

**From Fact to Fallacy:  
The Evolution of Margaret Alice Murray's Witch-Cult**

Catherine Noble  
anatharxes@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

The evolution of Margaret Murray's theory of a historical witch-cult deserves as much scrutiny as the topic of witchcraft itself. Its widespread acceptance despite glaring inaccuracies to the eyes of a modern reader testifies how little interest the academic world had in witchcraft in the first half of the twentieth century. Its enduring popularity in the face of contrary evidence reveals the emotional nerve struck by Murray's works. Today there are those still devoted to the concept of an ancient witch-cult, and they credit Murray with discovering it, even though the cult they describe may bear almost no relation to Murray's witches.

*It has long been the fashion to deride what you do not understand, or to misrepresent the evidence, or even to believe evidence which is clearly false.*  
(Margaret Murray, *My First Hundred Years*)

Margaret Murray's autobiographical words were uttered in reference to contemporary beliefs concerning ghosts, although they could have been spoken just as easily in reference to her critics, whom she repeatedly dismissed in print as close-minded, bigoted, or uninformed.<sup>1</sup> However, the words could truthfully be applied today to Murray's own works on witchcraft, for which she is most known. An Egyptologist with University College in London whose works on Egypt are still largely respected to this day,<sup>2</sup> Murray turned to the study of European witchcraft only when World War I effectively shut down her department.<sup>3</sup> Although she always had her critics, for forty years Murray was considered credible enough

1. Margaret Murray, *My First Hundred Years* (London: William Kimber, 1963), 103-105. Further discussed in Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 194-96.

2. Hutton, *Triumph*, 198.

3. Murray, *First Hundred Years*, 104.

that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* used her definition of witchcraft in its volumes. When her work fell from favor, however, it was not gently phased out as obsolete but ridiculed and denounced as a travesty of the study of history, an abuse of evidence coupled with academic ignorance of her subject. Although now undeniably wrong, Murray's ideas captured the imagination of readers, which, coupled with her illusionary expertise in the field of witchcraft, prompted renewed interest in a subject largely dismissed as unworthy of study in her time – but also created an image frustratingly difficult to dislodge from the minds of the public.

The Murray thesis posits the existence of a pre-Christian religion that spanned all of Western Europe and survived in secret until at least the eighteenth century. This religion, referred to as the Old Religion,<sup>4</sup> the witch-cult, or the Dianic cult, was supposedly most prominent among the peasants, but also reached into the highest orders of noble and church hierarchies. These were the Medieval and Renaissance witches, but instead of worshipping the Prince of Darkness, as Christians accused, they were in fact worshipping an ancient fertility god. In her first book, *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe*, this deity is briefly equated with Janus/Dianus.<sup>5</sup> However, for the rest of the book she refers to him as the Devil or Satan, although she accuses Christian record-keepers of substituting those names for whatever real name the witches provided.<sup>6</sup> In her second book, *The God of the Witches*, she renames him the Horned God.

Originally a joyous fertility religion with origins in the Paleolithic Era, the Old Religion was slowly eroded by the incessant pressure put upon it by Christianity, degenerating over the years until the church finally extinguished it altogether through the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its devotees practiced magic, but their rites had become debased through the years; and so instead of using their supposed powers for fertility, they instead blighted cattle and crops, caused disease, and otherwise behaved much as witches were accused of behaving.<sup>7</sup> In *Witch-Cult*, child sacrifice is accepted as fact, as the "accusations seem to have been substantiated on several occasions."<sup>8</sup> In *The God of the Witches*, however, she has changed her mind, stating that "little real evidence is brought forward of the actual killing of children, and it must always be

4. Murray's first book refers to the "old religion" in lowercase. Her second book capitalizes the two words, and that spelling is the one generally employed by those subsequently discussing her theories.

5. Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe* (1921; reprint, with a foreword by Sir Steven Runciman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 12.

6. *Ibid.*, 28, 31.

7. *Ibid.*, 24.

8. *Ibid.*, 158.

remembered that child sacrifice is an accusation which the members of a dominant religion are very apt to bring against any other religion."<sup>9</sup>

The Horned God was represented at gatherings by a priest in a horned helmet or mask whom the witches adored as the god incarnate, often copulating with him as part of their fertility rites. Furthermore, the witches periodically sacrificed their own members as representatives of this god, often in intervals of seven or nine years, depending upon location. These were generally volunteers, although Murray's third book, *The Divine King of England*, suggests one could be born or manipulated into this role as well. In life, these future victims were also considered god incarnate. Their deaths, like the periodic death of their god, returned fertility to the earth and prosperity to the people.

Elders of the cult were organized into groups of thirteen called covens. They led large celebrations called *sabbaths* on 2 February, 30 April, 1 August, and 31 October, which marked the seasons according to pastoral, pre-agrarian methods of measuring time.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, they held weekly meetings called *esbats*.

As strange as this theory might appear to the modern reader, there was a substantial amount of precedent in 1921, when her first book on the subject, *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe*, was published. Nineteenth-century Romantics, rebelling against both Christianity and the polluted and sprawling cityscape of London and other European urban centers, longed for what they came to view as the pure and simple life of Pagan times and also of the countryside. Soon the two became almost indistinguishable; nineteenth-century folk practices came to be regarded as vestiges of Paganism, miraculously remaining uncorrupted through centuries.<sup>11</sup> Sir James Frazer, whom Murray firmly believed in, had already popularized the concept of widespread fertility cults in *The Golden Bough* (1890), particularly concerning dying gods of vegetation.

