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Robert Seymour Conway

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## PICTURES OF PRE-ROMAN RELIGION

IN the course of many years' study of Ancient Italy, directed mainly upon linguistic and literary lines, it has happened to me to become familiar with some of the features of the religion of the Italian peoples outside Rome which are little known as compared with the half-Greek mythology that was current in Rome itself in the last century B.C. These features have nevertheless, as I hope to make clear, contributed something to the common stock of ideas which Europe took over in or with the Christianity which it drew from Rome. And in another part of my duties it has been natural to me in reading again and again the great Roman writers that immediately preceded the Christian era, especially the poet Vergil, to observe with interest some aspects of their ethical and religious attitude which have contributed more than a little to shaping the new faith. The first half of this book, therefore, will be given to certain non-Roman religious practices in different parts of Italy; and the latter half to the final struggle, so to speak, of paganism with itself, or perhaps, more truly, the struggle of the beams of light from Greek thought, travelling through Roman channels, with the grossnesses and opacities of primitive Italian belief. We shall find, if I mistake not, that this struggle is by no means over yet; and that the efforts to which thinking men of all nations are urgently summoned by the present appalling needs and

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troubles of human society as a whole may be at least clarified, if not actually aided, by observing how needs and troubles not wholly dissimilar were regarded by the greatest writers of that older day.

In one thing, ancient religion certainly differs markedly from religion as we know it in post-Puritan England, I mean its lighter aspects. The human animal can be playful and amusing as well as tragic, and the religions of Italy, both past and present, cannot be well understood if they are always regarded *au grand sérieux*.

In this first essay I will try to show, by word and picture, some of the things that have been recently ascertained about the cults of certain deities whom in a sense one may call local. One set come from the ancient Umbrian city now called Gubbio; and the other from the Venetic city now called Este which was one of the seats of the thoughtful and artistic race from which the culture of Venice ultimately sprang. The religious habits of these two races made different contributions to our modern stock of ideas; but in some respects both are typical of Italian religion.

One of the most ancient monuments in Italy is the famous Iguvine<sup>1</sup> Tables; they are of bronze, and seven of them are still preserved in the Town Hall of Gubbio; two are said to have been 'lost' long ago. These Tables are engraved with documents containing different parts of the Liturgy of a certain priestly brotherhood, and they give directions for the performance of different rites;

<sup>1</sup> By some mediaeval blunder, possibly a misreading of the Tables themselves, the name 'Eugubine' was long in use; but it has no ancient authority whatever. The name of the city was Iguvium and its ethnic adjective, both in Latin and Umbrian, was *Iguvinam* (if I may take a form in which the case ending is the same in both dialects, Latin and Umbrian).

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one of these parts, in point of elaboration the longest and therefore probably the most important, concerns a procession made from one point to another round the town, especially to the different gates, at each of which victims were sacrificed and prayers said; some of these we will consider presently. Five of the Tables, or strictly four and two-thirds, are engraved in the local Iguvine alphabet which is derived from the Etruscan alphabet; but the last two Tables and the last third of one other, though still written in the Umbrian dialect, are engraved in Latin alphabet, and these last two Tables show a later stage<sup>1</sup> of the language. The oldest of these seven tablets seems from its alphabet to have been engraved between 400 and 300 B.C. and the latest about 80 B.C., one of the results of the Social War in 90–89 B.C. having been the universal adoption for any public purpose of the Latin alphabet throughout Italy, except in the Greek cities.

The directions given in this liturgy for the promenade round the town have come down to us in two editions. One, the older form,<sup>2</sup> is written in the local alphabet; the other, which is the later form, is written still in the Umbrian dialect, with changes like that just mentioned, but in the Latin alphabet of about 90 B.C. In the older edition the officer who performs the rite is instructed to ‘pray silently’. What he is to pray is for the most part left to his own memory or discretion; but in the later form, although he is still ordered to ‘pray without speaking’, which means presumably ‘in a whisper’, the com-

<sup>1</sup> For example, ‘before the gates’ in the older Tables is *pre veris*, but in the later *pre verir*.

<sup>2</sup> Table IA; the later version in Table VIA.

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piler of the liturgy thinks it best to provide him with the actual words that he is to use.

There seem to have been about five stages in the performance at each of the gates or other halting-places. First of all the 'officer with the herald's staff', the beadle as we should call him, solemnly proclaims that all who belong to any one of four tribes, of whom the Etruscans are one, all four being presumably more or less hostile to the city, are warned to depart. If they don't depart, anyone who catches them hiding is instructed to 'carry them where they ought to be carried, and do with them what ought to be done', a cryptic formula which is generally understood to mean something sufficiently disagreeable, throwing them over a cliff, or the like. The notice has to be repeated three times. When these unfriendly bans have been duly proclaimed, the citizens of Iguvium themselves are told to 'make themselves holy and gather together in their proper divisions'. Then the officiating priests proceed, with various chosen persons of an inferior degree of sanctity, apparently appointed for the occasion (*praenovatos*), first of all to take the omens. Appropriate prayers are followed by a holy silence while they watch for the proper birds, who have to appear, if they are sufficiently gracious, and of the quite proper and legitimate breeds, namely a woodpecker and a crow and a pair of jays, within the proper augural lines in the sky, drawn by imagination over certain portions of the city.

