

Roots & Bones No. 2

Early Roman Religion and Witchcraft

By Robin Le Fay

—Number 2 in a series of 4 articles about the roots of Witchcraft. This article originally appeared in *Lady Letter*, V4, no. 4, Ostara/Beltane 1997.

This page was downloaded from www.ladywoods.org, the website of the coven of Our Lady of the Woods. It may be used for personal and educational purposes with credit to the author.

Witchcraft, though primarily of Celto-Teutonic origin, also draws from aspects of Romano animism. Roman culture influenced both the Gallic people they conquered and the Germanic tribes who overran their empire in the 3rd through 5th centuries, C.E. In Italy, France, and Spain, Latin culture was adopted by the new rulers and continued in expression and development. Christianity became the dominant religion, replacing the high gods and goddesses of the former faiths, but it was not able to fill the everyday needs of the material world which the oldest animistic powers provided.

Hybrid practices persisted among the illiterate populace for centuries. Among these hybrid beliefs are the Benandante and the Society of the Good Game, both documented in Italy by inquisitors during the 16th and 17th centuries. Despite the huge time gap, from the early Roman period to pagan practices of the later centuries, the cosmology of these archaic survivals characterize simplicity in form rather than sophistication, which may be why they survived well into Christian times. In order for us to understand the degenerative form of paganism born from Roman culture, we need to examine its earliest basic concepts and see if any of its core form remained.

Early Roman religion centered around the agricultural and domestic lifestyles of a rural people removed from the cosmopolitan Greco-influenced pantheons. Latin spiritual impulse was first a personal and community-oriented expression of the numen in all things. Numen is a supernatural power or spirit rather than a personified being. Numina is the spirit within.

A Reverence for the Household

The center of every Roman's life was the home and its hearth fire embodied by the maternal spirit called Vesta. Vesta's hearth flame is the source of human culture; we gravitate to it to keep warm, eat, and hear the songs and stories of our lives, of our ancestors, and the divine powers that allow life to be. The sacredness of fire is found throughout Indo-European religion; Brigit the fire goddess of the Irish Celts and the offering made daily at the central fire of a Hindu's household shrine attest to fire's importance. Another custom of hearth reverence was that the mistress of the house swept it clean at the end of each day in respect for Vesta. Through daily observation and practice of the domestic fire faith, the pagans maintained a sacred connection.

Each power or spirit had its place in the order of nature and needed to be honored at its proper location. Janus, the guardian of the household, dwelled in doorways, guarding the transition point between the safety of the home and the potentially hostile forces of the outside world. Janus mediated the domestic and wild realms, for many spirits were restricted to the outdoors due to the chaos and hazard their influence might bring when they were allowed outside their natural spheres. For example, any ancient Italian farmer would be reluctant to invite Mars Lupus, the protector of the boundaries of the farm and the fields, to an indoor ceremony. There was a need to keep the wolf where it belonged. Therefore, rituals were performed to honor Janus in exchange for his protection of the home; he monitored the effects that new elements would have as they were introduced into the home at transitional events such as marriages and births.

A *pagus* was a farmstead settled by *pagi* or country folk who worshiped the *geniu loci* or

locality spirit. The *genii*, or spirits of places, brought the benefits of life to those who worked the land and honored them. Every family made offerings of food at each meal in propitiation to these animistic powers. There were forest and woodland spirits, the *fauni*. Household spirits were called *penates*. *Lares* were the spirits of the fields. Each had its place; all had their importance.

These spirits are similar to, and perhaps related in Indo-European geneology to, the faeries, elves, and other entities venerated by medieval Europeans. The technological revolution diminished the belief in such powers.

Divine Guardians

The pagan Romans believed that each person had a divine spirit that acted as a guardian angel. A *genius* was a man's numen and a *juno* was the numen of a woman. Thus, the *genius* of a ruler would be honored. Earlier Roman rulers were priest-kings associated with the rites of the oak which became archaic long before Rome subjected Italy as a whole to her rule.

