

# Pre History of Magical Development

## *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

- Josephine McCarthy 2018

*And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not*

- John 1:5

To truly understand the emergence of the concepts that arise in today's western magic, we have to cast our attention far back in time to the cradles that those concepts emerged out of. Those cradles emerged out of North Africa, Western Asia, the Near East/Caucasus, and Europe. To understand why those cradles emerged as they did, where they did, and what their focus was, we have to look at the conditions that those cradles emerged from. Religion and magic evolves from cause and effect, from our response as humans to the world around us.

If instead we only look back a thousand years for the roots of magic, we miss the point of the exercise: finding such roots means to look far beyond the organised religions and magical practices of cultures that went before us – we need to look at what made our distant ancestors tick: the cauldron of human thought and response to circumstance that birthed magic in the first place.

If we look at human nature in its most bare form, we find two dynamics at play; find food, and store food. It is a base survival mechanism that along with breeding, and prey/predator behaviour, keeps our species alive. Those base mechanisms are still within us today as individuals and as societies – a lot of what we do has its roots in those basic survival instincts. Marketing in our modern consumer society taps into the 'find food/store food' mechanism that drives us – we buy, we consume, and we acquire more than we need (store/bank).

When it comes to the deeper spirit side of ourselves, we reach out to the unknown to try and make sense of the universe around us. We reach out for 'food' to eat for our souls and we try to store 'food' for our souls for the future (religion/beliefs). Magic is the active step that grew out of very early religious behaviour in its most primal form, where we move from passive acceptance of existence to a wish to actively engage with the universe around us and to have an element of control in how we navigate through life not only in terms of survival, but in order to flourish.

### Magic and its forms

Today, the same as a thousand years ago, magic falls into roughly two categories: secure resources, and clear the path ahead in our future (find food/store food). To secure resources (find food), magic developed into acts designed to attract, repel, bind and release – base actions to gain our needs and wants. Today we call this 'results magic' or 'low magic', labels that are both confusing and not entirely correct.

These two labels are modern tags using modern language that both denigrate that type of magic and also limit the understanding of such magic. The term 'results magic' comes from a twentieth century model of science, where experiments are designed and implemented to not only achieve results, but to have them repeated in a stable manner. That is fine for science but magic often does not work in such clearly defined parameters – it is as unpredictable as the

weather. I strongly suspect that this term slid into use as an attempt to give magic modern credibility by using terminology more commonly used in science.

The same can be said of the term 'low' magic – the term is loaded with snobbery and high handedness. 'High' magic is a term used to describe magic that reaches into mystical exploration, whereas 'low' magic seeks to acquire something or stop something. I have tied myself in knots for years trying to explain my stance on this issue, and it is often assumed that I am hostile to 'results/low magic', which is not the case. Rather, I see the gaping potholes and potential meltdowns that such magic can cause when it is paired up with emotional immaturity, a modern consumer mentality, magical ignorance or incompetence, and a massive fragile ego. Magic is magic, and every type of magic has its place and function, the key is to understand what is appropriate and when. This type of magic is about survival, about 'find food' for the body and soul to keep it functioning, whatever a person decides that 'food' is or represents.

'High' magic, or mystical magic seeks the Divine in the universe: it moves beyond 'find food/store food', but in order to understand and work within that type of magic, the 'find food'/low magic must also be understood not only intellectually, but practically – it is the weaving of inner power to manifest a controlled change in fate patterns. The magic itself (high or low) is no different be it mystical or functional, it is our approach and intention that creates a line of distinction.

This is a very important point to think about when looking into the ancient history of magic, as life in 7000BC was very different to life today. The quest for mystical magic is a luxury in many ways – to embark upon such a journey of transformation and connection to the Divine, you need food in your stomach, a roof over your head and shoes on your feet. You need to be relatively safe and secure, and have time to ponder, to think and to act. It is those luxuries that mystical magic (and all mystical and philosophical thought) grew out of.

Functional (results) magic grew out of dire need, and is essentially folk magic: the magic of the ordinary person trying to get by in a way that they define for themselves. Hence it is more common in poor and rural communities both today and in the past. Simply understanding the dynamics of resources and human need can put a lot of magical history into perspective.

This is not to say that mystical magic did not exist in very ancient times. We have no books left to us from thousands of years ago, but what we do have is magical knowledge today, and as practical working magicians, we can look deep into the ancient past in history and recognise certain acts that left archaeological findings for us to discover. We may not know the details, but the core magical mechanisms that display in very ancient findings show both mystical and functional magical religious behaviour. It is through those behaviours that we can begin to understand ourselves as magicians today, and understand where our magic comes from.