In 1862, Jules Michelet suggested in *La Sorcière* that the witch hunts were designed to stamp out not evil worshippers of Satan, but Pagans practicing a joyful, life-affirming religion of the peasantry that had become debauched over the years through the introduction of the aristocracy into its ranks. It was the witches, according to Michelet, that had kept the ancient wisdoms, which, when brought to light, heralded in the European Renaissance. Although Michelet had already made a name for himself as

9. Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches* (1933; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 122.

10. Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 12-13.

11. Hutton dedicates considerable attention to this process, particularly in chapters 3 and 7 of *The Triumph of the Moon*.

an early advocate of theories of a universal Great Goddess, the witches' deity was male, probably Pan or Priapus.<sup>12</sup>

Because of this precedent, critics of Murray have periodically reminded their readers that her thesis was not even original. However, there is nothing to indicate that Murray was even aware of Michelet's work. He does not appear in her bibliography, and in her autobiography Murray describes how the theory came quite suddenly and unexpectedly to her as she studied the old records.<sup>13</sup> G. L. Burr mocks her for not only being unoriginal, but also not being educated enough to realize it,<sup>14</sup> which is perhaps a bit unfair. *La Sorcière* was a sensationalist and popular French work that Michelet spent a mere two months in writing. Its purpose was to generate enough money to sustain Michelet while he worked on more serious projects and also to express his extreme dislike of both the aristocracy and the Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> While it became a popular best seller, "*La Sorcière* was greeted with silence from French literary critics, apparently because they recognized that it was not really history."<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, whether Murray was aware of *La Sorcière* is largely unimportant. Murray was not the first to put forward the witch-cult theory, but she was the first to put forth apparently solid evidence illustrating the connection between the witch-trials and Pagan religion.<sup>17</sup>

Murray benefited from championing a theory at odds with the established and rather worn-out academic view of the witch-hunts. The witch-hunts had ceased in the eighteenth century not because people realized no one was actually consorting with Satan, but because at least the intellectual elite had lost their belief in magic. In England, for example, the witch statutes were replaced in 1736 with the Witchcraft Act, which made it illegal to claim supernatural power or to accuse another of possessing such abilities. The witch-hunts were looked upon as tragic mistakes in which people were condemned for impossible crimes. The executed witches were victims of superstition, ignorance, and "hysterical panics whipped up by the Churches for devious political or financial reasons,"<sup>18</sup> and this outlook remained intact well into the twentieth century.

12. Hutton, *Triumph*, 138-39.

13. Murray, *My First Hundred Years*, 104.

14. G. L. Burr, "Review of *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*," *The American Historical Review* 27.4 (July 1922): 782.

15. Hutton, *Triumph*, 138.

16. *Ibid.*, 140.

17. *Ibid.*, 194-95.

18. Jacqueline Simpson, "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her and Why?" *Folklore* 105.1/2 (1994): 90.

But the English public, as well as some academics, had tired of this ultra-rationalist approach. The creation of magical orders such as the Golden Dawn and the Theosophists in the late Victorian period, as well as the popularity of séances and other spiritualist practices, are testament to a re-emerging acceptance of the supernatural in educated circles. Indeed, several of Murray's early supporters were members of these organizations, including Dion Fortune.<sup>19</sup> Although Murray did not believe in magic and portrayed the followers of her witch-cult as people only believing that they could work magic, she did present the witch-cult as a secret tradition, which won her high praise in *The Occult Review*, a publication that probably helped to popularize her thesis.<sup>20</sup> She was challenging the rationalist approach simply by claiming that witches were real people celebrating real *sabbaths*, and that challenge won support. Murray was refreshing and exciting, her approach liberating and yet still sensible.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Robert H. Murray opens his review of *Witch-Cult* with high praise for those few historians willing to really "rethink the thoughts of the past, especially when these thoughts assume a form which modern knowledge discredits."<sup>22</sup>

Murray also benefited from the simple fact that few academics were familiar with witch-trial documents. William Monter, writing in 1988, states that even "[t]wenty years ago, when European witchcraft first drew my interest, the field seemed uncrowded and understudied,"<sup>23</sup> and G. L. Burr, writing in 1922, credits Murray's popularity to "the lack in English of any thorough history of witchcraft."<sup>24</sup> To the casual reader her argument appeared sound enough, and the numerous blocks of quoted text in their original languages adds a further air of professional expertise at least to *Witch-Cult*, which Robert Murray describes as "a monument of compressed information, sound scholarship, and solid learning...the work has been so thoroughly carried out that it is not likely to be superseded. It is, indeed, pleasant to meet with a piece of work so comprehensive in scope."<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, highly critical of Murray's theory, nevertheless feels the need to praise the breadth of her learning,

19. Hutton, *Triumph*, 199.

20. Juliette Wood, "Margaret Murray and the Rise of Wicca," *The Pomegranate* 15 (Winter 2001): 46.

21. Simpson, "Margaret Murray," 90.

22. Robert H. Murray, "Review of *The Witch Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*," *The English Historical Review* 37.146 (April 1922): 276.