Roman society venerated ancestors, and people left offerings to them to procure their blessings and avoid being haunted. In many ways the Roman concept of the *Di Manes*, or spirits of the dead, is similar to traditional African beliefs; animism and ancestor worship play a part in both cultures' home and community observances. The *parentalia* was a festival held across Europe in February that honored the dead. In the Middle Ages, February was a time connected to the Wild Hunt of Phantoms led either by maternal figures or by Herne or Woden. It is not unreasonable to speculate a continuation of the above-mentioned phenomenon from pagan religions to hybrid folk tradition. The *Fata*, or Fates, became synthesized with the Teuto-Celtic Triple Mothers and their association with the dead and faeries became important to people of the later Middle Ages as the concept of the White Ladies in vernacular practice became established. This was an unconscious assimilation of many fragmented elements over a thousand-year period, from the 4th to the 15th centuries. It is here that the landscape of the physical world blends into the dreamscape of the Witch's Sabbat.

The Benandante

During the 16th and 17th centuries, in the Italian province of Friuli, dwelled the Benandante, men and women born with a caul who were believed to possess the second sight. Four times a year, the Benandante (good wizards armed with fennel sticks) fought for the fertility of the fields against evil sorcerers called *stregoni* or *strighe*, who wielded reeds. *Stregoni* brought famine and represented the destructive forces of nature, while the Benandante brought abundance and were aligned with the creative powers. These battles were fought at night on the Four Ember Weeks and occurred during trance or dream states. Benandante means "those who are traveling."

Shamanic overtones outline these visionary encounters. During the ecstasies of the Benandante's journeys, they could see and converse with the spirits of the dead. Shapeshifting into mice or butterflies was also possible. Sometimes animal guides were reported to help the travelers on their night flights.

The Benandantes were initiated into their profession during their twenties, after being requested to do so by an angelic being. They were organized into groups of various sizes led by a leader who gathered the assemblies together by beating on a drum. All members in this cult held to an oath of secrecy. It was believed that they gathered on Thursdays, connecting them to the Witch's Sabbath which was also attached, in some folk traditions, to that day.

The Good Game

Another cult, The Game of the Good Society, was related to the Benandante and existed during the same time period. The Society, consisting only of women, was headed by a divine female who was followed by a train of faeries or White Ladies and the wandering dead. *Madona Oriente*, *Richella*, *Abundia*, and *Fortuna* are among the local Italian names of the

maternal figure to whom Medieval women paid homage. Cups of water, wine, and food were offered to the good mistress. This holy mother taught her followers herb lore for healing and granted visions so that her attendants could answer questions for the betterment of their community. Animals eaten at her gatherings were believed to be restored to life afterwards. Horiente's followers were also given the ability to counter negative spells.

The Society met during the Four Ember Weeks, which corresponded to dates of agricultural and seasonal holidays, illustrating dual faith orientation. Like the Benandante, the Good Society also met on Thursday nights. In the documentation of their practices, it is stated that the assembly bowed their heads in veneration saying: "Be well Madona Horiente." Their Queen's reply was "Welcome, my daughters." Many kinds of animals were present and there would be feasting, dancing, and merriment. Some references describe Horiente's and the Good Society's visits to houses at night while the occupants slept to bless those dwellings kept clean and tidy.

Slavic Cousins—The Calusari

In Rumania, a satellite for Romance languages spoken in a vulgar form of Latin, there existed—and perhaps still exist—the Calusari, young men who perform a cathartic dance to protect their communities from the effects of the *zine* or faerie beings, who possess people and make them scatter-brained. The patroness of the Calusari is Doamna Zinelor—Diana, Queen of the Faeries.

The specifically choreographed dances imitate the movements of the *zine* and are a type of homeopathic magical remedy. The dances take place in the villages for weeks after the Easter season. Each village and hamlet has been purified from the ambient forces of nature. It is interesting to note that Rumanians did not suffer the Inquisition, and, therefore, were not subject to ecclesiastical influence. Therefore, the use of the name Diana in their dialect for the Goddess of the faeries presents some enlightening information in the study of the roots and bones of Witchcraft. It could not entirely have been an invention of the Church.

These are but some of the aspects of Roman influence to be found in researching Witchcraft. Indo-Europeans have many common parallels while retaining distinctive cultural traits. The Romans touched each people they encountered, whether for good and bad, and their legacy is still part of our great heritage.

References

Eliade, Mircea. *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbat*. Random House, 1991.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*. 1991.

Jones, Prudence and Nigel Pennick. *A History of Pagan Europe*. Routledge, 1995.

Larousse World Mythology. Chartwell Books, 1973.

Rose, H. J. *Ancient Roman Religion*. London: Hutchinson, 1948.

Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*. Cornell Univ. Press, 1972.

World Religions from Ancient History to the Present. Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1971.