

A whole forest of oaks, the island in the river, the fire and the bees of the Goddess: what Isis said

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This story, which perhaps follows the story of the Sibyl's warning in PAN 13, 2017, also begins with Oak, that prophetic and revelatory tree.ⁱⁱ

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The Sibyl's warning: I put my hand on a low oak branch and asked myself how a tree feels during an earthquake. That was early morning on October 30th 2016, when I was watching the sheep on our hillside. Instantly, the tree began jumping violently up and down. I was shocked. It took me a moment to realize that the whole landscape was rolling: it was the biggest earthquake in Italy since the 6.9R quake which had killed nearly three thousand people in Irpinia in 1980. The extraordinary precision of this answer to my question prompted me to look up the epicentre. Thus I discovered that the quake emanated from an area called the Sibylline mountains, below the summit of Monte Bove, known as the *Corona della Sibilla* (the Sibyl's Crown). A gash, 10 km long and 1 – 2 metres wide, opened up along the path to the cave where the prophetic Sibyl lived in pre-Christian times.

When a mountain speaks, it behoves us to listen.

I thought of the words of ecophilosopher Freya Mathews and so did my best to wait for events to unfold. "The discipline of decoding the world's replies to our questions is basically a poetic discipline. For just as the poet has to find the right image—one which holds a plurality of interleaved dimensions of symbolism within the irreducible unity of its concreteness—so the inquirer in the revelatory mode has to discover the salient constellations of experiences, things, or circumstances that hold such symbolism. Revelation also involves a discipline of waiting, of patience, of allowing the onion slowly, in its own time, to bare its many layers, little by little. One forgoes the kind of closure that reason on its own could cleverly impose at any time."ⁱⁱⁱ

I explored the significances around the Sibyl's presence and reputation down the centuries but I had a strong feeling that her message was about some world-changing event which was coming towards us. Although the damage to Norcia was enormous and the basilica of Saint Benedict collapsed, nobody was hurt. So this was perhaps a merciful warning which came to me via the oak that morning.

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This time there are *five thousand oaks*, a whole forest of oaks, holding up the roof of Notre Dame de Paris, that iconic hearth of European Christianity which caught fire on the evening of April 15th 2019. This roof is actually known to the Parisians as "la forêt", the forest. The anguished Parisians stood together in the streets weeping and singing the *Ave Maria* under a night sky lit up by the roaring flames while they watched the sacred heart of their city burn.

Thirty meters below the burning roof, above the sacristy on the south side of the cathedral, stood three beehives, installed in 2013 and home to 200,000 bees.

As the flames began to destroy the roof and the spire of the cathedral, the terrifying blaze shimmered on the waters of the Seine, for Notre Dame stands on an island in the river in the centre of the city. The

building of Notre Dame began in 1163 and the church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, but the history of that place surrounded by flowing water has a much older connection with the veneration of the sacred feminine image.

According to the Greek geographer Strabo, writing at the time of Cesar Augustus, the tribe of the Parisii, a Celtic Iron Age people, lived along the river Seine "on an island in the river". There is speculation that the name of the tribe derives from the Egyptian *Per-Isi*, "the temple of Isis". They were mentioned for the first time by Julius Cesar in his *De Bello Gallico*. The Parisii settlement was called Lucotocia but was renamed Civitas Parisiorum, "the city of the Parisii" in 360 AD by the emperor Julian in honour of its founders.

These Parisii carried with them from their place of origin their religion and their secret rites which centred on the Goddess Isis and we have a report of an original statue of Isis, preserved in the Abbey of St. Germain-des-Prés (another Benedictine centre) until 1514, when the Archbishop of Meaux had it destroyed.

The names and qualities traditionally given to the Virgin Mary - *Queen of Heaven, Mystical Rose, Mother of divine grace, Mother most pure, Mother most chaste, Mother most amiable, Virgin most merciful, Virgin most faithful, Cause of our joy, Comforter of the Afflicted* - all tend towards kindness but the aspects of the Goddess Isis are not all gentle. On the pillars of the twenty-one doors of the temple of Sekhmet-Mut at Thebes some of the descriptions of the aspects of Isis are Kali-like in their terrifying power to overwhelm her adversaries: The goddess Sekhmet, identified with Isis and sometimes portrayed as her mother, has violent characteristics that can cause destruction and illness: "Burning flame that cannot be extinguished, tongues of fire which destroy without pity" "Lady of Light who roars loudly".^{iv}

Nevertheless, we must also remember the more dynamic aspects of the Virgin Mary, from the Litany of Loreto: *Virgin most powerful, Mirror of justice, Seat of wisdom*. The Madonna has her powerful side too.

The deafening noise of the flames consuming the five thousand oak beams in the roof and the vast illumination of the sky were absolutely spectacular.

When the fire was finally put out, there was one woman in Paris who was worrying about the bees on the roof: had they survived the great holocaust? She is the person who takes care of the Notre Dame bees and she had to wait three months before she was allowed back up to check whether they had survived the great heat, the toxic fumes and the deluge of water.