23. William Monter, "European Witchcraft: A Moment of Synthesis?" *The Historical Journal* 31.1 (March, 1988): 183.

24. Burr, "Review of *The Witch-Cult*," 783.

25. Robert Murray, 276.

and he wishes his readers to understand that it is only her interpretation of evidence that he criticizes.<sup>26</sup>

But what firmly cemented her ideas in the minds of at least the public was that in 1929 she was allowed to write the "Witchcraft" entry for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,<sup>27</sup> an entry that continued to be reprinted in subsequent editions until 1969.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it may have cemented the idea in Murray's own mind, for she wrote the entry not as a theory, but as a universally accepted fact,<sup>29</sup> an approach she would take with her two later books on the subject as well. The fact that she was asked to write it in the first place, however, testifies to the lack of current scholarship on the subject in the 1920s. After all, Murray had written only a single book on the subject whose first printing sold a mere 2,020 copies.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, it was not as if she had been universally accepted among academics. From the very start, *Witch-Cult* had some very determined detractors. Burr has barely a kind word for Murray, accusing her not only of being totally uninformed of modern scholarship, but also of treating documents uncritically and even of manipulating evidence:

To her every confession is true, all the accused guilty, and whether convicted or acquitted. She does not trouble her judgment by hearing even what they say for themselves. Mary Osgood, for example, whose confession she repeatedly quotes, not only retracted it all and was eventually discharged, but handed in (she and her Andover neighbors) a vivid description of the pressure and persuasion by which the confession was extorted.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, Burr is so disgusted with the book that he makes clear that it would not have even received his review if not for the fact that it was published by Oxford University Press coupled with "the praise it has received from even historian reviewers."<sup>32</sup> Clearly this is a review with a warning: reader beware.

E. M. Loeb is even more scathing, describing Murray's approach as "novel," fueled by "a naïve desire for originality combined with an over-facile intuition" resulting in "the most fantastic lack of discrimination in her evaluation of the validity of the court testimony given at the witch trials" and finally "a bewildering mass of false inferences."<sup>33</sup> In response

26. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African* (1958; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 12f.

27. Simpson, "Margaret Murray," 89.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Hutton, *Triumph*, 199.

31. Burr, "Review of *The Witch-Cult*," 781.

32. Ibid., 783

33. E. M. Loeb, "Review of *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in*

to Murray's objections concerning modern writers' penchant for theories revolving around the supposed hysterics of women, he offers up *Witch-Cult* as evidence aplenty of hysterics past and present.<sup>34</sup> There is no constructive criticism between peers here; it is a frontal attack on an author Loeb clearly believes has no place among published historians, at least on the topic of witchcraft.

Perhaps because of such harsh criticisms, it was a non-academic publisher who released *The God of the Witches* in 1933. It too flopped at first.<sup>35</sup> Burr produced another biting review, rebuking not only Murray, but also her "complacent reviewers." Again, his complaints revolved around her undiscerning and misleading treatment of sources.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, however, the Murray thesis was becoming well known and well respected. In 1934, a reviewer chastised Montague Summers both for dismissing the idea of Pagan witches as foolish and for failing to include both *Witch-Cult* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in his bibliography. Ironically, Summers was also criticized for being uncritical and for making "sweeping statements of unpardonable inaccuracy,"<sup>37</sup> complaints that had already been leveled at Murray and would be many more times again. Aldous Huxley accepted Murray hook, line, and sinker, right down to her insistence that the witches' *sabbath* was an etymological mystery, having nothing to do with the Hebrew Sabbath.<sup>38</sup> (Modern scholars now see the similarity of names as explained by the same anti-Semitism that caused witch gatherings sometimes to be labeled *synagogues*). He even expounds upon the *esbats*, a word Murray found used in a single document.<sup>39</sup> It appears in a confession given under torture and spoken in the Basque language,<sup>40</sup> and it may be nothing more than a corruption of the word *sabbath*.<sup>41</sup> Other influenced authors include G. B. Harrison, Lewis Spence, Robert Graves, Pennethorne Hughes, Sir Steven

*Anthropology*," *American Anthropologist*, New Series 24.4 (October – December, 1922): 476-78.

34. Loeb, 477.

35. Murray, *First Hundred Years*, 104.

36. G. L. Burr, "Review of *The God of the Witches*," *The American Historical Review* 40.3 (April 1935): 491-92.

37. J. H. H., "Review of *The Werewolf*," *Man* 34 (November 1934): 182-83.

38. Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 136. In *Witch-Cult* Murray attempts to equate the word *Sabbath* with the French *s'ebattre*, meaning "to frolic".

39. Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 97.

40. Elliot Rose, *A Razor for a Goat: Problems in the History of Witchcraft and Diabolism* (1962; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 38.

41. *Ibid.*, 169.

Runciman, Sir George Clark, and Christopher Hill, although the last eventually “tacitly recanted.”<sup>42</sup>

Interest in *The God of the Witches* grew after World War II, and Oxford University Press acquired the rights to reprint it in 1952. In 1954 Faber & Faber published her third book on the Old Religion, *The Divine King of England*. No academic has ever taken the wild and unsubstantiated theories of this volume seriously,<sup>43</sup> but her fans seemed ready enough to simply ignore the book, for Oxford was still willing to re-print *Witch-Cult* in 1963, 1967, and 1971 and *The God of the Witches* in 1970 and 1981.

Increasing interest in Murray’s books was the result of multiple factors. Keith Thomas credits the relatively sophisticated *Witches, Demons and Fertility Magic* by Arno Runeburg, published in 1947, in bolstering the credibility of the Murray thesis.<sup>44</sup> Several distinguished historians, unfamiliar with trial records, had also incorporated her work into their textbooks.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, by the 1960s, witchcraft was becoming a serious topic of academic study. However, as larger numbers of historians became familiar with the evidence of the witchcraft trials, the problems inherent in Murray’s treatment of it became obvious. Ironically, the Murray thesis was being torn apart at exactly the same time as her books reached the zenith of their popularity.

Murray’s own inexperience in the field, despite first appearances, was certainly a major source of her problems. Murray was trained as an Egyptologist, not as a European historian. She had little academic training in the modern sense, leaving her without any broader foundations. Instead, Sir Flanders Petrie trained her personally, mostly in the course of his Egyptian archeological work, leaving her knowledge and expertise highly specialized and confined to a relatively limited subject area. Furthermore, her extensive knowledge of ancient Egypt may have influenced her interpretation of witch-trial evidence at least subconsciously. Egyptian culture endured in relative stability for thousands of years, and she attempted to ascribe those same qualities to her Old Religion.<sup>46</sup>

Murray’s research material was limited to trial documents and pamphlets dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all of which are hearsay – they were written by witch-finders, not by the witches themselves. Murray is aware of this problem, and she is quick to point

42. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 515f.

