

Survivals of the Cult of the Matronae into the Early Middle Ages and Beyond

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From the late first century to the beginning of the fifth century CE, the area now referred to as the Rhineland was under Roman occupation. During this period, thousands of altars were carved and dedicated by individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, in honor of divine beings known as the *Matres* in Gaul and the *Matronae* in *Germania Inferior*. Based on the archeological evidence, these divine beings have been grouped together as goddesses or ancestral spirits. The quantity and quality of the evidence suggest that this was a very important religion for the inhabitants of the region, whether they were Celtic, Germanic, or Roman.

When the Romans moved into these areas, they brought with them their distinctive artistic methods of portraying the divine. Because Romans associated local deities with their own, they portrayed the goddesses of Gaul and Germany using Roman artistic techniques and gave the goddesses a Roman epithet as part of their identities. From the inscriptions on the altars, historians and archaeologists know that most of them were dedicated by Roman citizens, primarily military men and other officials.

With these cults, the Romans took local religions and transformed them, iconographically and intellectually, in such a way as to make it more appealing to other Romans. For such a religion to appeal to the high-ranking, intellectually sophisticated devotees, it had to offer not only domestic well-being and fertility, but also comfort and protection in this world and the next. These cults of the northern mother goddesses are examples of *interpretatio romana* (Wissowa, 85).

The Romans defeated the people but did not ignore their concepts of the divine; they added their own iconography to the cult while allowing it to maintain its local character. This local character can be seen in the retention of native names and the triple imagery of the matrons -- concepts alien to the Roman world but apparently not considered incorrect or inferior. This triple imagery is very common for Celtic religious expression, yet most of these altars were dedicated by Romans and represent one example of the Roman predilection for syncretism in religious matters.

A careful study of the sanctuary sites for these cults shows that most of the altar inscriptions were written in the second half of the second century and the first quarter of the third. Some of these

sanctuaries were active places of worship until their destruction or abandonment in the beginning of the fifth century (Lehner, 301-321).

Did the cult of the *Matronae* die out with the destruction of the temple sites or is there evidence that it may have survived in an altered form? Information is scarce and sketchy after the beginning of the fifth century, but there does appear to be some evidence for continuation of the *Matronae* and their cult into later periods. In his article on the origins of Christmas Eve, Ernst Maas attempts to make a connection between the Anglo-Saxon name of that night with the *Matronae*. The English historian Bede (born 673) records that the non-Christian Angles held a celebration on Christmas Eve called *Modraniht*, which can be translated as "mothers' night" (Maas, 60). Although the Angles came from an area north and east of the Rhineland, this does provide the possibility of a continuing existence of a cult dedicated to the mothers through the seventh century.

Another possible example of survival of worship of the *Matronae* or at least a similar concept is the *Disir* from Scandinavian myth. The *Disir* are the spirits of the female ancestors who received sacrifices during midwinter (DuBois, 51). These spirits were venerated and appeased in order for the family to prosper. This is a very similar to *Matronae* worship.

Further evidence of figures that could be connected to the *Matronae*, can be found in the 11th century writings of Burchard, the bishop of Worms. In the nineteenth book of his compendium of canon law sources, known as the *Decretum*, he mentions the penance that a person must undergo if they believe and worship the *Parcae* (Migne, 971B-D). The term *Parcae* was used in a number of inscriptions from the Roman period to refer to some of the *Matronae*, and is translated as "the Fates." Wolfgang Heiligendorff believes that Burchard was referring to a surviving aspect of the cult of the *Matronae*, but by itself the evidence is not sufficient to warrant this conclusion (Heiligendorff, 5-100). Bishop Burchard was born to a noble family of Hesse and was educated at several schools, including ones at Köln and Koblenz, especially the Benedictine school at Lobbes in the Diocese of Cambrai (Buckley, 886-887). With such an education he was certainly familiar with the ancient Roman literature on "the Fates" and since he was in Köln as well, he may have seen some of the original altars and at least one altar to the *Parcae* has been found at Worms (CIL XIII 6223). The peasants certainly did not use the term *Parcae* in their worship; the term was what an educated man like Burchard would use. The evidence is uncertain however since, although the city of Worms is on the Rhine, it lies far south of main *Matronae* sites. Burchard also lived six centuries after the last of the sanctuary sites were vacated or destroyed.

Another survival may possibly be found in the female martyr saints Einbede, Warbede, and Willebede. They appear in a stone relief at

the Cathedral of Worms that dates before the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The relief may be as old as the first structure on the site, a cloister built in 1243 CE. The martyrs are depicted as three women draped in heavy clothing and crowned by halos. Each holds a book and a palm frond (Jung, 177). These women are supposed to be three Burgundian princesses who were martyred by Attila the Hun. Heiligendorff interprets their names as meaning "what is", "what was", and "what will be." (Mackensen, 26). Because of the interpretation of these names, the three sisters are identified by some as being associated with the *Parcae* (Heiligendorff, 26). The *Parcae* have been associated with the *Matronae* in a number of altars from the Roman period. These same sisters appear in stone reliefs at twenty-two different churches and chapels throughout southwest Germany built between the 13th and 15th centuries (Heiligendorff, 29-31).