The bees survived. The beekeeper's name is Sibyle Moulin. We could have asked: what was Notre Dame saying with those flames? What was Isis saying? Who are her adversaries?

Demeter's sacred Oak, the insatiable appetite of Erysichthon and his punishment: what Demeter said

I am following here a path of enquiry shown me by the oak that so startled me with a swift response at the time of the 2016 earthquake in the Sibylline Mountains

On 19th July 2019, Athens was shaken by an earthquake which sent its citizens running into the streets. The epicentre, though, was actually in Eleusis, the place of the ancient Mystery rites dedicated to Demeter and Persephone. Thus after many centuries, a crowd of people once more ran through the streets in the place sacred to the Goddess.

The Greater Eleusian Mysteries were celebrated at the autumn equinox for nearly two thousand years and came to an end only with the closing of the sanctuary by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 392 AD. The deep understanding which the initiates drew from the secret ceremonies did not arise from an explicit theology but rather from the religious acts of the participants: it was an *experiential* initiation.

The secret regarding the content of the rites was never betrayed in so many centuries: it is said that the sacred Mysteries were accessible only with a golden key which the priests of Demeter kept "fast upon the tongue".^v However tradition has it that the participants experienced a descent to the underworld as an image of the descent of the soul into the body which, as Plato recounts in the myth of Er in the tenth book of

the Republic, is accompanied by thunder and earthquake. Comparative studies link the rites with those of other Middle-eastern cults such as that of Isis and Osiris.

The Greater Mysteries, in which the initiates “learn, contemplate and ponder the nature of things” was said to have five stages: purification, transmission of the sacred rites, contemplation, crowning and finally the felicity that comes from experiencing the presence of the gods.^{vi}

One of the stories about Demeter tells of her anger with King Erysichthon of Thessaly. Perhaps this particular story of insatiable greed can give us, as we ponder the way forward in our moment of fear and isolation during the coronavirus pandemic, a more specific indication of what happens if the natural world is consumed without respect.

So, King Erysichthon, wishing to build himself a banqueting hall, ordered his men to chop down a whole grove sacred to Demeter. Amongst the trees, the men found a huge oak tree hung all over with votive offering to the Goddess in gratitude for prayers answered and this tree they refused to cut down. The king therefore took an axe and chopped the tree down himself, killing the dryad in the oak who cursed him as she died.

Demeter punished Erysichthon by filling him with a spirit of insatiable hunger. The king sold everything he had to buy endless supplies of food, but the more voraciously he ate, the hungrier he felt. Finally, he sold his own daughter Mestra, who was however, saved by Poseidon. *In the end, Erysichthon devoured his own body.*

Ovid tells us of the desperate avidity of the king:

“Yet when his wicked frenzy had consumed all sustenance and for the dire disease provision failed, the ill-starred wretch began to gnaw himself, and dwindled bite by bite as his own flesh supplied his appetite.”^{vii}

Thus the Goddess made visible to the human world the woes which are the consequence of unbridled greed.

Picturing the flight through the streets of the inhabitants of Eleusis during the earthquake in July 2019, I remember that one can still see the signs of the huge oak doors at the threshold of the sanctuary through which the participants in the Mysteries passed as they approached the sacred rites of Demeter and her daughter Persephone.

Before reducing us to this unprecedented period of silence and quiescence, the ancient holy places of Europe perhaps warned us in their language of earth and fire not to destroy the sacred grove of the world. It is up to us to use this chance to reflect or resign ourselves to devouring our own bodies.

26 March 2020

15th day of the pandemic

The Sibyl, Isis, Demeter, but that’s ridiculous, isn’t it?

So, are we to believe that the ancient oracles are still at work? What kind of meaning, if any, have we indicated by recalling these three recent episodes? How can these very old European stories have anything to say to us in our hour of hardship during this frightening pandemic in 2020?

For the modern world, earthquakes and fires have no significance beyond their material consequences. For several centuries, the idea that they might be portents or messages from the gods has been regarded as a primitive fantasy.

But we could ask ourselves what kind of worldview gave rise to those ancient ideas. It seems to me that in all pre-modern societies, the physical world was seen as a living entity and felt to have priority over the organisms it contained. In order to express the nature of this containing and nourishing entity, human beings saw its parts as personified. Thus rivers, mountains, seas, forests were seen as gods and goddesses. The many divinities who arose from the evident multiplicity of this world expressed for us as humans our

fundamental connection with a living world and this is because the only subjectivity which we know from direct experience is our own.

Demeter and Persephone were known as the “sacred nourishing Goddesses” and what in fact provides our nourishment? Of course it is the physical world, with its waters, plants and animals. Demeter and Persephone are the material world in its wholeness. And Isis? One of the prayers to Isis says “Hail to thee, Great One, Divine One, your veil has not been lifted, it has not been lifted! Hail to thee, Oh Hidden One, there is no path which leads to you.” What is this veil? Perhaps it was a way of speaking of the green and fertile natural world behind which humans perceived an invisible subjectivity?