43. Ronald Hutton, “Paganism and Polemic: The Debate over the Origins of Modern Pagan Witchcraft,” *Folklore* 111.1 (April 2000), 111. Also Parrinder, 56.

44. Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 115.

45. Hutton, “Paganism and Polemic,” 110.

46. Simpson, “Margaret Murray,” 92.



out that in England torture was illegal in most witch-trials, so that the recorded confessions of English witches should be highly believable.<sup>47</sup> She also addresses the issue of those cases in which witch-finders did employ torture to extract very specific types of confessions, asking the reader to consider where the witch-finders might have originally gotten their ideas on what constituted “correct” answers.<sup>48</sup>

Murray’s abuse and ignorance of evidence leads to sweeping, inaccurate generalizations. A central point of her argument is that the Old Religion was a widespread, organized and unified phenomenon, worshipping the same god through the same rites, such as the *sabbaths*. Yet Murray freely admits that most of her evidence is from English trial records, and English witchcraft is almost bereft of mentions of the *sabbath*. Nothing is seen of the *sabbath* before 1612, and it remains extremely rare outside of a handful of years in the seventeenth century when Matthew Hopkins, the self-appointed Witch-finder General, prosecuted hundreds of witches after bringing Continental concepts such as the *sabbath* to England.<sup>49</sup> Of all the Western European countries, England offers some of the least evidence of an organized witch-cult, yet it is England that Murray returns to again and again, and whose entire royal family she connects with the Old Religion.

Murray appears either wholly ignorant of the similarities between various folktales and witchcraft accusations, or she deliberately suppresses them. In an effort to depict witch feasts as innocent pot-luck dinners among the faithful, for example, Murray quotes a source as reading, “Some of them went to John Benny’s house, he being a brewer, and brought ale from hence...and others of them went to Alexander Heiche’s house and brought aqua vitae from hence, and so made themselves merry.”<sup>50</sup> What she replaced with ellipses, however, is the following: “and they went through a little hole like bees, and took the substance of the ale.”<sup>51</sup> This event therefore is neither innocent nor mundane. It also taps directly into “an international migratory legend about supernatural beings who enter a cellar to steal drink, or rather, the non-material ‘substance’ or ‘goodness’ of the drink; it is told not only of witches but of fairies, and werewolves and *benendanti*.”<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, she presents evidence in support of her thesis that in reality

47. Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 16.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Thomas, 444-45.

50. Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 141.

51. Simpson, “Margaret Murray,” 91.

52. *Ibid.*

is unrelated to witchcraft. Her connection of Diana to the witch-cult largely stems from a Christian document called the *Canon Episcopi*, created around the year 906 CE. The *Canon* addresses one form of the Wild Hunt, in which women join Diana in magical, nocturnal rides across great distances. The problem is that the *Canon* never refers to these women as witches.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the *Canon* depicts these women as suffering from demonic delusions precisely because such events are not possible. The Wild Hunt is a superstition, and priests are instructed not to punish women who believe they participate in such things but instead should teach them the error of their ways. In fact, the church later had to rationalize how the *Canon* did not apply to accusations of witchcraft.<sup>54</sup>

By limiting her research to the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Murray severs the witchcraft trials from their historical context. While the period she covers includes the greatest number of trials, there are earlier trials and, more importantly, there are the heresy trials, in which witchcraft eventually became a standard accusation. In both an appendix of *Witch-Cult* and in her subsequent books Murray portrays the fifteenth-century Joan of Arc as a great witch leader,<sup>55</sup> heedless of the fact that Joan was executed as a heretic, not as a witch. Divorced from historical context, the process of burning victims such as Joan and disposing of their ashes in water becomes a witch-cult fertility rite,<sup>56</sup> instead of a purification ritual intended to cleanse the world of a heretic's remains, who could not by reason of her heresy be given a Christian burial.

Indeed, Murray gives no good explanation why it took the church so long to directly attack the Old Religion. She suggests that the church was only able to openly attack the witch-cult at the end of the fifteenth century because it had finally gained enough strength and power.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the Catholic Church was in decline by the fifteenth century, and the Protestant Reformation would fracture it early in the sixteenth century. It was the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries that saw the church at its height, as evidenced by prolific building of cathedrals, monasteries, and universities;<sup>58</sup> the Crusades; the successful persecution of heretics; and the multiple power struggles between kings and popes for domination, a struggle the church not infrequently won.

53. Christina Hole, *Witchcraft in England: Some Episodes in the History of English Witchcraft* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 24-25.

54. George Lyman Kitteredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1956), 246.

55. Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 270-76.

56. *Ibid.*, 160, 276.

57. *Ibid.*, 19.

