

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



*The  
Continuing  
Power of  
Legend*

HELEN MARTINEAU

## THE CONTINUING POWER OF LEGEND

### Legends and myths

The intent of legends may be moral, educational or inspirational – heroic sagas of love, bravery, sacrifice, noble deeds, tales of wise leaders, demons and animal helpers; stories told and retold to bond a group or honour a place of powerful energy where legendary events were said to have taken place. And they would have developed first as oral traditions. Over time legends were added to and embellished. Many legends also contain mythic elements.

Despite the common assumption, myths are not synonymous with legends (nor are they the ‘unreal fictions’ or fallacies modern usage implies). A myth is a kind of shorthand to portray the numinous, the divine worlds, and the reality of their relationship to human lives. Myths belong to the sacred, to religions. Their universality derives from humanity’s connection with the great mysteries of existence, known first to initiates, seers and poets and represented by symbolic rituals, pictures and stories. This symbolism dwells deep in the human psyche. Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Rudolf Steiner are scholars in different fields who investigated such spiritual archetypes to interpret the meaning of myths, or meanings because myths are many layered.

### The disciples’ inner purposes inspire legends

Disciples who had been immersed in the ministry of Jesus Christ journeyed forth to convey the meaning of his death and resurrection. ‘The twelve’ gained their own legends – such as Thomas journeying through Persia and as far as India, Andrew to Scythia north of the Caspian Sea and Bartholomew to Armenia where he became patron saint of that church. Their dedication was understood to be confirmed by their various forms of martyrdom.

Behind such legends, which were consolidated over the centuries, lies the story of the spread of Christianity. Behind this is a deeper reality of the spiritual seeds planted in those regions by itinerant apostles.

The legends about Peter saw him in Rome becoming the first pope (from *papa* ‘father’) before being crucified upside-down. This became the foundation story of the Roman Catholic church. The mission of the soul known as Peter was to become that figurehead for the unfolding of the western church as a physical and eventually worldly institution.

In our period of dreadful revelations of abuse emerging from a redundant church hierarchy, we need also to recognise that the Christ message was once able to survive and develop safely within a firm structure. For a time, the radical new mystery needed such protection. But that time has long passed and as always what originally had a purpose becomes negative when we hang on to it beyond its 'use-by date'.

Mary Magdalene inspired many legends with mythical dimensions. The Eastern Orthodox churches have never accepted Mary the 'penitent prostitute'. Building on the gospels their Magdalene is the Myrrh Bearer and Apostle to the Apostles. And in legend she spent her final days in Ephesus working with John the gospel writer.

Mary is also said to have spent time in Rome and England, but France is the dominant legendary site and the source of most of her legends that grew up in the Roman Catholic church. Why is this? Legends particularise universal myth. And in the case of the divine feminine, my sense is that the stories growing up around the Magdalene and other exceptional women in Christian tradition made up for something the church in western Europe by the early Middle Ages had sent underground.

### **Ancient Gaul's gods and goddesses become saints**



*The Matres – triune goddess of Gaul  
Mercury*



*Celtic Rosmerta & Roman*

Since primal ages people have worshipped the spirits at special places of power in nature. When one group replaced another the gods and goddesses simply acquired new names

Gaul, the region of modern-day France, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany was inhabited by indigenous Celtic peoples ((Gauls). Celts everywhere had linguistic, social and artistic similarities, but really were made up of many tribal groups with their own leaders. Their religion was nature based and associated with deities of caves, forests, rivers, springs and hilltops. These places were personified, and goddesses were as prevalent as gods. There were many divine couples. And there was the triple goddess represented as the trio called Matres,

The conquering Romans, in typical fashion simply absorbed these deities and placed their votive images in the multi-cultural temple called the Pantheon (it still stands in Rome today). Epona the horse goddess was 'adopted' by the Romans as their own although this was unusual.

Gauls began to give their gods an additional Roman name and/or marry the Roman god to one of their goddesses, such as Roman Mercury merging with Esus as husband of Rosmerta, 'the great provider' who was prominent across Celtic Europe.

The first firm record of Christians in Gaul is a description of their torture and martyrdom at Lugdunum (Lyon) in 177 CE during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Christian missionaries spread the message and it took hold despite opposition. Legends grew up and have filled in the information gaps.

Wherever Christianity put down roots, Christians built their churches on sites that had long been sacred to the gods and goddesses of indigenous peoples. Some deities became Christian saints; and as well some saints were adopted as deities by local people. There was no problem about this mingling, for a while.

## **Two Marys; two Christian expressions of the feminine spirit**

But with the Romanisation of the western church and its growth as a worldly power, the message of a judgemental God and the first-born son he sacrificed (another world myth) for sinful humanity dominated; this along with the demand for obedience to God's representatives – a Catholic all-male clergy with the pope at its head.

Two very different expressions would emerge to compensate. Mary Magdalene, with passionate red as her colour, as a saint needed some adjustment. But the Virgin Mary, who combined loving mother and untouched maid, despite the contradiction, was ideal as an object of

devotion in man's domain as the archetype of heavenly Wisdom or Sophia.



*Images of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary*

The wonderful Gothic cathedral at Chartres in France is a high point in the centuries-long line of churches in the Madonna's pure name – yet which pulse with an insistent undercurrent.

In Notre Dame of Chartres there are two 'Black Madonna' sculptures: One sits enthroned on a pedestal in a side chapel, surrounded by the red-gold light of hundreds of candles that worshippers from around the world light in her honour (a recent clean-up has revealed her as a bit paler). The other, Notre Dame de Sous-Terre, carved from dark wood, lives beneath in the crypt in which there is an ancient well (now blocked up).

Our Lady Under the Ground has an austere and tranquil beauty and with her child on her knees is a replica of an original destroyed during the French Revolution. The crypt and its original Madonna date from centuries before the medieval cathedral above it.

The first church on this site was made of wood and built over a Druid temple – druidic religious artefacts have been excavated there. Chartres was the most sacred meeting place for the Carnutes, the Celtic tribe it was named for.

There are further Black Madonnas in Europe. Several explanations have been put forward to explain these dark-skinned statues. Black is the colour of the earth and a real possibility is that they hold the memory of ancient goddesses. At Chartres, underground waters that once served the well

mark it as a place of power related to a goddess of the fertile earth and the waters, such as Aclionna and Sequana.

So many deep layers of myth were poured into the Virgin Mary, in a sense she really has ascended into the realm of goddesses. The frequent image of her with the child on her knee is a near replica of Egyptian Isis with the infant Horus. The goddess lived on in Christian Europe because this divine mother was more potent than the medieval church's version. But we shall leave her for now and turn to the other Mary called Magdalene.

The Catholic church authorities declared that Mary Magdalene was a fully repentant sinner and a model for all 'fallen womankind'. Her sainthood was therefore assured. Yet whenever we experience her power in her legendary places it is because we, as pilgrims attune to the mythic archetypes behind the often-fanciful legends. They still live in us. But this isn't all we want. We also long for the woman behind both propaganda and legend to be restored to us. That is why, more than for most other biblical women, writings abound attempting to 'prove' that her legends really happened. Let's look at some that surround the legendary Magdalene.