When we look at ancient historical events that were happening at the same time as the emergence of magical behaviours, we can then start to understand not only the cause and effect of the development of magic, it can also give us the foundational understanding of magical practice today – it becomes a whisper that travels down through time and reminds us of our magical roots.

In this essay, I wanted to dig back as far as possible to look for early magical behaviour. The time lines that I rummaged around in were far earlier than the written word, so I had to look at archaeological findings to see if I recognised anything. I also looked at the wider environment, at what we as humans were doing and potentially why we were doing it.

This took me on a journey back to the period between 7000BC and 5000BC in human history, looking at what was happening with climatic events in the northern hemisphere from northern Europe to the Near East and north Africa. Bear in mind throughout this essay, I am not an archaeologist or trained historian, but I have done my best to check everything and ensure it is referenced.

### The series of unfortunate events

The first thing that I tripped over was a rather startling bit of evidence from our genetic history. Sometime between the period of 7000BC to 5000BC modern humans experienced an abrupt genetic bottleneck specific to human males across the Old World<sup>1</sup>. Since the research paper was published in 2015, various other research bodies have tied themselves into knots trying to understand why this would happen. Some theorised that it could be social (war, patrilineal dominance) and others suggested that it could be environmental (volcano). When there is a massive environmental disaster, often male foetuses abort<sup>2</sup>, but the ratio of male to female in the bottleneck was 1:17, far greater than has been observed with spontaneous natural abortions during disasters.

But when scientists look at these startling anomalies, by nature of their focus, they tend to look for one specific potential cause, or a small orbit of potential cause and effect. However, when disasters strike, the ramifications can have wide and long-lasting effects in all aspects of society and health. So I spent some time looking closely at this time period to see what was going on, and I began to see the potential for complex cause and effect reactions in human populations across the Old World.

The period from around 6,500BC to 5,000BC reads a little like the title of a Lemony Snicket novel – A Series of Unfortunate Events. It was a rough time to be a human, and over that thousand-year + period, anything that could go wrong, did.

The picture that emerged was not one of a single massive disaster, but a series of them spanning just over a thousand years. It was a time of climate instability, and of massive land and environmental changes which would have likely affected various populations in a wide variety of ways. Let us look first at the natural events that occurred over that long period of time between 6,500BC and 5,000 BC, and then we will look at the fragments of evidence of the human responses to such upheavals, as they will give us a better picture of the cauldron that what we know as magic today, evolved from, and why. Obviously magic existed in human cultures long before these events, but as we get further into this exploration of magical history, you will begin to see how pivotal this time was.

Leading up to the period we are looking up, we had the end of the last Glacial age around 10,000BC and the beginning of the Holocene Thermal Maximum (9,000 to 5,000BC).

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Karmin, M. et al. A recent bottleneck of Y chromosome diversity coincides with a global change in culture. *Genome Res.* **25**, 459–466 (2015)

<sup>2</sup> Impact of earthquakes on sex ratio at birth: Emek Doğer, [Yiğit Çakıroğlu](#), [Şule Yıldırım Köpük](#), [Yasin Ceylan](#), [Hayal Uzelli Simsek](#), and [Eray Çalışkan](#)

Basically it went from cold to warm/hot, and such shifts cause all sorts of expansions and contractions in weather and the landscape. By the time we get to the era of the genetic bottleneck, things are really moving. Bear in mind with the dating of the following events that they can only be approximately dated scientifically, usually give or take a few hundred years.

The first event that caught my eye was the draining of Lake Agassiz - Ojibway, a vast glacial lake that at its peak potentially covered 440,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the North American continent. Around 6,200BC the vast fresh waters drained into the Atlantic, dumping huge amounts of fresh water down the Hudson Strait and into the Labrador sea west of Greenland. It is also thought to have caused or contributed to the collapse of the Laurentide Ice Sheet in North America, which also dumped vast quantities of fresh water into the ocean. This is a crucial area for the global ocean circulation system, and such a massive influx of cold freshwater essentially stopped the Gulf Stream flowing<sup>3</sup>. It was rapid, and it was dramatic.

It caused absolute chaos around the world and is thought to have triggered what is known as 8.2 Kiloyear event, a period of intense rapid cooling that lasted anywhere from 200 to 400 years. It caused drier conditions in North Africa, and 300 years of aridification and cooling in the Near East/Mesopotamia/western Asia. East Africa suffered 500years of drought, and the effects/evidence of the rapid cooling have been found around the world.