58. Parrinder, 107.

Many lesser but no less disturbing problems plague Murray's writings. Murray is obsessed with the concept that covens are to have thirteen members, even though, by her own admission, only a single trial record actually mentions this number.<sup>59</sup> Her attempts to form groups of thirteen have been denounced by numerous historians as arbitrary, frequently counting people who were suspected but never brought to trial as well as those found innocent, along with ignoring the occasional condemned witch.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, she depicts the word *coven* to specifically refer to the elders of the cult, the ones who performed magic and acted out religious rites.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the word originated around the year 1500, is a variation of the word *convent*, and can refer to any sort of assembly, not specifically a witch assembly.<sup>62</sup>

Criticism mounted slowly and puzzlingly unevenly. In 1948 the witchcraft as fertility cult theory was described by C. L'Estrange Ewen as "discredited."<sup>63</sup> Two years later, however, Stanley Edgar Hyman called Murray a good, sensible source.<sup>64</sup> In 1954, Francis L. K. Hsu criticized Pennethorne Hughes' book *Witchcraft*, for a "lack of discrimination in the use and interpretation of facts."<sup>65</sup> The reason for his objection was not Hughes's support of the witch-cult theory, but merely that Hughes presumed every accused witch was part of the cult. Hsu, however, hedged his wording. Although he assured readers that the existence of witchcraft is undeniable, he described Hughes as *attempting* to show that the witch-cult did exist. He further distanced himself from the Murray thesis by describing the witch-cult's association with any pre-Christian religion as only a possibility.<sup>66</sup>

George Lyman Kitteredge stated in 1956 that the Murray thesis could not stand up against even the most elementary historical criticisms.<sup>67</sup> In 1961 Julio Baroja wrote that claims of Pagan cults and Horned Gods are totally in opposition to any and all serious, factual investigation, and he accused the supporters of such claims of using arbitrary archeological

59. Murray, *God of the Witches*, 69.

60. Parrinder, 102, 109-10.

61. Murray, *God of the Witches*, 13, 190.

62. Parrinder, 39.

63. C. L'Estrange Ewen, "Review of *Witchcraft in England*," *The American Historical Review* 53.2 (January 1948), 326.

64. Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Review of *English Folk Heroes*," *The Journal of American Folklore* 63.248 (April – June 1950), 254.

65. Francis L. K. Hsu, "Review of *Witchcraft*," *The Journal of American Folklore* 67.263 (January – March 1954), 85.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Kitteredge, 275.

fabrications.<sup>68</sup> He acknowledged, however, that the theory was still highly accredited in the English-speaking world.<sup>69</sup> In 1962, Elliot Rose lamented:

The Murrayites seem to hold...an almost undisputed sway at the higher intellectual levels. There is, among educated people, a very widespread impression that Professor Margaret Murray has discovered the true answer to the problem of the history of European witchcraft and has proved her theory...I feel confident in saying at this stage that it has not yet been proved.<sup>70</sup>

Alan Macfarlane found it disgraceful in 1971 for a university press to reprint *The God of the Witches* "without a word of warning to innocent readers," and he considered the survival of the Murray thesis to be almost as intriguing as witchcraft itself.<sup>71</sup>

By now, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* found itself in a bind. Murray's article was removed in 1969, but the replacement article was a patchwork of ill-fitting facts. The opening sentence of the 1971 article defines witchcraft as an "exercise of alleged supernatural powers for antisocial, evil purposes."<sup>72</sup> Yet, the next paragraph connects Paleolithic cave paintings of horned figures with witchcraft and provides one of the cave paintings Murray herself printed in *The God of the Witches*. Such a connection only makes sense if one accepts witchcraft as having developed from a fertility cult. The article calls the Murray thesis a theory and then proceeds to express two other theories: that witches were in fact devil-worshippers and that witches were the victims of hallucinations. Yet it then states matter-of-factly that the witch-cult survived until at least the eighteenth century, and some of the information is lifted verbatim from Murray's article. The *Canon Episcopi* is even cited as an early church document addressing witchcraft.<sup>73</sup>

The *Britannica's* confusion, however, was relatively momentary. Its 1974 edition bears a significantly more sophisticated entry on witchcraft, covering a variety of cultures around the world and addressing the large range of theoretical explanations now available. It briefly mentions the Murray thesis with a note that most contemporary scholars consider the theory historically unfounded,<sup>74</sup> although describing it as "highly

68. Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O.N.V. Glendinning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 252.

69. Baroja, 65.

70. Rose, 14-15.

71. Alan Macfarlane, "Review of *The God of the Witches*," *Man* 6.3 (September 1971), 506.

72. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 23 (1971), s.v. "Witchcraft."

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Macropaedia* 19 (1974), s.v. "Witchcraft."

imaginative"<sup>75</sup> seems overly derogatory for a publication that trusted the thesis just a few years previously. In its discussion of modern witches it even credits Murray's older *Britannica* article, although the writer makes it clear that he respects the witches no more than he respects the Murray thesis, describing their practices as "antics" and their founder inaccurately as a "satanist [sic]".<sup>76</sup>

It is only in the 1980s that historians appear totally comfortable writing Murray off completely, and such comments are frequently written as sighs of relief. In 1988, Monter lists laying the ghost of Murray to rest as one of the accomplishments of witchcraft historians.<sup>77</sup> Christina Lerner stated in 1984 that "we have now reached a stage when it is possible to ignore altogether the once-influential view of Murray".<sup>78</sup>

Despite the forty years of controversy surrounding Murray's witch-cult, Murray's name might be all but forgotten today if it were not for Gerald Gardner. In 1954 Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, in which he claimed to have been able to study a modern-day coven of witches who did indeed follow an ancient Pagan religion that had survived in secret throughout the entire Christian period. They celebrated the same four major holidays that Murray identified as witch holidays, while organizing themselves into groups of thirteen.<sup>79</sup> Gardner even secured Murray to write the book's introduction. Five years later Gardner confessed to actually being a member of the witch-cult in *The Meaning of Witchcraft*.

There were, however, important differences between Gardner and Murray's claims, differences that would frequently be glossed over in later years by followers of Wicca, as Gardner's witch-cult eventually became known. Most significantly, Gardner insisted that most accused witches were actually nothing more than falsely accused Christians and that very few had any connection with the witch-cult.<sup>80</sup> Gardner's witch-cult also lacked the organization of Murray's. While he claimed to have been initiated by a surviving coven, he did not claim that its specific practices were ancient. He suspected that the rites taught to him might have been brought to England from Italy during the Renaissance or even

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Monter, "European Witchcraft," 185.

78. Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 47.

79. Four more holidays, occurring on the solstices and equinoxes, were added later to the Wiccan calendar.

80. Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (1954; reprint, New York: Citadel Press, 1970), 37-38.

later and joined to existing covens.<sup>81</sup> He also admitted that by the twentieth century they had become fragmentary, requiring him to augment them with outside material in order to construct functional rituals.<sup>82</sup>

Gardner was also far more skeptical of witch-trial evidence than Murray. For instance, he specifically addressed the accusation that witches denied or repudiated the Christian religion. Gardner found this unlikely to have happened often, believing that the witches regularly only initiated those who were born into the Old Religion, not converts from Christianity. Says Gardner: "To say it is 'proof' because many witches were tortured until they admitted repudiating Christianity is like saying that similar testimony is proof that they flew through the air on broomsticks."<sup>83</sup> This was a distinctly more critical approach than Murray's, as she preferred to dismiss confessions of flying as superstition while accepting the rest of a confession as true.

Gardner's witch-cult also honored a goddess alongside the Horned God, although she did not yet have the prominence that would be attributed to her by later Wiccan authors. Even Doreen Valiente, Gardner's former high priestess, who has been credited with strengthening the role of the goddess, speaks of the Horned God and *his* consort,<sup>84</sup> a subtle but important difference with today's authors who write of the Goddess<sup>85</sup> and *her* consort. The position of High Priestess was at least equal with the High Priest even in Gardner's time. Indeed, when a man was required for a ritual but none of required rank was available, a woman was allowed to belt on a sword and take his place. A man, however, was never allowed to take the place of a woman. Gardner also theorized (and made clear that it was simply a theory) that the witch-cult descended from Stone Age matriarchal times.<sup>86</sup> Murray too traced it to the Stone Age, but no mention of matriarchy was ever made. Indeed, Murray gives a single nod to the Great Goddess theory, stating that in all probability the cult originally worshipped the Mother Goddess, but that "at the time when the cult is recorded the worship of the male deity appears to have

81. *Ibid.*, 48.

82. Doreen Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (London: Robert Hale; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 17.

83. Gardner, 43.

84. Valiente, 27.

85. The varying practices of capitalization of "Goddess" are dependent upon author. Gardner never capitalized "god" or "goddess" because he was not speaking of deities that he addressed as such. His deities had names, but those names were considered oathbound and so in print he wrote only of "his god and goddess." The practice of addressing deities as "God" and "Goddess" postdates Gardner.

86. Gardner, 43-44.

superseded that of the female, and it is only on rare occasions that the God appears in female form to receive the homage of the worshippers."<sup>87</sup> In 1963, at the age of 100, Murray does declare in *The Genesis of Religion* that the Goddess was "the supreme deity of the ancient faith from which the 'Witch-cult' arose,"<sup>88</sup> but that is almost a decade after Gardner's first publication and therefore is certainly not one of his influences.

There is still fierce debate within the Wiccan community as to how much Gardner was a victim of bad information, a deliberate fraud, or something in-between. Murray's writings were highly popular at the time of Gardner's writings. The University of London had even granted her the degree of Doctor of Letters.<sup>89</sup> As an amateur academic, Gardner may not have even been aware of the criticisms of her work. Nevertheless, there are disturbing passages in *Witchcraft Today*. He quotes part of what is now known as the Charge of the Goddess:

Once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, meet in some secret place and adore me, who am queen of all the magics...

For I am a gracious goddess, I give joy on earth, certainty, not faith, while in life; and upon death, peace unutterable, rest and the ecstasy of the goddess. Nor do I demand aught in sacrifice.<sup>90</sup>

He theorizes that it dates from when Romans and other strangers came into lands where the witch-cult held sway.<sup>91</sup> However, the first paragraph is lifted nearly verbatim from Charles Leland's *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches* (1899) while the second paragraph borrows chapter 1, verse 58 of Aleister Crowley's *Liber AL or Book of the Law* (1904) with only minor alterations.

Murray is commonly considered the leading influence on Gardner. Indeed, sometimes a historian criticizing Murray will also direct a few very unflattering remarks toward modern witches. However, as already shown, Gardner did not blindly accept Murray's thesis, nor was Murray his only source. Ronald Hutton in *Triumph of the Moon* has already traced in excellent detail the many influences upon Gardner, which I mention here only to illustrate the complex weave of associations leading to modern witchcraft: nineteenth-century Romanticism, Freemasonry, *The Golden Bough*, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley, *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches*, and the theories of the Great Goddess and ancient matriarchal civilizations.

87. Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 13.

88. Hutton, "Paganism and Polemic," 111.

89. E. O. James, "Obituaries: Dr. Margaret Murray," *Folklore* 74 (Winter 1963), 568.

90. Gardner, 42.

91. *Ibid.*

Moreover, as Murray was not the first to put forth the idea of witchcraft as Pagan religion, it is possible that another would have popularized the notion even if Murray had not. So while Murray was undoubtedly a significant influence on Gardner, it is possible that Gardner would have put forth something similar even if Murray's books had never been published.

Indeed, if it were not for Gardner, the Murray thesis would likely have vanished into obscurity by the 1970s. Modern witches repeatedly appeared in the news in Britain, which could only have encouraged sales of Murray's books. Furthermore, the Murray thesis's attachment to this new religious movement earned it instant defenders. These new adherents, however, were rarely academics, and their books found plenty of non-academic publishers. Well into the 1980s, respected Wiccan authors continued to publish information on the Old Religion.