When these omens have been duly obtained, the priests proceed with the sacrifices at three different gates, at each of which particular victims are prescribed, oxen or pigs or heifers or sheep or bull calves, always three in number. In each case some wine or vinegar is poured

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out and very long prayers are said, addressed to a different deity (or deities) at each place over each victim; but all of them to the same effect, invoking blessings upon various classes of the people and various parts of the city. Much the same kind of thing happens at two temples, and this completes the purification of the Citadel.

The lustration<sup>1</sup> of the people is a longer business, at least the prayers are even longer; they are not delivered at temples, but at more picturesque places, such as 'the Fountains' and 'the Blackberry Bush' (though we are not to interpret the names as being houses of public refreshment, only as turning points in the topography of the city). There are points of interest in the prayer, which is the same in all the places, though addressed sometimes to all three and sometimes to only one of three deities, namely, *Cerfus Martius*, who is masculine, and two feminine deities who belong to him, one called *Praestita* and the other called *Tursa*.<sup>2</sup> Whether they are wives or daughters or merely sacred attendants does not appear. It is clear that the business of *Tursa*, the third of the group, is to frighten people, though she can be kind if she chooses. Probably the duty of *Praestita* is just the reverse, to provide help or food, though she can refuse it if she chooses. We shall perhaps find more light on these deities later on. The most striking thing in all three prayers is the greater fulness with which evil is invoked upon the four enemy tribes than are the blessings upon the people of *Iguvium*. The latter are briefly included in the phrase 'be kind and bless them with peace',

<sup>1</sup> Table IB and IIA (first half); the later version is in VIB and VIIA.

<sup>2</sup> It is convenient to use these names in the form they would have had in Latin.

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though the different classes of citizens, noblemen belted and not belted, whoever they were, men of war with spears and without, are fully enumerated; but the curse is tremendous. ‘ Make them fear and make them tremble. Throw them down and trip them up. Snow upon them, rain upon them. Thunder at them, smite them. Lame them and bind them in fetters.’ And the curse, be it observed, comes first. That was the real thing. When their enemies had been thus properly dealt with, the blessings desirable for the people themselves might be enumerated in few words. It is curious how the gods of primitive peoples are instructed with much morefulness to do harm than to do good; but all that concerns our own enquiry is to note that the conception of a deity who was glad to do good for its own sake was remote from the Italian peasant.

Yet we have evidence that the good people of Iguvium, although they wished their enemies properly cursed, found many other cheerful occupations for this presumably annual festival. In some of the regulations<sup>1</sup> of the Brotherhood we read of a banquet accompanied by sacred (but no doubt very cheerful) ‘jumpings’, and of a vote being taken at the end to say whether the brethren have been satisfied with the way the whole festival has been conducted and if not, how heavy a fine is to be inflicted on the steward. Other regulations state the quantity of corn and the number of beasts which the brethren are to receive from various estates.

One of the earliest of the documents<sup>2</sup> which the Tables contain gives directions for the conduct of a ceremony, which includes a procession, on a fixed day of every year,

<sup>1</sup> Table V.<sup>2</sup> Tables III and IV.

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which there is some reason<sup>1</sup> for thinking may have been at the opening of the month of May, though the meaning is not quite certain. It may or may not have been part of the lustration just described. But it has one curious feature; the sheep who is to be ultimately sacrificed is carried about in some kind of cage, which appears to be elevated upon a stretcher; and when he finally reaches the field in which the sacrifice is to take place, apparently a framework of two storeys was erected beside or under or perhaps more probably on the top of the cage, and each storey had to be carefully marked or fastened by bronze nails or clamps. After various bowings and scrapings to two deities on behalf of the town and people and the Brotherhood there is a curious injunction to have the 'usual jokes with the sheep', at least that would appear to be the meaning if the words signify what they would in Latin; but it may be that the word *ioca* in Iguvium meant rather 'exclamations' than anything humorous. It is certain that they were uttered over the head of the sheep; but if they were 'jokes', we may doubt if the sheep himself saw the point of them.