Nature decided that this event was really just not dramatic enough, and decided to throw some spice into the mix, just to be sure. Around 6,225/6170BC there was a massive land slip off the coast of Norway, known as the last Storegga slide, which dumped 3,500 km<sup>3</sup> of debris into the north Atlantic, triggered a mega tsunami event. This event covered Doggerland, a land area that acted as a bridge between Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands. It was an area of expansive fertile hunting grounds for the region's Mesolithic cultures, and it vanished beneath the sea during this catastrophic event. It is likely that the area was already under extreme stress from rising seas (from the 8.2 kiloyear event), and this massive tsunami had a huge impact on all the coastal communities of the North Sea. It has been approximated that the tsunami was 13 feet high and went inland for fifty miles.

Around that time (6500BC/6200BC) there was an apparent collapse of the eastern flank of Mount Etna that would have caused a potentially devastating tsunami that would have consumed Mediterranean coastal settlements. An Italian study led by Maria Pareschi of the Italian Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology in Pisa suggested the subsequent tsunami was possibly 130ft high. If that was triggered by a massive volcanic explosion, it would have likely also caused a volcanic winter period, as well as deep memories of a catastrophic event.

The result of these different dramatic events would have had a massive impact on societies around the world as it suddenly got a lot colder, and in many places, dryer, with weather that was unpredictable, and massive floods in many areas. Thanks to archaeology, we know that there was a sudden interruption of the stability in society which is demonstrated in finds from Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria from this period of climate instability. Before the 8.2 kiloyear event, the pottery from Sabi Abyad was complex, highly decorative, and there was evidence of mass production and trading. Suddenly, around the 8.2 kiloyear event, the pottery ceased to be

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<sup>3</sup> Reduced North Atlantic Deep Water Coeval with the Glacial Lake Agassiz Freshwater Outburst Helga (Kikki) Flesche Kleiven, Catherine Kissel, Carlo Laj, S. Ninnemann, Thomas O. Richter, Elsa Cortijo. 2004 DOI: 10.1126/science.1148924

complex and decorative, and instead became rudimentary and simply functional. There was no evidence of decoration or trade – people were scrambling to simply survive and keep going.

The temperature began to steeply rise a few hundred years later with what is known as the Thermal Maximum, and with that came rising sea levels once again. Just as things were settling down, we have the Mount Mazama eruption, a volcano in the Oregon segment of the Cascade Volcanic arc. The eruptions sent a 30 mile high ash column into the stratosphere, with fall out over a three year period. The climatic eruption created Crater Lake, and it had a volcanic Explosivity index of 7. It has been hypothesised that this mega explosion could have affected weather and temperature over a three to four year period in northern latitudes.

Two thousand years later, we then have the 5.9kiloyear climate event (Bond event 4 - 3,900 BCE) which triggered intense aridification to areas of North Africa and the Arab Peninsula, from which they never recovered, and was incidentally the most likely reason that people started to gravitate towards the Nile Valley from the nearby Sahara region.

In Europe it most likely was the trigger for the North Atlantic cooling episode that brought about the decline and collapse of the European Neolithic culture in south east Europe. The period from 4,200BCE to 3,900 BCE saw intense climatic change with much colder winters in Northern Europe. The climate continued to deteriorate until approx. 2,800 BCE, and during this long span of time many settlements along the Danube were burned and abandoned, and overall the region saw an upsurge in settlement fortifications.

### People and responses

When ancient cultures are subjected to repeated and prolonged extremes from natural disasters, and the stories of such disasters are handed down the generations in oral traditions, the response is usually two fold – what do we do (food, survival)? Who/what do we pray to for help? The intense and sudden cooling of that period, with the accompanying weather extremes, will have put a lot of societies and communities under extreme stress. This was still a time of a mix of hunter gatherers, animal domestication, and early agricultural experiments.

Groups were already highly ritualised in their beliefs, and most religious finds we have from archaeology of this period were continuations of the ‘Venus figures’ (35,000BC to 3,000BC), Bull cults, and anthropomorphic figures. It is also pertinent to point out at this stage of this essay, that highly ritualised behaviour was not, as has been previously presumed, the result of agriculture, but predates agriculture, or at least appears at the very early agricultural experiments before agriculture ‘proper’ becomes established. It is likely that people’s ritualised behaviour was focused on predator and prey: what threatened them, and what fed them.

The archaeological finds at Göbekli Tepe near Sanliurfa in SE Anatolian Turkey of a highly ritualised megalithic T shaped decorated standing stones predate organised agriculture<sup>4</sup>. The deepest layers of the site show activity from the Epipalaeolithic period (18,000 – 8,000BCE) and the presence of the megaliths from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period (PPNA). The samples used for dating were charcoal deposits and would have represented the endpoint of activity for that layer – the structures are older than the charcoal deposits. It is interesting to

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<sup>4</sup> Schmidt, Klaus. (2000). Göbekli Tepe, Southeastern Turkey. A Preliminary Report on the 1995-1999 Excavations. *Paléorient*. 26. 10.3406/paleo.2000.4697.

note that the images on the megaliths are predator and prey, with at least some of the megaliths attempting to portray humans: some of the T bars of the stones were fashioned as arms (but no heads).