In 1986 Raymond Buckland, a former covener of Gardner's, admitted that the Murray thesis had some problems. Like Gardner, he did not think the cult was as widespread as Murray depicted it, nor did he think there was evidence "of a direct, unbroken line of descent from the cave-people [sic]." <sup>92</sup> He was even aware that scholars disputed most of Murray's claims, although he described these disputes as recent, apparently oblivious to the existence of the older criticisms. <sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, he dedicated five pages to describing the evolution of the Old Religion from Paleolithic religion. He even included the two cave drawings of men dressed as horned animals included in *The God of the Witches*.

But there was stronger dissent in the Pagan community as well. Isaac Bonewits was describing Murray's witch-cult as non-existent by at least 1971 in his book *Real Magic*, with the result that many considered Bonewits unfriendly to the Wiccan and Witchcraft communities. <sup>94</sup> In 1979, Margot Adler dedicated a lengthy section of *Drawing Down the Moon* to the subject of the Murray thesis, stating that "while modern Wicca has very little to do with the witchcraft of the Middle Ages, the revival was strongly influenced by Margaret Murray." <sup>95</sup> Her use of the words "modern" and "revival", however, leaves open the possibility that there may be a historical witch-cult. She writes of Paleolithic horned gods and fertility goddesses being honored in secret through the Christian era as being a Wiccan myth that most simply took too literally. <sup>96</sup>

92. Raymond Buckland, *The Complete Book of Witchcraft* (1986; reprint, St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1991), 6.

93. *Ibid.*, 1.

94. Margot Adler, *Drawing down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* (1979; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 67.

95. *Ibid.*, 47.

96. *Ibid.*, 45-46.



A decade later, Scott Cunningham is still wary on the subject. In *Wicca for the Solitary Practitioner* he states: "As stated earlier, the Wicca as outlined in this book is 'new', although built upon established rituals and myths, firmly rooted within the earliest religious feelings within nature aroused within our species."<sup>97</sup> This Wicca may be new, but he doesn't rule out the possibility that there is a form of ancient Wicca, and his reference to "established rituals and myths" encourages this impression. Furthermore, there is no clear earlier statement of Wicca's age. The closest I can find is a reference to the "current controversy as to the antiquity of Wicca."<sup>98</sup> However, it is notable that none of Murray's works appear in his list of suggested readings.

Through the 1990s into the present there has been a great variety of opinions within the Pagan community. A large number of practitioners now fully accept Wicca as a modern religion and the Murray thesis as thoroughly erroneous. However, multiple authors continue to claim to follow the Old Religion as discovered by Murray, including Silver Ravenwolf, who is possibly the current best-selling Wiccan author. She makes no attempt at an academic approach. Gardner may have had bad information, but he at least attempted to be critical. Ravenwolf, on the other hand, appears content to string together information from second-hand, thirdhand or fourthhand sources. For instance, she describes the Dianic Tradition as

first pinpointed by Margaret Murray in 1921 in "The Witch-Cult in Western Europe," this term appears to include a mixture of various traditions. However, their prime focus in recent years is on the Goddess, and has been pegged as the "feminist" movement of the Craft."<sup>99</sup>

Ravenwolf clearly has no real idea what Murray meant when referring to the Dianic cult and has an even harder time equating Murray's cult of the Horned God with modern feminist Dianics. Likewise, Ravenwolf stubbornly keeps to the number of nine million victims of the witch-trials,<sup>100</sup> even though academic scholarship has long since lowered that number to no more than 100,000 and more likely closer to 40,000.<sup>101</sup>

So, why would anyone, much less authors, so stubbornly cling to such an inaccurate and ill-supported theory? For some, it may be the fear that

97. Scott Cunningham, *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1992), 10.

98. *Ibid.*, 4.

99. Silver Ravenwolf, *To Ride a Silver Broomstick: New Generation Witchcraft* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1993), 12.

100. *Ibid.*, 19.

101. Hutton, *Triumph*, 132, 435-36.

an admittance of historical error implies a flaw within the religion itself. Wicca certainly is not the only religion facing this quandary, but its nature actually makes it less, not more, dependant upon historical continuity. In Islam, for example, the Koran is the literal and unaltered word of Allah, and Islamic scholars are wrestling with the discovery of old Korans that are not, in fact, identical to modern versions. Wicca, lacking a revelatory text, should feel far less threatened. The Council of American Witches addressed this issue in 1974 as a part of their Thirteen Principles of Belief, which states: "As American Witches, we are not threatened by debates on the history of the Craft, the origins of various terms, the legitimacy of various aspects of different traditions. We are concerned with our present, and our future."<sup>102</sup>

However, there is a faction within the Wiccan community that is more attracted by the pseudo-history than the theology. Followers of the Old Religion claim to follow a religion older than Christianity. Indeed, they frequently claim to follow the world's oldest religion. Boasting nine million victims, the Old Religion has supposedly racked up more victims than the Jewish Holocaust. The Old Religion is a survivor, a rebel, and a thorn in the side of Christian authority, and this still appeals to many Wiccans, particularly teenagers, who are the targets of much of the current literature. This should not come as too much of a surprise, considering that rebellion against the established party line was part of the appeal of the Murray thesis from the very beginning.

As time progresses, it becomes more and more difficult for serious Pagan Murrayites to justify themselves. Starhawk is a feminist witch who makes serious attempts at academic appearances and possesses a real talent for evocative writing. Her books are all well documented with copious footnotes. Unfortunately, those footnotes are full of references to Murray and her various supporters or one-time supporters – Christopher Hill is frequently cited in at least one book. For Starhawk, the witch-trials were not only against the Old Religion but also against women and the peasant classes,<sup>103</sup> a sort of triple genocide. Where outdated references are not enough, she substitutes references to "oral tradition,"<sup>104</sup> which of course a reader cannot verify at all. She attempts to draw connections between documented beliefs of historic groups such as the Ranters and Diggers in seventeenth-century England and the Old Religion. She does confess that the connections between seventeenth-century world-views

102. Quoted in Ravenwolf, 6-7.

103. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 188.

