

THE ANCIENT ROOTS OF ITALIAN WITCHCRAFT

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Witchcraft in the Aegean-Mediterranean region is among the oldest forms mentioned in ancient Western literature. Its roots are deep and varied, encompassing ancient Greek and Roman witchcraft along with the prehistoric beliefs and practices originating in what is now called the Italian peninsula. Within the mainland Italian witchcraft traditions are elements of archaic Etruscan and Roman religion. Among the traditions of the island of Sicily we find a greater influence of the Greek mystery religions, which blended with indigenous beliefs and practices. The ancient Etruscan civilization arose in the northern region of what is now called the Italian peninsula. Archaic Roman religion originated from inherited elements of Etruscan beliefs and practices. Both were well rooted in Neolithic if not Paleolithic times. In fact, anthropologist Professor Marija Gimbutas states that the Etruscans were the heirs of Neolithic religion. It is this prehistoric connection that raises some interesting elements.

Hesiod, the seventh-century BCE Greek writer, mentions archaic beliefs that he refers to as 'oak and boulder'. In his book, the *Theogony*, Hesiod differentiates between the teachings given him by the Muses from those found among the peasantry. To the latter he ascribes the title of the teachings of oak and boulder, and although he does not reveal them in any depth, there are things we can assume about them with reasonable certainty. Hesiod was the first of the Aegean bards to record written tales. Therefore we can regard many of the things he refers to, as being rooted in as prehistoric beliefs. Writing several centuries before the rise of Christianity, Hesiod mentions a half-forgotten race of beings known as the Titans. In essence these are the prehistoric deities of the Aegean region. It is amazing to realise that in Hesiod's time the people of his era thought back upon a half-remembered period of lost gods and goddesses. To them these were the ancient deities.

The Titans were considered to be a primal race of deities who preceded the gods of Olympus. Some commentators regard them as personifications of the forces of nature as interpreted by our prehistoric ancestors. However, through the writings of Hesiod we see them as more developed, although they do appear less sophisticated than the Olympic class of deities. One Titan is the goddess Hecate, and later in this article her ancient connection to witches and witchcraft will be examined.

Returning to Etruscan religion, it is interesting to note the inclusion of a veiled group of deities known as the *Involuti*. The *Involuti* were above the high deities in Etruscan religion, and even the great god Tinia and his consort Uni were under their power and influence. In archaic Roman religion this basic concept is reflected in the belief that even Jupiter and Juno had no power over the Fates. Is it possible that the *Involuti* and the Titans represent some primal force whose power caused primitive humans to believe that even the Gods were second in rank?

Many traditions of Italian witchcraft teach the concept of the Old Ones, which is a race so ancient that their myths and legends are fragmentary at best. They are viewed as the ancient powers and forces of the deep woods, oceans, earth and sky. In most traditions the Old Ones are associated with the stars, which were venerated long before the sun and moon. This speaks to the great antiquity of such a concept as the Old Ones. It is possible that the *Involuti* represent the half-forgotten memory of a race of beings that precede human personification.

The Titans may be a midway point between the Old Ones and the more defined gods of Olympus. It is in the race of Titans that we find Hecate, a goddess long associated with witchcraft. Hesiod's *Theogony* bears the first mention and description of Hecate in Western literature. He states that she rules over the heavens, the earth, and what lies beneath the sea. In ancient times these were known as the Three Great Realms. 'that which is above, below, and in-between.' Hesiod notes that Hecate grants abundance, success, and good fortune.

There is no reference in the *Theogony* to Hecate as a hag figure or a deity particularly connected to death or the souls of the dead. This image comes much later in time.

By the Hellenic period we find Hecate associated with the crossroads, a place where communication with spirits of the dead was believed to be most favorable. Ancient beliefs held that Hecate gathered lost souls under her protection at the crossroads. Here sorcerers and witches gathered to enlist the powers of the spirit world or underworld. One of the oldest depictions of a Southern European witch appears in the character of Medea. Ancient writers portray her as using a wand, cauldron, knife and an altar in her works of witchcraft. Medea is referred to as a priestess of the goddess Hecate, which demonstrates the ancient connection of witchcraft to seemingly religious themes.

