real



desire of the seeker will lead us to him and him to us.

Following this and the influence of the Enlightenment, Napoleon and Egyptosophy, Freemasonry, Martinism, Theosophy, Magnetism, and other traditions, the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a flowering of Rosicrucian orders in France. These included the Rose-Croix of Toulouse (in the Languedoc) and the Rose+Croix of France.

Clemence Isaure – the Painting

From 1892 to 1897 under the direction of Joséphin Péladan (who had strong ties to the Jeux Floraux and the Rose-Croix of Toulouse), the Rose+Croix of France organized the Salons of the Rose-Croix in Paris. These salons, which hosted tens of thousands of guests each year, presented music and Rosicrucian ritual, as well as art. Well-known composer and Rosicrucian Erik Satie was named the musical director of the Order of the Rose+Croix in the early 1890s. Claude Debussy, Satie's friend and one of France's greatest composers, was also a Rosicrucian.

The Rosicrucian Salons exhibited the works of many painters of the Symbolist movement, including Henri Martin from Toulouse, whose paintings were exhibited in 1892. That same year Martin was commissioned to create a number of paintings for the Hall of the Illustrious in Toulouse's Capitole. He chose as his theme – the Jeux Floraux.

One of these paintings is *The Appearance of Clemence Isaure to the Troubadours*. In it, Clemence Isaure shows the seven troubadours the charter of the Jeux Floraux, which includes the rose and the cross. She is accompanied by three Muses and by the goddess Minerva, the Egyptian Isis.

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Poster for the Rosicrucian Salons, 1892.

H. Spencer Lewis and *The Appearance of Clemence Isaure to the Troubadours*

In 1908, twenty-four-year-old H. Spencer Lewis had a mystical experience in which he was directed to seek out the Rosicrucians in France. Not knowing exactly where to begin, he wrote to a Parisian bookseller who had recently sent him a catalog of mystical books, to ask if he might be able to help him in his quest. The bookseller suggested that H. Spencer Lewis come to Paris.

Following many synchronistic events, H. Spencer Lewis was able to travel to Paris a year and a half later. After meeting with the bookseller and passing many tests and trials, through many cities in France, H. Spencer Lewis was mysteriously handed a note directing him to go to the Hall of the Illustrious in the Capitole of Toulouse at



H. Spencer Lewis, 1915.

a particular time. He was to speak of this to no one.

There he silently stood on that day, before this painting, contemplating its mystical meaning. A man in the gallery made a sign (a Rosicrucian sign) that he had seen at other points on his journey.

H. Spencer Lewis said to him, "Pardon, Monsieur, but I believe I am addressing a gentleman who has some information for one who is seeking Light."

The man replied "Yes" in French, and then asked him why he chose to study this painting in particular. H. Spencer Lewis replied, "Because, Monsieur, it seems so beautiful, so wonderful, and expresses what I believe. I see in it a very mysterious meaning, a symbol of –"

Satisfied with this answer the man then handed H. Spencer Lewis a note with instructions on how to proceed. This man was the Grand Master of the Rose-Croix of Toulouse, who was probably Clovis Lassalle, a well-known photographer (of

historic buildings and archival documents) and mystic of Toulouse. Through the Rose-Croix of Toulouse, the Jeux Floraux, and the Archaeological Society of Midi, Grand Master Lassalle was associated with those who had directed H. Spencer Lewis on his initiatory journey, including the Parisian bookseller and those who would later initiate H. Spencer Lewis into the Rosicrucian tradition.

At midnight on August 12, 1909, H. Spencer Lewis received his mystical initiation into the Rosicrucian tradition, in a Rosicrucian Lodge in an ancient chateau outside of Toulouse. Here he also accepted the charter to re-establish the Rosicrucian tradition in America, thereby perpetuating the ancient mysteries that so significantly contributed to it, beautifully symbolized by the inspiring image of Clemence Isaure, the Rosicrucian Golden Isis.

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THE DINNER PARTY



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To see more, visit www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party.

The Dinner Party is a monumental work of art on display in the Brooklyn Museum. Judy Chicago led hundreds of collaborators, including a core group of twenty-five people, over a period of five years to create this masterpiece.

The Dinner Party is a massive ceremonial banquet table, arranged in the shape of an open triangle (a symbol of equality) with thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating an important woman in history. Imagine some of the most important women in history coming together at one table!

On the white floor below the table, the names of 999 other women are inscribed in gold.

The place settings for the thirty-nine Guests of Honor are arranged on three wings, each 48 feet long:

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- Early Christianity to the Reformation, depicting women who signify early expressions of the fight for equal rights;
- The American Revolution, Suffragism, and the movement toward women's increased individual creative expression, symbolized in the last place setting for Georgia O'Keefe.

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You are also encouraged to consider whom you would want to invite to this gathering of powerful women.

