



Wicca's History . . . Revisited

"The late Dr. Margaret Murray traced back and saw Witchcraft's origins in Paleolithic times: 25,000 years ago. She saw it as a more or less unbroken line through to the present, and as a fully organized religion throughout Western Europe for centuries before Christianity.

"As Christianity gradually grew in strength, so the Old Religion was slowly pushed back. Back until, about the time of the Reformation, it only existed in the outlying country districts . . .

"By the late seventeenth century the surviving members of the Craft had gone underground; into hiding. For the next three hundred years, to all appearances Witchcraft was dead. But a religion which had lasted twenty thousand years, in effect, did not die so easily. In small groups – surviving covens, – oftentimes only family members – the Craft continued.

"A rough estimate of the total number of people burned or tortured to death on the charge of Witchcraft, is nine million. Obviously not all of these people were followers of the Old Religion . . ."

– *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, Lesson One

A lot of our books tell this story – but is it our story? Or is it our lore?

Wicca was developed in the middle of the 20th century by Gerald B. Gardner, an Englishman who believed he was restoring an ancient faith. In fact, he was combining folklore and customs, and ancient attitudes toward Nature. In Wicca, he recreated and modernized an older relationship between humanity, the Goddess and God, and the forces of Nature.

Since then, many denominations – we call them Traditions – of Wicca have developed, all based on Gardner's work and on the Order of Circle he arranged.

Some Pagans say it's alright to worship other cultures' pantheons in a Wiccan format. Others think it's best to worship each pantheon on its own terms. MEM tends toward the idea that it's more respectful to learn about other cultures rather than bring their pantheons into Wicca's Anglo-Celtic context.

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There has always been disagreement with the idea that Wicca is a pre-Christian religion. But even now, some people still believe that what we do today is what people did thousands of years ago. Even in the last 30 years, as earlier theories have been disproven, the idea that Wicca is a new religion has not been completely accepted. There is "new" scholarship, though, unimpeachable, and we must not ignore it.

Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford University Press, 1999) demonstrates – without a shadow of a doubt, many of us think – that Wicca's beloved pre-Christian and medieval "history" is, in fact, our *lore*.

Paganism was virtually gone before the Inquisition was declared. The witchcraft so famously maligned during "the Burning Times" was Satanism – and that seems to have been invented by the Church to explain the growing dissatisfaction with its greed and political power. Between about 1400 and 1700, "only" around 50,000 people were executed for "witchcraft," and none of them were any kind of Wiccan.

Of course that's 50,000 too many people – but the point is that nowhere near nine million were executed for witchcraft. European populations did decline, and steeply, from 1340-1500, but famine, the Hundred Years' War, and the recurring outbursts of the Black Death – the Bubonic Plague – explain more deaths than the Inquisition.

WICCA'S REAL STORY IS ONE WE CAN BE PROUD OF, THOUGH!

Paganism, most of it state religion, was dead. It took a while for things to settle down after the Inquisition and the Plague, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. But once things were sorted, people noticed that something was missing. That "something" was the Goddess. Her followers had been converted, but they still heard Her call – the the whole of English culture answered.

Hutton outlines for us England's two-century preparation, through art, literature, poetry, anthropology, archaeology, and social science, for a restoration of Pagan principles. Beginning in the mid-1700s, the Industrial Revolution helped, too, by making cities dangerous, ugly, and oppressive. By comparison, Nature, which had been seen as unsafe and uncivilized, looked pretty good again.

"In religious terms," Hutton acknowledges of Gerald Gardner, Wicca's founder, "it might be said that he was contacted by a divine force which had been manifesting with increasing strength during the previous two hundred years, and that it worked through him to remarkable effect."

Our lore is still important to us. We can still appreciate the ideas of solidarity, and learn from the old stories that sometimes silence is a good idea. We can let centuries of connection with and dependence on the seasons guide us in our own relationships to Nature.

But we should know and be proud of our newer, truer story, too. There's a popular chant called *We Are the Flow*, and one line goes, "We are the witches, back from the dead." That is our true story – and could Wicca have a better one?