From this rather unsatisfactory guessing at the meaning of a number of difficult words, let us turn to a different (and surprising) source of information. In this very town of Gubbio on the 15th of May every year there is still held an extraordinary festival which does not appear to be, in fact, religious at all, at least not in any Christian sense, although it is recognised and patronised

<sup>1</sup> There is little doubt that it means 'at the full season of the second month'; only we do not know with which month the year began at Iguvium. If it was March, and began the year as at Rome, that would give us the end of April. But Ovid's list (*Fast.* 3. 94) shows that the second assumption is uncertain.

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by the Bishop of the Diocese. It is called the Elevation of the *Ceri* and occupies the greater part of the day, and the best energies of three distinct bands, or crews, of men in gay uniform—white trousers, red shirts and caps, with a long string and tassel reaching to the waist, and a long coloured sash wound several times round the body. Each of these crews of men carry round the town one of the three *Ceri*, of which Figure 1 is a picture.

The *Cero* is carried on a wooden frame which ten men at a time are needed to bear, and the number of each crew is much larger than ten, so that they can take the duty in turn. The *Cero* itself is an erection of wood twelve feet high, divided in the middle by a kind of waist which unites an upper and a lower quasi-cylindrical case or box with rails projecting, giving to the octagon something like the look of a square. At the top of each of these *Ceri* there is erected the image of a saint, about two feet in height. The chief of the three is known as Saint Ubaldo, the famous Bishop of the town in the twelfth century, canonized in 1192. He is carried by a crew chosen from the Guild of Masons (*Muratori*). St George and St Antony are similarly represented at the top of the other two *Ceri*, carried by crews from the traders (*Negozianti*) and countrymen (*Contadini*) respectively. They make two circuits of the town by fixed routes, one in the morning and one in the evening, each *Cero* going separately, except at a fixed hour when they all meet in the central Piazza. All their movements are conducted at a run, even up quite steep ascents; but custom is merciful enough to allow them to pause for refreshment, mostly liquid, at the house of any patron who will provide a tub of wine, and secure for his house



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thereby all the advantages connected with the favour of the particular saint for the ensuing year. Wherever it is understood that the saint desires to show particular favour to a house, his crew, with their long and cumbrous stretcher on their shoulders, walk, or rather rush round, in the narrow street outside the house at least once, but sometimes three times, if neither the saint nor they get too giddy. Besides these private entertainments they are provided with an elaborate mid-day meal attended by the Bishop and other notables. Neither the Bishop nor any ecclesiastic shares in the procession; but after Vespers in the evening a kind of deputation headed by the Bishop and carrying the portrait of St Ubaldo, taken down from his proper home in his monastery, goes to meet the *Ceri* at a particular corner of the town. The picture of the saint is waggled to and fro, and his image at the top of the *Cero* makes an equally moving response. Then the Bishop and his reverend companions draw to one side, and the *Ceri* plunge off again at full speed down a steep hill. Finally the *Ceri* with the saints are rushed up another hill to a monastery at the top, to be taken care of for another year in a compartment labelled as belonging not to the monastery but to the town. It is quite clear that St Ubaldo has anticipated by many centuries the prevailing temper of the drivers of modern vehicles. Speed is essential to his happiness; safety does not matter. For when he arrives at the monastery he has nearly always lost most of his clothes, and on one recent occasion he had lost his head too. I have seen a cinematograph picture of the festival, from which it appears that the crews of the *Ceri* are highly popular and always accompanied on their round by an excited and enthusi-

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astic following of citizens, old and young. Figure 1 shows the general appearance of the Ceri in the street. Figure 2 gives small models of the three which are preserved in the Municipal Museum. Figure 3 is a photograph of the quiet procession of ecclesiastics on their way to meet it. Figure 4 is from a painting preserved in the Municipal Museum, which the cinema picture entirely confirmed, of the scene in the Piazza. I owe these pictures and the description of the festival to a charming study of the ceremonies by Mr Herbert M. Bower.<sup>1</sup>

I have been tempted to dwell perhaps at greater length on this picturesque ceremony than its importance deserves; but the correspondence with what we were able to elicit from the ancient Iguvine Tables does, I think, suggest some historical connexion. The double peregrination of the town seems to point to the combination of two different ceremonies, and the extraordinary shape of the Ceri may perhaps correspond to the two storeys of the wicker framework with the victim in the third storey above or below the other two, which might be taken to explain in part the extraordinary structure of the Ceri at Gubbio on their stretcher.

But what has all this to do with modern religion? More than perhaps appears. Not in the features of the procession itself, but in at least two aspects, in which the ancient liturgy and the modern festival are thoroughly typical of the Italian religious outlook, the number (namely

<sup>1</sup> *The Elevation and Procession of the Ceri at Gubbio*, London, published for the Folk-Lore Society, 1897. I have never succeeded in visiting Gubbio on May 15; but my friend Mr Cyril Bailey tells me he saw it as recently as 1912 and has met friends who have seen it since 1918. I thank the Folk-Lore Society cordially for their kind permission to reproduce the pictures.