The writer Virgil, in his work the *Aeneid*, states that Hecate is part of a triformis goddess comprised of herself, Diana, and Phoebe. Another ancient writer known as Lucan writes of a triformis goddess worshipped by witches, who is comprised of Hecate, Diana and Persephone (known to the Romans as Proserpina). Many modern scholars claim that the basic idea of a triformis goddess associated with witchcraft is a modern notion fostered by neo-pagans. However it is clear that the idea itself is not modern and is found in ancient literature.

The Roman poet Horace, in his work titled *Epodes*, reveals old beliefs associated with Diana and her connection to witchcraft. Horace depicts Diana as a goddess that presides over the secret rites and mysteries performed at night. Here she is called a 'faithful witness' to the workings of witches wherein Diana can be evoked to assist her followers. They call upon her and Proserpina, and with the aid of a book of enchantment (presumably scrolls) they are able to draw down the moon and stars from the night sky. These and other elements persist in writings about Italian witchcraft well into the Christian era.

In the early half of the fifteenth-century of the Christian era we find an interesting picture of Italian witchcraft. It has not yet been transformed into the diabolical sect portrayed by the Church and its agents. The image of the Christian notion of the Witches' Sabbat is still in the invention stages at this time and the absence of any mention of the Devil is noteworthy. In fact the term Sabbat is absent as well, and the witches' gatherings are called in Italian a *tregenda*. The root meaning of this word is to take a break from mundane tasks (a respite).

Scholar Franco Mormando, in his book *The Preacher's Demons*, presents the views of this period through the eyes of a friar named Bernardino of Siena. Bernardino was zealous in his work to stamp out witchcraft and he wrote and preached extensively on the topic. Mormando writes that the Sabbat has its roots in pagan mythology, specifically in the un-Christian but non-diabolical 'Society of Diana,' which was depicted as a 'gathering of women under the tutelage of the pagan goddess of the moon and the hunt.' By the end of the fifteenth-century the Church succeeded in fully demonising this legendary assembly and transformed it into the infamous Witches' Sabbath. But what was it prior to this intentional distortion?

Around 1354 the Dominican preacher Jacopo Passavanti wrote a passage about people going to join the witches' *tregenda* in order to see dead people. The *tregenda* is described as a gathering of witches who make contact with spirits of the dead. In response, agents of the Church brought charges against the witches aimed at portraying them as swindlers who took money from distraught family members who believed the witch could bring messages from the dead. But as people continued in sincerity to seek communication with the dead, the Church inserted a belief intended to undermine reliance upon witches as the mediators between the worlds. The official teaching was then created that the Devil can take on the appearance of the dead, which placed the practice of the *tregenda* under the label of the diabolic.

An interesting reference to the *tregenda* can be found in a paper by Wolfgang Detel submitted at a conference held at Johann Wolfgang University in December of 2000. It was later published in 2002 by Akademie Verlag. The author writes that the *tregenda* took place in 'desolate and uninhabited regions...such as the borders of lakes, forests, dark and obscure places, old and deserted houses...caves, caverns, grottos, gardens, orchards; but best of all are the cross-roads, and where four roads meet, during the depth and silence of night.' The inclusion of the crossroads brings us back to the goddess Hecate, who has long been a

patroness of witches that gathered at the crossroads of rituals and spell casting.

When we consider Hecate as a legendary goddess of the crossroads, and we recall her role as a gatherer of the spirits of the dead, the view of the witches' assembly as a means of spirit communication appears well rooted in ancient practices. It is substantial evidence of survival that such a connection still appears in the fifteenth-century of the Christian era. It is the consistency of such themes of antiquity associated with witchcraft that can allow us to dispel the Christianised view of the Sabbat as a gathering to worship the Devil and perform perverted acts.

In the seventeenth-century writings of the Italian witch hunter Francesco Guazzo we find several key elements. Guazzo states: 'The infection of witchcraft is often spread through a sort of contagion to children by their fallen parents...and it is one among many sure and certain proofs against those who are charged and accused of witchcraft, if it be found that their parents before them were guilty of this crime. There are daily examples of this inherited taint in children...'

