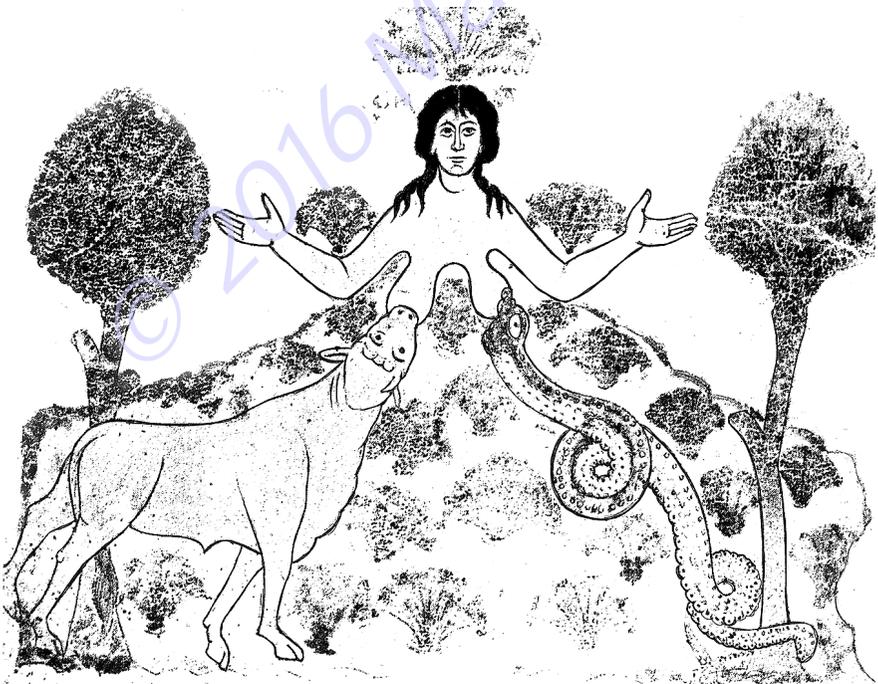


7

THE WITCH HOLDA AND HER RETINUE

In the year 1000, despite their centuries-long campaigns, churchmen still confronted regional ethnic cultures saturated with heathen belief and custom. Bishops and abbots continued to attack them with missionary zeal. Among their weapons were penitential books designed to ferret out beliefs and customs disapproved by the church. Armed with these manuals, priests questioned villagers about their adherence to the forbidden folkways. They were laboring to stamp out veneration of goddesses and their nature sanctuaries, incantation, divination, herbcraft, contraception, tying-on of herbs and amulets—and beliefs in women who journeyed in the spirit.

Around 906, abbot Regino of Prüm wrote a handbook for the use



*Benificent Mother Earth with serpent and bullock at her breast.
Exultet Roll, 11th century parchment from Monte Cassino, Italy*

of bishops on visitations to their dioceses. His *Libri duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis* was intended for interrogation and “correction,” exhorting people to report those who disregarded church doctrine and who kept pagan ways. Women were especially suspect when it came to magical and pagan matters. Many of Regino’s interrogatories began with the words: “Is there any woman who...” Female teachers and practitioners of birth control were major targets of this ecclesiastical offensive on folk culture. So were chanters of invocations to non-Christian deities.

One passage from this work would resonate for centuries, as the foundation for a medieval mythology of shamanic witches who rode the night skies with a goddess. This theme would gradually be transformed into a demonological fantasy that reigned as the defining ideology of the witch hunts; but that process took centuries. It began with Regino of Prüm’s condemnation of a popular belief that witches flew by night in the company of an ancient goddess:

*Diana dea
paganorum*

Certain criminal women, who have turned back to Satan and are seduced by illusions of demons and by phantasms, believe and avow openly that during the night they ride on certain beasts together with Diana, the goddess of the pagans, and an uncounted host of women; that they pass over many lands in the silence of the dead of night; that they obey her orders as those of a mistress; and that on certain nights they are summoned to her service.¹

Regino lamented that “a numberless multitude of people... think that there exists some divine power other than the one God.”² His reference to popular belief in “Diana” was not new. For centuries missionaries fighting to stamp out folk religion had been using this name to denounce goddess veneration, particularly in France and Spain. Back in 585, Gregory of Tours related that a monk had destroyed a statue of “Diana” at Yvois in the Ardennes. He quoted Wulfilaich as saying, “I preached always that Diana was nothing, that her images and the worship which they thought it well to observe were nothing; and that the songs which they sang at their cups and wild debauches were disgraceful...” As a result of his desecrations, the monk broke out in sores all over his body.³ We are told nothing about



The theme of witches riding on animals in the company of a Goddess began to be recorded in the late 800s, and was repeated for centuries. This night rider is clad only in a cape and is blowing a horn. Church fresco, Schleswig, ca 1300.

how these Gaulish-Frankish people felt about the smashing of their goddess (whatever her real name was) or what her shrine looked like, or what ceremonies took place there. We do know that early medieval sources understood Diana as a forest goddess, a spirit of the wilds, who also sometimes appeared to field workers, and whose followers were known as *dianatici*.

Diana became the great exception to the priestly refusal to name competing pagan deities, as Bernadette Filotas has observed. But she comes to us through the clergy's insistence on the *interpretatio romana*; they used a Latin name which "disguised an indigenous Rhenish goddess of death and fertility..."⁴ However, a name of that German goddess managed to leak through the canonical boilerplate (see below).

It is significant that the women themselves said that they rode in the night, even though no one knows what they really believed. This account comes to us third-hand, from a source whose intense bias could not be more clear. Regino contemptuously referred to "little

pages skipped

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in the role of a nocturnal guide of souls, remains unexplained.” He suggests her association with miraculous revivals as “the key” to her linkage with Herodias.⁸³ That is part of the puzzle; but Pharaildis had a more direct association with the witches’ shamanic flights, in the manner of Holle. By 1456, a Bavarian writer was denouncing witches’ flying ointments under the name *unguentum pharelis*.⁸⁴

The theme of “one third” of humanity who follow a goddess reappeared in the late 13th century poem *Roman de la Rose*. Jean de Meun identified them as the followers of Dame Habonde (Lady Abundia). Her name is recognizable as a medieval descendant of the Gallo-Roman goddess Abundantia. Contemporary sources confirm that French women were still making offerings to this goddess. In 1282, bishop William of Auvergne described rites for Lady Abundia, Satia, and the “ladies of the night”:

Concerning the mistresses of the night, that they are the good women, and great gifts are presented by them to the houses which they visit; especially they persuade the women.⁸⁵

These faery divinities fly into houses through keyholes and feast on the offerings of food and drink laid out for them, without ever diminishing their quantity. They bring prosperity to the households that honor them in this way.^{85b} William also reported a belief “that goddesses existed who made such prophecies or predictions at men’s birth.” He had heard people say that they had overheard goddesses “talking together of the destiny of children being born.” The bishop regarded all this as superstition, but warned that it was far more widespread than “the ravings of old women,” since it was “repeated almost everywhere,” including near his own birthplace.^{85c}

The *Roman de la Rose* follows the Canon Episcopii by setting the



Earth with snake, tree, and babies.
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