104. *Ibid.*, 197, 207.

and the Old Religion are difficult to document,<sup>105</sup> but she appears totally oblivious to the reasons for this difficulty – namely, that there is still no documentation for the existence of the Old Religion.<sup>106</sup> She even attempts to compare Quaker thought with the Charge of the Goddess, which she insists is of unknown origin.<sup>107</sup> Finally, despite numerous references to Murray's work, the Horned God plays a very small role in Starhawk's writing. She is a Goddess-worshipper. To use evidence of a religion centered on one deity to prove the existence of a religion centered on a different deity is in itself an abuse of evidence worthy of Murray herself.

Others seem to think that the burden of proof remains on Murray's critics, not on her supporters. Donald Frew attacks multiple anti-Murray works by targeting small, specific and relatively tangential details, which he then presumes renders the entire attack upon the Murray thesis invalid.<sup>108</sup> In response, Ronald Hutton states:

[A]t the opening of the 1970s, the thesis was rapidly revealed as possessing no sustainable basis... More recent research has apparently buried it beyond retrieval, and it must be emphasized how extensive that research has been. Between 1980 and 1995 fifteen international academic conferences were held to discuss the witch trials and their context, and the papers presented there, and generally published in the proceedings, represented only a part of the work carried out in the subject during the past two decades. That united hundreds of scholars, covering between them every European state... None have found any basis for characterising early modern witchcraft as paganism.

Donald Frew has apparently read not a single one of these works. As a result, his declaration that the hypothesis that witchcraft was a survival of paganism "can't be ruled out" is made without an attempt to engage even with the relevant body of secondary sources, let alone primary records.<sup>109</sup>

It is a rebuff that would have made G. L. Burr proud. Jacqueline Simpson echoes Hutton with the declaration that

Particularly over the past twenty-five years, there have been very numerous books, articles, and conferences in Britain, Europe, and America. Presenting the research of a multitude of scholars, none of whom uncovered any evidence to support her theory, while finding a great deal incompatible with it... Anyone who hopes to reclaim Murray's reputation as a historian, let alone argue that 'the hypothesis that Witchcraft was a survival of paganism...can't yet be ruled out', can only begin to do so by confronting

105. *Ibid.*, 209.

106. *Ibid.*

107. *Ibid.*, 210.

108. Hutton, "Paganism and Polemic," 104.

109. *Ibid.*, 110.

squarely the issues which this huge body of scholarly work has raised.<sup>110</sup>

Frew does clarify that he does not consider the Murray thesis as proven. However, not only does he, in fact, state that the thesis “can’t be ruled out”<sup>111</sup> but he warns that anyone studying witchcraft, whether historical or modern, should be sensitive to “assumptions that they bring to the study of religious groups and individuals.”<sup>112</sup> The comment was in response to a speech made by Simpson, a scholar not of Wicca but of Margaret Murray, and who has retorted that she was, in fact, discussing Murray.<sup>113</sup> The study of Murray’s thesis cannot possibly involve a religious group, because the group that Murray discusses did not, in fact, ever exist. Frew’s objection only makes sense if he believes that some sort of historical witch-cult existed, and preferably one that at least resembled the one postulated by Murray.

Murray caused considerable damage to the study of witchcraft, especially in the public sphere where her ideas caught the imagination of authors, journalists, and moviemakers who continue to popularize her ideas, at least in fiction. However, she also encouraged a new academic look at a subject largely considered unworthy of study. While historians today do not view medieval and early modern witches as followers of Pagan religion, neither do they dismiss them as simply being caught up in an unfortunate episode of hysteria and panic. Since the 1960s, hundreds of books have been written on the subject of the witch-trials, discussing the intricacies of economic, social, political, and religious interactions that contributed to the jailing and execution of thousands of supposed witches. While the Murray thesis has been demolished on scholarly grounds, no other comprehensive explanation for the witchcraft phenomena has taken its place,<sup>114</sup> which might explain why some held onto the Murray thesis for so long, seeking explanation for a long and bloody chapter of European history. The Murray thesis might be grossly inaccurate, but it is neat, clean, and, yes, imaginative, which seems to be what a great many persons continue to desire. Murray’s appearance of expertise certainly contributed to her popularity, but she also offered a world-view desirable to a great many people. Murray’s books may not be informative, but they

110. Jaqueline Simpson, “Scholarship and Margaret Murray: A Response to Donald Frew,” *Ethnologies* 22.2 (2000): 286-87.

111. Donald Frew, “Methodological Flaws in Recent Studies of Historical and Modern Witchcraft,” *Ethnologies* 20.1 (1998): 61.

112. *Ibid.*, 33.

113. Simpson, “Scholarship,” 1.

114. E. William Monter, “The Historiography of European Witchcraft: Progress and Prospects,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2.4 (Spring 1972): 439.

are inspirational, at the very least driving us to seek the truth behind the phenomena of witchcraft and the fascination the topic continues to command.

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The evolution of Margaret Murray's theory of a historical witch-cult deserves as much scrutiny as the topic of witchcraft itself. Its widespread acceptance despite glaring inaccuracies to the eyes of a modern reader testifies how little interest the academic world had in witchcraft in the first half of the twentieth century. Its enduring popularity in the face of contrary evidence reveals the emotional nerve struck by Murray's works. Today there are those still devoted to the concept of an ancient witch-cult, and they credit Murray with discovering it, even though the cult they describe.

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