Guazzo notes that witches adhere to certain laws within their society. He states that witches 'read from a black book during their religious rite' and he notes a religious demeanor among witches when he writes: 'For witches observe various silences, measuring, vigils, mutterings, figures and fires, as if they were some expiatory religious rite'. Guazzo's depiction of witchcraft seems to indicate a rather structured and organized cult, and is consistent with accounts from Italian witch trial transcripts dating from 1310 to 1647.

In the second half of the twentieth-century, the American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland claimed to uncover a sect of witches in Italy who practiced the 'Old Religion'. This he described as the veneration of the goddess Diana. Leland was among the first folklorists to interview people claiming to be witches. Prior to his writings the ideas of what witches did, and what they were like, came exclusively from non-witches. Other folklorists joined in and began such interviews in various regions of Italy. Among these folklorists were J.B. Andrews, Lady De Vere, and Roma Lister.

Andrews was told by the witches of Naples that witchcraft is divided into special departments of the art. He lists two as adepts in the art of earth and sea magic. Later in his article in *Folk-lore*, the journal of the Folklore Society, it is implied that a third specialty may exist related to the stars. Andrews also tells us that Neapolitan witches perform knot magic, create medicinal herbal potions, construct protective amulets, and engage in the arts of healing. He concludes his article with excerpts from direct interviews with Italian witches. Here he states that when asked of them what books they gathered their information from, the witches replied that their knowledge was entirely traditional, and is "given by the mother to the daughter." The witches also told Andrews that blood is exchanged from a vein in the arm, and the new member is given a mark under the left thigh. Although the moon is not specifically mentioned, the witches do report to Andrews that such ceremonies are performed at midnight.

Folklorist Lady de Vere provides the following information from her interviews with witches: '...the community of Italian witches is regulated by laws, traditions, and customs of the most secret kind, possessing special recipes for sorcery – *La Rivista* of Rome, June 1894. This separates witchcraft from the known material found in common and popular folk magic traditions. It also more than suggests that common folk magic and witchcraft are two separate traditions.

Charles Leland mentions the following from his field studies among self-proclaimed witches, which conforms to Lady de Vere's findings: 'The witches of Italy form a class who are the repositories of all the folklore; what is not at all generally known, they also keep as strict secrets an immense number of legends of their own, which have nothing in common with the nursery or popular tales, such as are commonly collected and published ... the more occult and singular of their secrets are naturally not of a nature to be published - *Legends of Florence*, 1895

It is true that for many generations the secrets of Italian witchcraft went unpublished. Leland's writings were the first to reveal authentic elements of the Old Ways, and it wasn't

until sixty to seventy years later that others followed suit. Many people feel that Leland invented Italian witchcraft as depicted in his books. However two things are very apparent through his private journals and letters. The first is that his Tuscan informant ‘Maddalena’ was an actual person and not a figment of Leland’s imagination. The second is that he sincerely believed in the authenticity of the material collected by Maddalena. In this light he was not the fraud or hoaxer that some critics and skeptics would have us believe. It is through Leland and Maddalena that we capture a snapshot of Italian witchcraft and folk magic at the close of the nineteenth century. Here we glimpse the roots of Etruscan religion declined into folk religion and magic. Peasants preserved the Old Ways, often masking things with Catholic veneers, and masquerading the deities of witchcraft in the guise of various saints. So successful was this formula that some future practitioners forgot the pagan roots. Today these particular practitioners know only the Catholic-based folk magic system of *Stregoneria*, which is sorcery as opposed to old rooted witchcraft (*Stregheria*).

Stregoneria, in Italian culture, is always viewed as a negative and harmful practice. Italian dictionaries define it as a diabolical practice commonly in league with the Devil. *Stregheria* is an older word in the Italian language and was used by the eighteenth-century Italian writer Giralamo Tartarotti to describe a Dianic cult of witches. This idea reflects the classical literature of the pre-Christian era in which we find Diana associated with witches and witchcraft. It is a theme that spans almost 2500 years and persists uninterrupted in witch trial documents and witchcraft literature century after century into modern times. Many Italians and Italian-Americans have proudly reclaimed their ancient spiritual, religious, and magical heritage by embracing contemporary *Stregheria* and its offshoots. Through this the past is honoured, the present is embraced, and the future is secured.

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