

PAGAN DIGEST



THE IRISH PAGAN SCHOOL
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WELCOME TO THE DIGEST!

There's a lot of stuff available online, but one of the things that's been pissing me off about current Pagan resources is that folk can't tell what's quality, reliable, and recommended... and what is just going to add more owl shite that you only have to unlearn later.

So, we decided to commission some of the top Pagan minds (all of whom are reputable published authors) to write unique, fresh articles on general Pagan topics which we can then supply to our members.

In this way, our lovely authors get paid and supported (by us and by you, if you are a Pagan Digest subscriber!) to create the best Quality Pagan Resources on a regular basis, and you know you are only learning the good stuff so you don't have to waste any of your time or energy with the rest!

To make it accessible and sustainable, we have created a simple, inexpensive monthly subscription membership that you just enroll in at the Irish Pagan School, and you can access a pleasantly formatted digital PDF file each week containing (at least) one of the following Pagan Digest pieces:

- An Article written especially for you by a published Pagan author (there will be TWO author articles available per month)
- Author Answers – one of our authors will write an answer to a Subscriber's Question (there will be at least ONE of these per month)
- Resource Review – a written review of what we're reading, and whether it's worth your time and money... or not (at least ONE of these per month).

To submit your Subscriber Suggestions for author/topic, or ask a Subscriber Question, or request a Resource Review... just email us now through Eolas@IrishPaganSchool.ie with 'Pagan Digest' in the Subject Line!

Lora O'Brien

Co-Founder, the Irish Pagan School

PROF. RONALD HUTTON - THE BIRTH OF VENUS: A HISTORY

Some deities have biographies, while others have not. In other words, some goddesses and gods go through history with much the same associations, myths and responsibilities as those with which they were equipped when they first emerge into it. Others, however, develop, changing form and focus and acquiring new personae and attributes with the passing centuries. Venus, the Western world's most celebrated goddess of love, is one of the latter kind.

She was essentially a Roman deity, although the spread of Roman power and influence gave her to all subsequent European civilisation, and she grew in might and complexity as Rome itself did. Her beginning, in its prehistory as a farming settlement on a group of hills in central Italy, was as the spirit which vivifies and protects vegetable plots: the local market garden goddess. As such, she was amorphous and sexless, which explains an apparent linguistic conundrum: that this eventually most rampantly feminine of Western deities has a name which is a neuter noun.

Her rise to her eventual international glory, and identity, was a product of Rome's combination of increasingly irresistible military might and imperial ambition, and cultural inferiority, diffidence and lack of confidence. In other words, the growing Roman state kept conquering and absorbing other peoples with longer histories of state building and richer and more cosmopolitan civilisations. It then determinedly imported ideas and images from those civilisations into its own, to improve that. Two peoples in particular were submitted, successively, to this treatment, and each in turn provided a makeover for Venus.

The first was the Etruscans, in central Italy, who had been living in cities when Rome was still a village, and had a now almost forgotten goddess who was patroness of flowers, called Turan. The flowers made a match with vegetables, as important forms of vegetation grown by humans in gardens, and so the divine cabbage patch doll called Venus merged with Turan. She became definitively female in the process, and enlarged her purlieu to become Lady of the Flowers, and especially of the most glamorous of all, roses. More generally, she became a spring-bringer, an animating force of natural life, and especially of blossoms and greenery. The second people who proved to be major influences on Roman culture were even more important in this role, because they happened by the time of Rome's rise to be the most influential in the whole of Europe and the source of most of its later science and art: the Greeks. The Romans encountered them fully when they conquered the affluent and dynamic Greek colonies which covered the coasts of southern Italy and Sicily: the America of the ancient Greek world. These gave Roman thought and belief a massive transfusion which was only reinforced when the empire eventually engulfed Greece itself and its other colonies in the eastern Mediterranean. As part of this process, Roman deities were now merged with Greek counterparts, and Venus's Etruscan makeover had left her as the loveliest goddess in Rome's pantheon, and the best match for the Greek Aphrodite.

Venus simply took over the Aphrodite cult lock, stock and scallop shell. The great myths surrounding the Greek goddess, and her pivotal role in epics such as the Trojan War and the quest of the Argonauts, got transferred to the Roman one with the latter's name substituted. The same thing happened to her iconography, as the classical nude statues of Aphrodite, ultimately based on the one that the Athenian Praxiteles had sculpted for the city of Cnidos, got copied by Roman artists as representations of their goddess. Venus thus became the dominant deity of love, sexuality and desire, embracing Aphrodite's special associations with doves and the mineral copper. However, Venus was not yet fully formed, because neither was the Roman world.

The latter took a further quantum leap in the last century before the Christian or Common Era, when Rome's empire took over the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and especially the Syrian region. Unsurprisingly, a similar quantum leap was taken by Venus, in the last great expansion of her realm. She became a deity of war as well as of love, as Venus Victrix, and associated with the planet which alternates as evening and morning star and has ever after born her name in the Western world. What had happened was that she had run into yet another divine counterpart and absorbed her persona, in this case the one known variously in the Fertile Crescent as Ishtar, Ishana and Astarte. Behind all three was the Sumerian deity Inanna, whose transformation into the Semitic Ishtar had influenced the personae of the other two. Inanna had as long a progress to stardom as Venus, having started four millennia before as the protectress of agricultural barns and accumulated more and more powers as the Mesopotamian civilisations did. Venus, in her final form, could be described as the last and greatest of her daughters. This last makeover enabled Venus to make an ultimate extension of her own, as a presiding deity of both life and death, starting the summer as Venus Obsequens, provider of the pleasures of the body, and ending it as Venus Libitina, the taker away of breath and patroness of funeral directors.

The massive cultural legacy of Rome no doubt explains in the main why Venus has remained a major figure in European culture ever since, instantly recognisable in mainstream culture while Inanna and Ishtar had to be rediscovered by modern archaeologists and Aphrodite was remembered more by literary elites. It may also be, however, because she had become so much more complex and wide-reaching a figure than any of the others and generated an art and literature to match her scale of operation. She had learned so much, from so many other older and more experienced goddesses, on her rise to international stardom, and put all that she had learned to use. It had been a long, long, road from the village vegetable plot, but the glory she had gained on it seems likely now to last as long as humanity. *FIN*