In our modern, utilitarian society, this language of respect and veneration sounds primitive and extravagant.

But let us reflect on the consequences of our turning away from this very ancient worldview. This traditional conception of the nature of reality sustained societies which flourished for many millennia. We now live in a “global” society in which any residual divinity is transcendental and the physical world is left to the greed of those who exploit it. We live in a fragile and precarious society and now our vulnerability is suddenly and shockingly exposed.

Shall we try for a moment thinking in the old way and see if it suggests something helpful?

If the physical, material world were alive, present to itself, in fact an intelligent and communicative subjectivity, with its own ends and a timescale beyond the human one, how could it speak to us, its small and dependent parts?

Dialogue requires a shared language. What kind of language could the seas, the rivers, the forests and the mountains speak? It would have to be a language of physical things, made of the elements of this world – water, fire, stone, soil, plants, animals, weather – but how could we humans understand this language?

Over the long ages, the world itself has inspired our stories, our great mythological narratives. Together the world and its people have created a common language. Thus when the mountain splits open just below the Sibyl's crown (*la corona della Sibilla*), we could, while we calculate the Richter measurements, also remember the Sibyl's role as a prophetess and ask ourselves what kind of warning she is offering us. When we stand transfixed watching the fire as it burns the spire of Notre Dame on the island where Isis was venerated, we could ask ourselves what adversaries these Goddesses are fighting and why. When we see people once again running through the streets of Eleusis, we could recall what was celebrated in Demeter's sacred night and then perhaps we would remember the winter which fell upon the world when the Goddess lost her daughter and what a long search, what trials she had to undergo in order to find her and transform the world back into a green and fruitful place again.

Then perhaps we would see that the physical world speaks to us in the language we have brought into being together, we and the world, and that here in the European context, this language is based on the mythology of our own narrative tradition. In other parts of the world, there will certainly be ancient place-stories that are called up for those who are listening in moments of crisis, like the many months of terrible fires in Australia in 2019-2020.

The philosophical position which sees the physical cosmos as having a psychic interiority is panpsychism. One of its exponents, Christof Koch, says “I often encounter incomprehension”^{viii} and the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* begins the entry on Panpsychism with these words: “Although panpsychism seems incredible to most people nowadays, it was accepted in one form or another by many eminent thinkers both in antiquity and in more recent times.”^{ix}

The panpsychist position is a serious alternative to the mechanistic, Newtonian worldview in which we have all been educated. It shows up the fragility of the scientific view of the physical world as an inert backdrop for human existence and instead suggests it is a communicative presence capable and desirous of carrying on a dialogue with us.^x If this is in fact the nature of reality, then perhaps the natural world is trying to speak to us. Can we allow ourselves to remain deaf to the call of the world any longer?

2 April 2020

23rd day of the pandemic

Notes

1. Etain Addey lives in the foothills of the Italian Appennines, where she and her partner Martin Lanz and passing friends have farmed for forty years. Her country stories and reflections are published in Italian and English: *Una gioia silenziosa* (2003), Ellin Selaie/A Silent Joy (2010), Eyebright Books, Lydney Glos; *Acque profonde*, (2009), FioriGialli/From the Deep Well (2016), Eyebright Books, Lydney Glos; *La vita della giumenta bianca* (2015), Magi Edizioni, Rome/The Life of the White Mare (2020), Eyebright Books, Lydney Glos. Etain is a founding member of the Italian bioregional group, Sentiero Bioregionale (www.sentierobioregionale.org) and organizes the local farmers' market.
2. E. Addey (2017), "The tree, the cave, the lake, the stream: What the sibyl said", PAN 13.
3. F. Mathews (2003), *For Love of Matter: a Contemporary Panpsychism*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2003, p 203.
4. E. Neumann (1981), *La Grande Madre: fenomenologia delle configurazioni femminili dell'inconscio*, Astrolabio, Roma.
5. G. Colli (1977), *La sapienza greca*, Adelphi, Milano. The saying comes from Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus where the Chorus sing:

Where the dread Queen and Maid
Cherish the mystic rites,
Rites they to none betray,
Ere on his lips is laid
Secret's golden key
By their own acolytes,
Priestly Eumolpidae.

6. Clemente Alessandrino, *Stromata* V 71,I.
7. Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Translated by A. S. Kline. Book VIII. <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm> Accessed 5 December 2020.
8. O. Burkeman (2015), "Why can't the world's greatest minds solve the mystery of consciousness", *The Guardian*, 21 Jan.
9. D. M. Borchert (ed) (2006) *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Thomson Gale/MacMillan Reference USA.
10. F. Mathews (2003) *For Love of Matter: a Contemporary Panpsychism*, SUNY Press, Albany.