

VSI 2014: Folklore and Paganism—Podcast Text

On the death of Dr Margaret Murray at just over one hundred years of age, her colleague, E. O. James, detailed her remarkable career as a teacher of all things Egyptian, ex-president of The Folklore Society, and distinguished folklorist. The latter interest is embodied in her 'controversial theory', based on studies undertaken in the 1920s, that a pagan cult survived into the medieval period (E.O. James, 'Obituary for Margaret Murray', *Folklore* 74, no. 4 (1963): 568-69). Its rituals, presided over by a horned god and his consort (later replaced by a masked priest and priestess) were based on the natural cycle of vegetation. According to Murray, the Christian church equated the masked priest with the Devil and persecuted the cult members as witches. Murray remained convinced that elements of the cult could still be found in folk practices associated with the changing seasons. Despite his admiration for her many accomplishments, even E.O. James was forced to admit that her suggestion that the death of certain English monarchs could be explained by a myth about a dying god who is reborn each spring was a less than convincing contribution to anthropology (569).

Whatever one's scholarly reservations, Murray's notion of a witch cult was emotionally compelling and was taken on by Gerald Gardner, another member of The Folklore Society, who announced that one of these ancient witch cults remained active in England. His theories influenced the modern pagan revival known as Wicca, which, together with other forms of contemporary paganism, has become a significant force in modern spirituality. Its particular interest for the history of folklore studies lies in its relation to the origins of that discipline, and in the influence of figures, such as Gardner and Murray, in its creation. The topic of folklore studies and Murray's theories was re-opened by another president of The Folklore Society whose rigorous examination of Murray's books and articles noted her very selective use of data and her tendency to regard printed material as a primary source (Jacqueline Simpson, 'Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?' *Folklore* 105, (1994): 89-96).

The idea that folk customs and beliefs were the survivals of an earlier cultural phase was one of the founding theories of the discipline of folklore, and the customs of rural Britain soon came to be regarded by many early researchers as the survivals of an ancient paganism. Sir Arthur J. Evans, the archaeologist famous for his excavations of Knossos in Crete and for his suggestions about the role of the god-king in that civilization, published an extensive article on a megalithic site, the Rollright Stones, situated conveniently near his home in Oxfordshire. In tandem with archaeological analysis of megalithic monuments, there was a growing interest in what folklore might reveal about their origins. Evans gathered together an extensive body of material ranging from William Camden's (1551-1623) accounts of men turned to stone, to William Stukeley's (1657-1765) druidic speculations, supplemented by conversations with local people. The interpretive model which Evans applied was typical of its day, namely that traditions associated with the Rollright Stones were remnants of 'ancient lore still handed on by these Oxfordshire villagers' (Arthur J. Evans, 'The Rollright Stones and Their Folk-Lore', *Folklore* 6, no. 1 (1895): 6-53).

One of the most influential contributions to the belief that a pagan fertility deity lingered into medieval life was Lady Raglan's confident assertion that such a figure lay behind the foliate heads of medieval architecture. Lady Raglan's speculations about the development from cult to a pagan survival in church architecture mirrored the myth/ritual theory promulgated by her husband, Lord Raglan. A belief that the Green Man, as she called him, was once a pagan deity is still often stated as fact with little

understanding of its theoretical heritage (Lady Raglan, 'The "Green Man" in Church Architecture', *Folklore* 50, no. 1 (1939): 45-57).

Venetia Newall's account of the Allendale Fire Festival in the 1970s provides a welcome counterweight to this speculative approach (Venetia Newall, 'The Allendale Fire Festival in Relation to Its Contemporary Social Setting', *Folklore* 85, no. 2 (1974): 93-103). This exemplary study traced the developments of a custom that grew out of Methodist hymn singing in a prosperous mining town to a 'time-honoured custom' from the pagan past. Newall noted the increasing importance of the festival in an area whose economic importance had declined, and she suggested that nostalgia for this past led to 'a desire to provide it with an exotic history, even attaching it to "pagan" or "prehistoric" times' (98-99).

Murray historicized the 'dying god' myth as a vegetation cult practised during a primitive period in European history. Her ideas have cast a long shadow that has contributed to the impression that amateur folklorists scour the countryside looking for pre-Christian fertility rites. No matter how sympathetically one wishes to look at this charmingly eclectic scholar, folklorists and historians will (quite rightly) continue to point out how little of Murray's theoretical model can be supported by her sources.

Modern paganism, on the other hand, has become increasingly confident as a movement, more influenced by feminist principles and ecological thinking and less dependent on arguments about continuity with an ancient past. Wallis and Blain's article advocates a dialogue between archaeologists and contemporary pagans regarding the interpretation and use of ancient sites such as the one studied by Arthur Evans (Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain, 'Sites, Sacredness, and Stories: Interactions of Archaeology and Contemporary Paganism', *Folklore* 114, no. 3 (2003): 307-21). Folklore remains important in this dialogue, not as the remnants of ancient beliefs or the basis for a new religion, but as a creative source for the interpretation and understanding of sacredness.

Obituaries Dr Margaret Murray	E. O. James	Vol. 74. 4	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0015587X.1963.9716934
Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?	Jacqueline Simpson	Vol. 105.1-2	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0015587X.1994.9715877
The Roll-Right Stones and their Folk-Lore	Arthur J. Evans	Vol. 6.1	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0015587X.1895.9720276
The "Green Man" in Church Architecture	Lady Raglan	Vol. 50.1	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0015587X.1939.9718148
The Allendale Fire Festival in Relation to its Contemporary Social Setting	Venetia Newall	Vol. 85.2	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0015587X.1974.9716540
Sites, sacredness, and stories: Interactions of archaeology and contemporary paganism	Robert J. Wallis & Jenny Blain	Vol. 114.3	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0015587032000145351