

The Cauldron

Issue NO. 99 February 2001

THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF ST. LUCY

Edward Hilton

It is a well-known fact that during the period of so-called 'dual-faith' in the transition from paganism to Christianity several of the popular gods and goddesses became transformed into saints, or saints adopted their attributes. One of these was the Sicilian Saint Lucia or Lucy, who has many attributes associated with the sun and fire goddesses of the ancient pagan world. Indeed her festival was celebrated with folk rituals relating to both fire and light. She also had associations with the midwinter solstice and witchcraft that link her to the European witch mothers of fate and death, Diana, Hecate, Percht, Freya and Holda.

St. Lucy has been described as 'the goddess of the returning light' (McGrath 1997:25). Originally she was a young girl living on Sicily in the fourth century CE – during the period of dual faith mentioned earlier. When a pagan suitor admired her beauty it is said she took the extreme step of plucking out her own eyes. She then carried these around on a plate. Lucy was then later sentenced for her Christian beliefs and sentenced to be burnt. By a miracle the flames did not harm her and she had to be stabbed to death with a sword. Because of this miracle, and the fact that her name means 'light', she was made into a saint. In time she became associated with the old pagan custom of lighting fires at midwinter to ward off the winter demons and the powers of darkness. Originally these sacred fires were lit to encourage the return of the sun at the darkest time of the year.

Christian mythology is full of gory and sadistic tales of self mutilation or horrible forms of death. The story of Lucy's eyes may be just another grisly tale of this genre of suffering. However alternatively, it may possibly have a symbolic pagan meaning. In the old beliefs the eye represented the sun and 'the eye of God' was the solar disc. The eye of God, often in a triangle, is a very ancient pagan and occult symbol. Also when the flames refused to burn her body the saint had to be despatched by the use of a sword – the traditional symbol and weapon of the elemental power of fire.

St Lucy was very popular with the peasants in Central Europe and Scandinavia. In Sweden her feast day was December 13th and it was called either St Lucy's Day or Little Yule. For many people it marked the official beginning of the Christmas celebrations. To prepare for the festival the house had to be cleaned from top to bottom, special candles were made and it was strictly forbidden to do any threshing, spinning or weaving on that day. This latter taboo links St Lucy with manifestations of the witch goddess who is said to spin and weave the destinies of the human race. A prohibition upon spinning and weaving during the 'in-between time' of the twelve days of Yule was also associated with the winter goddess Holda.

At dawn on Lucy Day a young girl, usually the youngest daughter of the family, was chosen as the Lucy Bride or Lucy Queen. The chosen one was dressed in a white frock and a crown made of thortleberry twigs decorated with nine white candles. As a representation of the new-born sun, the Lucy Queen travelled around the village or town and to the outlying farms bringing with her the blessing of the returning light. She was accompanied by the 'star boys' dressed as little old men with red beards and grotesque masks to represent the spirits of winter banished by the solstice fires. When the Lucy Queen visited a farm she blessed the animals to bring prosperity for the coming year. If for any reason she missed out a house on her route it was regarded as an ill omen. It meant bad luck and illness for the occupants for twelve months.

In the Tyrol the Lucy Queen brought small gifts of candy or toys to female children. In the Alsace she was associated with a similar female figure who distributed gifts to the sick and elderly, In that form she was accompanied by a 'wild man' dressed in a bearskin. Again the giving out of presents at midwinter and the bestial consort reminds us of Holda or Percht who led the Wild Hunt at midwinter. In her native land of Sicily, images of St. Lucy were paraded through the streets and people who touched them were said to be cured of illnesses. Young men also ran wildly through the streets brandishing blazing torches and bonfires were lit to scare away evil spirits. Among modern Croatians St. Lucy is still acknowledged at midwinter. On St. Lucy's Day people plant a pot of wheat. This usually takes from 13th December to the 21st December to germinate. The wheat symbolically becomes a sign of light and life being renewed in the darkness at the turning of the year.

St Lucy was also linked to witches. In Austria it was said that the sisterhood flew through the night sky on St. Lucy's Eve. A mysterious light, called the Luzieschien, was also supposed to appear in the sky at midnight. This may possibly link with the Star of Bethlehem and the birth of the Child of Light at midwinter who is recognised by both pagans and Christians. Some superstitious Swedes, obviously influenced by negative Christian propaganda, denounced Lucy as a 'goblin' because she was supposed to lead the Wild Hunt. Again this links her with both Holda and Diana. It also suggests that Lucy in her pagan form combined the twin aspects of the dark and bright goddess as maiden and hag.

In Hungary St Lucy is even more closely associated with a shamanistic form of witchcraft that survived into the 19th century. It included initiation into the witch cult and the granting of Sight or seership to selected female initiates This involved making a 'Lucy stool' that was used to commune with the dead at the winter solstice. The person who carried out this ritual, known as 'the seeing woman', sat on the stool, she then went into a trance and saw visions of the departed. These included the spirits of dead witches who initiated the entranced seer into their mysteries. This enabled her to foretell the future, find hidden treasure and travel to and from the spirit world.

Pocs (1998) suggests this ritual was connected with the cult of seidr carried out in pagan Northern Europe by the priestesses of Freya. This art was also carried out by a female seer in ritual costume who sat on a small stool on a raised platform. She also went into a trance and communicated with the spirits. Freya ruled both fertility and the dead and her seers have been regarded as the prototype of historical witches. Today in traditional witchcraft one female member with psychic powers is often selected to be the coven's seer or medium to commune with the spirit world. Professor Pocs also links St Lucy directly with the European witch goddess who was variously identified as Diana-Artemis, Hecate, Holda and Freya. Pocs describes these ancient female deities as 'chthonic figures of antiquity, Celtic and Germanic goddesses appearing as the leader of the march of the dead and as guardian and initiator spirits of the seeing women.' (1998: 25)

Today there is a tendency among some writers to deny or disregard the importance of the witch goddess in medieval Europe. The folklore, myths and legends connecting female saints like St Lucy to the pagan goddess of fate, fertility and death prove this to be a mistaken belief. If you search the folk traditions and the records of the witch trials there is plenty of evidence for the clandestine, yet popular, worship of the Queen of Elphame among European peasantry. She appears heavily disguised as a divine figure representing both the bright solar light and the dark moon.

Bibliography and further reading: *The Sun Goddess* S McGrath (Blandford 1997), *The Sacred Ring. The Pagan Origins of British Folk Festivals and Customs* Michael Howard (Capall Bann 1995), *British Folk Customs* Christian Hole (Hutchinson 1976) *Between the Living and the Dead* Eva Pocs (Central European University of Budapest. Hungary 1998), Also a personal communication from May Clacy 2.7.99