The first written version of their martyrdom comes from the seventeenth century, when a Jesuit priest named Crombach recorded the events as having taken place in the fifth century (Heiligendorff, 32). Because these figures coincidentally appear in a set of three and slightly resemble the robed and circularly coifed figures from the *Matronae* altars, some scholars consider them as survivals of the *Matronae* cult.

One strong piece of evidence links these sisters to the *Matronae* cult: the similarity of the objects found in both types of carvings. Einbede, Warbede, and Willebede are portrayed in a manner similar to the *Matronae* on their altars. The sisters are dressed in clothing much like that of the *Matronae*: their hair is long and loose like that of the middle *Matronae* figure. All three have halos that resemble the headdresses of the two older *Matronae*. The halos could be a Christian reworking of the Germanic headgear worn by the *Matronae*.

The princesses hold items that could be interpreted as related to the objects held by the *Matronae*. In one hand they hold palm fronds, lilies, or other flowers; in the other they have a book, rose, arrow, staff, or a gold ring. The Christian symbolic interpretation of these items is similar to the meaning of the fruit, money, or bread held by the *Matronae* -- abundance, fertility, power, and wealth (Heiligendorff, 44-45).

It is possible that Einbede, Warbede, and Willebede are indirectly descended in some way from the *Matronae*. The artists who created the images of the sisters may have been influenced by examples of *Matronae* altars that could still be seen. They could have depicted what they saw in a more Christian form. This shows there does not need to be a direct link of religious belief for the iconography to survive.

Closely associated with Einbede, Warbede, and Willebede, by their iconography, is the veneration of three sisters known as Faith, Hope, and Charity (Fides, Spes, and Caritas). Traditionally they are three sisters who were martyred during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (117-138CE) and they are portrayed in a way that is similar to the

Burgundian princesses. Faith, Hope, and Charity present a stronger case for the influence of the *Matronae* because they are found in the same geographic region, including the cities of Bonn and Köln (Heiligendorff, 51-53). These sisters were venerated by the common people in this region for many centuries.

These are all possible examples of the survival of some aspects of the *Matronae* cult into later periods. It was not uncommon for pagan deities to be adopted into the emerging Christian world view. One way of transforming an old deity was to make him or her a Christian saint with identical or similar characteristics (Berger, 49). Saint Brigid of Ireland is an example of this process. In pre-Christian Ireland, there was a goddess of fire, smithcraft, poetry, inspiration, and healing known as Brigid. When Christianity came to Ireland one of the early figures that helped in the conversion was a woman known as Brigid. She was the abbottess of Kildare when she died, was considered a saint by the people, covering smithcraft, poetry, and healing. She was also known as the foster-mother of Christ and the patron saint of childbirth. Her feast day (February 2) is the same day as the celebration in honor of the old goddess Brigid. The celebration was known as Imbolc, Brigidmas, or Candlemas (MacCana, 154). This process was most common in the countryside, where conversion to Christianity was slower and belief in the old gods persisted longer. By turning these old gods into saints, the Church facilitated conversion to the new faith. The Church fathers extended this policy to other aspects of the older religions, including sacred sites and ritual practices. This policy is clearly outlined in a letter from Pope Gregory the Great to Saint Augustine in 601 CE., as quoted by the Venerable Bede:

He (Saint Augustine) is to destroy the idols, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up, and relics enclosed in them. For if these temples are well built, they are to be purified from devil-worship, and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that its temples are not destroyed, may abandon idolatry and resort to these places as before, and may come to know and adore the true God. (Bede, 1.30)

One of the most common ways of absorbing the older religion was for Christianity to take over the old feasts and holidays as well (Berger, 52). Christmas and the Easter are prime examples of this widespread practice.

Christmas is the holiday that is supposed to honor the birth of Christ, but many traditions and practices can be traced back to pre-Christian religious holidays that occurred at the same time of year. The

date for Christmas is the same as the Feast of the Invincible Sun of the Roman religion. The Sun was said to be born on December 25 and the early Christians used that date for the birth of the son of God (Baldovin, *Christmas*, 460). Other Christmas traditions that can be traced back to pre-Christian practices including, the Yule log, the holly, the mistletoe, and the concept of the birth of the light.

The formula that is used to calculate Easter would seem to be a wholly Christian tradition, but it has echoes of pre-Christian practices in it. The formula is that Easter is on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. This has echoes of the traditions associated with the coming of spring and the pre-Christian celebrations of the solstices and equinoxes. Other pagan themes that were absorbed by Easter include the traditions of painting eggs and the Easter hare or rabbit (Baldovin, *Easter*, 558).

Following this pattern, it seems that the *Matronae* were slowly absorbed into the local cult of saints when Christianity became the dominant religion in the region. They were likely incorporated because their worship persisted and common people still had need for them and their divine functions. The *Matronae* were converted into sisters and female saints, and legends were created years later to explain their existence. The fact that, as late as the eleventh century, Bishop Burchard had to warn people not to worship the *Parcae* shows how strongly these deities were imbedded in the faith of the common people.

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