

MADDALENA TALUTI

A Witch of Old Italy

Raven Grimassi

In the history of Italian witchcraft there is perhaps no figure more mysterious than the witch known as Maddalena. As described by the American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland in several of his books, she was an Italian fortune teller and witch. She reportedly supplied Leland with a great deal of Italian witch lore including the text he later published as the *Aradia: or Gospel of the Witches* in 1899. Maddalena was also personally known to folklorists Roma Lister and Lady de Vere (to who she was first introduced as ‘Margherita’). Author Rev. J. Wood, in his book *The Life and Legend of Michael Scot*, states that she was familiar to Leland’s friends as Maddalena.

Interesting findings related to Maddalena came to light through some research I conducted at the US Library of Congress. At the Pantheacon conference, on February 17th, 2008, I presented a copy of a page from *The International Folklore Congress: Papers and Transactions*, 1891. On page 454, Maddalena’s name appears as a contributor to an exhibit presented by Charles Leland. Her name is given as Maddalena Taluti. In the modern Pazzaglini translation of *Aradia* a contributing writer expressed his belief that Maddalena’s last name was Talenti. He states that the name appears in a letter to Leland and is difficult to make out. The error is therefore understandable.

According to Leland, in his book *Etruscan Roman Remains*, Maddalena was originally from the town of Rocca Casciano, which is now called Rocca San Casciano.¹ It is located in the Province of Forli-Cesena in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna. She reportedly traveled a great deal, making a living telling fortunes and selling charms. Leland said Maddalena claimed to have been trained in a family tradition of Italian witchcraft, which was passed on to her by her aunts and by her step-mother. The *Aradia* material obtained for Leland differs greatly from the material that the witch previously supplied to him. In *Etruscan Roman Remains*, Leland describes the witches of Italy as being both good and bad. By contrast the *Aradia* material portrays witches in a negative light. It is noteworthy he describes a group that he calls the ‘beautiful witches of Benevento.’ This will later contrast sharply with his depiction of witches in the *Aradia* material.

After receiving the material from Maddalena, which became the foundation for the books *Legends of Florence* and *Etruscan Roman Remains*, Leland made another request. In 1886 he asked Maddalena to try and locate a text he heard of that was a type of ‘witches gospel’. Eleven years later she sent him some material that he published as *Aradia; or the Gospel of the Witches*. It is noteworthy that Maddalena had fulfilled Leland’s previous requests for material within a short period of time. The fact that it took her ten years to present the *Aradia* material strongly suggests that she was originally unaware of it.² This further suggests that the tradition it represented was not the one she personally practiced.

¹ *Etruscan Roman Remains*, T.Fisher Unwin, 1892 – page 141

² Some sceptics believe that Maddalena invented the *Aradia* tradition in order to make some money off Leland. However, no Italian con artist is going to wait ten years to make a few francs (the currency Leland

The tradition Maddalena most likely practiced is reflected in Leland's books *Etruscan Roman Remains*, *Legends of Florence*, and *Legends of Virgil*. The portrayal of witches and witchcraft in *Aradia* does not reflect the same image as his earlier works. This is another indication that the material came from a system outside of Maddalena's own knowledge and experience. A letter from Leland to his niece, which I presented a copy of at the Pantheacon conference, describes Maddalena performing a ritual in which she invokes a goddess and a god. During the invocation, she reportedly went into convulsions, and Leland had to send out for two pints of brandy in order to restore her back to normal.³ This suggests Maddalena was a genuine practitioner of the 'Old Religion'. Leland goes on in the letter to say that if ever there was a true depiction of the witch Maddalena demonstrated it through her magic.

In *Aradia*, Leland notes that he lost touch with Maddalena after receiving a letter from her saying she was marrying her shoemaker called Lorenzo Bruciattelli and immigrating to America. As a result of this comment, the view has been held that Leland never heard from Maddalena again, and what became of her is unknown. Fortunately, another recent discovery I made came in the form of a letter found in the archives of the Library of Congress buried in a stack of old correspondence. Written by Leland to his niece, it mentions that Maddalena did not move to America, but left her husband and went to Genoa to make a living there on her own.⁴ She wrote to Leland letting him know what happened, and she asked him if he could send her ten francs as she was in a difficult financial situation. He complied, but it seems that the two never met again after this communication.

Who was this person called Maddalena? Pennell mentions running across her name in one of Leland's manuscript notes, where he writes:

'...a young woman who would have been taken for a Gypsy in England, but in whose face, in Italy, I soon learned to know the antique Etruscan, with its strange mysteries, to which was added the indefinable glance of the Witch. She was from the Romagna Toscana, born in the heart of its unsurpassingly wild and romantic scenery, amid cliffs, headlong torrents, forests, and old legendary castles. I did not gather all the facts for a long time, but gradually found that she was of a Witch family, or one whose members had, from time to immemorial, told fortunes, repeated ancient legends, gathered incantations, and learned how to intone them, prepared enchanted medicines, philtres, or spells. As a girl, her Witch grandmother, aunt, and especially her stepmother brought her up to believe in her destiny as a sorceress, and taught her in the forests, afar from human ear, to chant in strange prescribed tones, incantations or evocations to the ancient gods of Italy, under names but little changed, who are now known as folletti, spiriti, fate, or lari - the Lares or household goblins of the ancient Etruscans.'⁵

Maddalena worked with another witch (or a sorceress) named Marietta, and together they provided Leland with research materials. Leland comments that Maddalena has an

paid her). As described by Leland, Maddalena was very poor, and therefore would have supplied Leland with the *Aradia* material much faster than ten years down the road.

