

The Pomegranate

Readers' Forum

Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas.

Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended.

Dear Pomegranate Editor,

I have read the article on Harran by Donald Frew in *The Pomegranate* 9 with great interest.

Mr Frew has correctly referred to the group known as the Sabi'ah (Sabaeans) whose exact identity or qualification remains wide open to scholarship. The Qur'an lists them among those who were religiously acceptable in the eyes of God: Jews, Christians, Sabaeans, and—of course—Muslims. Th. Ibn Qurrah, it is reported by Ibn an-Nadim, claimed that he and his community were Sabaeans, and were thus exempt from being considered enemies of Islam, coming under the same protection (*dhimmah*) that is accorded to Christian and Jewish subjects. What exactly was the religion of the town and its people remains open to question.

The Syriac term with which he described himself (and his community) may be related to the enigmatic Arabic term *Hanif*. Abraham, the Qur'an states, was neither Jewish nor Christian; he was a *Hanif*. Some would argue that before his prophethood, Muhammad too was a *Hanif*. The term may mean someone who worshipped the One God prior to the descent of revelation.

Two important points are missing from the article (which I enjoyed reading). The first is the report—again by Ibn an-Nadim—that a rift over ideological and philosophical issues occurred between Th. Ibn Qurrah and his townsfolk to the point that he had to leave the town. How does one interpret this? The second point is that once he had referred to himself and his community as a Sabaeans, and the identification was accepted by the Muslims, neither he nor his community could be described as 'Pagans', unless one wants to suggest that Ibn Qurrah was not telling the truth.

Hanna Kassis,
Budapest, Hungary

To The Pomegranate:

For the last several years I have attended lectures by Donald Frew and have eagerly awaited the printed versions of his entertaining and convincing presentations. I'm sorry to say, however, that the substance of his recent articles in both *Ethnologies* and *The Pomegranate*—although almost identical with the content of his lectures—leaves much to be desired, especially as scholarship and academic precision are concerned.

One of the most convincing elements of Frew's lectures on Harran is his reading of the passage attributed to Thabit Ibn Qurrah that begins "We are the heirs and propagators of Paganism ...". No Neopagan audience of today can fail to be moved by these words. Nor could they fail to be convinced of the point, central to Frew's argument, that Ibn Qurrah is a descendent and defender of Classical Graeco-Roman Paganism. If this is so, Frew is well on his way to convincing us that Harran was a Pagan centre of scholarship under protection of the Islamic authorities of the day, and as such it can be considered a previously

unsuspected route by which Classical Pagan beliefs and their concurrent magical practices were transmitted from ancient times to the scholars of Late Medieval Europe.

But as it turns out, the word Frew's source gives as "Pagan" is actually *han-putho*. My medieval Arabic is pretty rusty, but this is surely a close relative of *hanith*, the term used in Islam to refer to those who were already on the right path prior to, or without having been formally exposed to, orthodox Prophecy. The primary element of this path, of course, was belief in the One True God: Abraham is usually given as the classical example of *hanith*. No polytheistic Pagans could possibly be referred to thus.

In his quotation of this passage, Frew capitalizes the words Pagan and Paganism. This is, of course, in accord with the current standard for referring to a modern practitioner of the religion or to those who practiced Classical Graeco-Roman Paganism in antiquity, but in this case it may only serve to lead the unwary reader astray. I would be curious to see if the original paragraph in Scott's *Hermetica* capitalized these words. Unfortunately, none of the university libraries to which I have access seem to carry this book. This, along with the book's having been published in Boulder, Colorado, and being no longer in print, lead me to suspect that Frew may be relying on a non-standard, possibly sensational, New Age source for information that requires more careful handling.

Aaron Walker
UC Santa Cruz

Prudence Priest writes:

As one of the founders of the Northern European Tradition, an original member of the Rune Guild, an long-time member and

elder in CoG, a philologist and diffident scholar, I feel compelled to comment on Blain & Wallis' article "Men & 'Women's Magic'".

There is no evidence that the practice of seidh makes you 'unmanly' (neither does being gay for that matter—where have you people been for the last 20 years?). But because these practices involve being 'possessed', and since genuine possession is virtually impossible to control (ask any Voodoo drummer or Pentecostal), there is plenty of evidence that you can be 'unmanned' by these practices.

For the difference between 'unmanly' and 'unmanned' please consult a dictionary.

Any genuine psychic experience can 'unman' anyone (male or female), and being a man who embraces his anima is not going to give you special dispensation to avoid this.

Prudence O. Priest

To the Editor:

I read with interest Max Dashu's "Another View of the Witch Hunts" (*Pom* 9 [1999]:30-43) and John Michael Greer's "Myth, History and Pagan Origins" (*Pom* 9 [1999]:44-50). Greer makes some astute observations about the myth of Pagan origins, including its character as a sacred narrative (the definition of myth used by many folklorists) and its structural similarity to other contemporary narratives of fall and redemption.

A key aspect of this sacred narrative seems to be the period of persecution known as "the burning times," during which witches—our actual or spiritual ancestors—were executed for their practices. I do not wish for a moment to question the historicity of this terrible episode

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