³ This episode is reported in a letter from Leland dated August 15, 1893. There is also another of Leland's letters dated January 25, 1891 that also reports that Maddalena went into convulsions while repeating incantations. This suggests that Leland and Maddalena engaged in these matters for purposes other than just a demonstration of Maddalena's abilities. Some sceptics regard Maddalena as acting in these cases in order to cause Leland to believe in her as a witch or sorceress.

⁴ The letter was found in box 367 of the Whistler-Pennell collection, and is dated August 6, 1895.

⁵ *Charles Godfrey Leland: a biography* by Elizabeth Pennell. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1906 – page 309-310

'inexhaustible' memory when it comes to matters of witchcraft, which suggests that she can recount on the spot as opposed to having to go off and invent something for him.⁶ Leland also mentions there are times when Maddalena admittedly does not possess the information he wants to know, and she then consults other witches to obtain it. This suggests integrity on the part of Maddalena, a trait that critics avoid attaching to her character.

Many unsubstantiated rumors surround Maddalena. Among the allegations is that Leland had an affair with her. But Leland's mentions of her (even in his private diaries and journals) reveal nothing to even suggest a romantic or sexual relationship. However, it is clear that Leland was fond of her as a friend and genuinely cared about her well being. Her poverty bothered Leland a great deal, and he sometimes gave her money that was not attached to payment for information; it came instead from caring and friendship. In *Legends of Florence*, Leland says regarding his first meeting with Maddalena:

'In the year 1886 I made the acquaintance in Florence of a woman who was not only skilled in fortune telling but who inherited as a family gift from generations, skill in Witchcraft - that is, a knowledge of mystical cures, the relieving people who were bewitched, the making of amulets, and who had withal a memory stocked with a literally incredible number of tales and names of spirits, and strange rites and charms. She was a native of the Romagna-Toscana. Where there still lurks in the recesses of the mountains much antique-Roman heathenism though it is disappearing very rapidly. Maddalena - such was her name - soon began to communicate to me all her lore. She could read and write, but beyond this never gave the least indication of having opened a book of any kind; albeit she had an immense library of folk-lore in her brain. When she could not recall a tale or incantation, she would go about her extensive number of friends, and being perfectly familiar with every dialect, whether Neapolitan, Bolognese, Florentine, or Venetian, and the ways and manners of the poor, and especially of witches, who are the great repositories of legends, became in time wonderfully well skilled as a collector. Now, as the proverb says, "take a thief to catch a thief," so I found that to take a witch to catch witches, or detect their secrets, was an infallible means to acquire the arcane of sorcery. It was in this manner that I gathered a great part of the lore given in my Etruscan-Roman Remains.'⁷

In *Legends of Florence*, Leland mentions that it was from Maddalena that he first heard of the goddess Diana referred to as the 'Queen of the Witches'. He also states:

'But to her only worshippers now left on earth – such as Maddalena – Diana is far more than this, for she is the queen of all witchcraft, magic, sorcery, the mistress of all the mysteries, of all deep knowledge, and therefore the greatest of the goddesses – all the rest, in fact, except Venus and Bacchus, who only exist in oaths, being now well-nigh forgotten and unknown to them.' – page 79

Leland paid Maddalena five francs a week to be his informant - as he called her. He was very impressed with her knowledge, and once made the comment that Maddalena "is as far ahead of Madame Blavatsky as sun to moon." The Russian woman Helena Blavatsky was a very popular occultist and mystic of the period. In 1886, Leland told Maddalena that he had heard of a 'witches' gospel', and asked her to try and obtain a copy during her travels to various parts of

⁶ *Biography* 2 – page 341

⁷ *Legends of Florence (first series)* – page vii

Italy. Years later she eventually delivered the material to Leland. This came to be published as *Aradia; or the Gospel of the Witches*, and resulted in placing Maddalena and Leland permanently in the history of modern witchcraft. It is likely that Maddalena never dreamed that future generations would speak of her across the world.

It may never be known more than is currently available about Maddalena. Did she ever have children, and were they trained in same arts she practiced? If so, are her descendants now reading fortunes and selling charms in the back ways of some Italian city? There is sadness attached to the high probability that these questions will go unanswered for all time. In his letter dated August 6, 1895, Leland makes a comment that I feel is a good way to end this article.

‘...I felt sad to think I have seen the last of her – ‘twas as if a light has left the Florentine sky’

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NEW PAGAN TEMPLE IN ICELAND

Although the Norse pagan religion in its modern form has been recognized by the Icelandic government since 1973, only this year will a public temple be opened for the first time since the Viking Age. Reykjavik City Council has donated a site for the proposed temple, but the neo-pagan Asatru Association will have to raise the £645,000 required to build it. The new building will host seasonal rituals, naming and passing of age ceremonies, weddings and funerals and weekly study sessions for beginners. At seasonal festivals attendees will recite poems, make sacrificial libations to the Norse gods Odin, Thor and Freya and feast on ‘sacred’ horsemeat. The high priest of the Asatru Association, a film composer called Himar Om Hilmarsson, oddly said: “I don’t believe in a one-eyed man who is riding about on a horse with eight feet”. Instead he sees the old pagan myths and gods as “stories and poetic metaphors and a manifestation of the forces of nature and human psychology”. The Asatru Association had 2400 members in 2014 from a total Icelandic population of 330,000. Despite its high priest’s post-modern skepticism, there is a wide belief in supernatural beings, elves, trolls and the ‘hidden people’ or nature spirits in present-day Iceland. In fact road construction is often delayed or diverted because of its proximity to sites associated with the faery folk (*The Guardian* February 2nd 2015).