This extensive ritual site, that was in use on and off for thousands of years, and it pre-dated the first cultivation of the eight founder crops in the region. This is important to us as we dig around in the mists of pre-civilisations, as we are looking for cause and effect, and ritualized behaviour that is the ancient forebear of magic. People didn't intentionally grow crops (agriculture) and then begin to civilise and ritualise, the *ritualization came first*.

The 'Venus' figures are very interesting in that they are depictions of females with exaggerated breasts and thighs, and sometimes vulva. This depicts 'plenty' and 'breeding'. Remember that at the period we are looking at (between 7,000 and 5,000BC), societies and populations in general were very small by today's standards. The focus would have been on three simple things: Breed, find food, store and protect excess food for winter. Everything would have focused around those three dynamics, and in a way, it still does today: we are driven to reproduce, to get what we need, and to obtain excess to store (bank accounts etc).

When there is a major disaster or a prolonged period of disasters like climate collapse or shift, those three survival dynamics are put under extreme stress. Small populations are very vulnerable and can collapse easily. In such instances, the survival of females is far more important than the survival of males: if you have ten men and only one woman, only one child at a time can be born. If you have ten females and one male, ten babies can be born at one time: this ensures the continuation of the tribe into the future – *it also causes a male DNA bottleneck*. It is simple dynamics of nature, and one that we know was used in Neolithic societies.<sup>5 6</sup>

It is very likely that during this prolonged period of a few hundred years of rapid cooling (that then suddenly warmed back up a few hundred years later), that vulnerable communities began to collapse through cold, starvation, and lack of known resources. It is my theory that during this period not only were there natural spontaneous abortions, but also infanticide and male sacrifice. Culling/exposing the majority of male children would ensure that all meagre resources were protected and the small number of male children that made it to adulthood would impregnate the females.

I was talking about this bottleneck and the culling hypothesis with a biologist who had specialised in genetics and epigenetics. She also suggested the possibility of castration as a survival mechanism. I was not aware of any evidence of Eunuchs that was pre-first millennium BC, where it was used in the courtly culture of the Neo Hittite State of Carchemish<sup>7</sup>. I did some digging around and found evidence of knowledge of the link between testes and fertility in Neolithic animal husbandry (earliest findings approx. 5,600BC) – they castrated their surplus male animals to control breeding.<sup>8</sup> So that knowledge was kicking around the Old World and was very likely going on prior to the date of the

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<sup>5</sup> Birdsell, Joseph, B. (1986). "Some predictions for the Pleistocene based on equilibrium systems among recent hunter gatherers". In Lee, Richard & Irven DeVore. *Man the Hunter*. Aldine Publishing Co. p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> Milner, Larry S. (2000). *Hardness of Heart / Hardness of Life: The Stain of Human Infanticide*. Lanham/New York/Oxford: University Press of America.

<sup>7</sup> Trevor Bryce: *The World of the Neo-Hittite Kingdoms: A Political and Military History*. Oxford, New York 2012

<sup>8</sup> *Size Reduction in Early European Domestic Cattle Relates to Intensification of Neolithic Herding Strategies* - Katie Manning, Adrian Timpson, Stephen Shennan, Enrico Crema University College Dublin Published: December 2, 2015 (Plos)

archaeological finds. Castrating the majority of the living males while leaving fertile only the strongest and healthiest, though an extreme response, would make survival sense for the long term population. But the castrated males would need to be fed in the short term, so I am not wholly convinced this would have been a solution, unless there was a need for working but infertile males.

It is very possible that the sudden bottleneck on the male DNA was a result of applying animal breeding knowledge to lower the male population, while also practicing infanticide/exposure of male babies and the sacrifice of a percentage of the male adults. When you add to this the mix of disease, malnutrition (from extreme weather changes) and resulting resource wars, you get a picture of catastrophic change, and extreme responses in the people in order for the tribe to survive.

Such events that spanned a few hundred years would have also stuck heavily in the ancestral memory, and stories of the events and how those events were dealt with would have gone down the generations in the forms of stories, oral history and ritual behaviour, something we know happened in Neolithic cultures<sup>9</sup>. I wonder if this is the source of the Biblical stories that appear in a variety of books in the Bible of the killing of the first-born sons? There was certainly human sacrifice around at that time and it carried on for another three thousand years.

One thing to note as we look at this from the perspective of wanting to know how magical/ritual behaviour patterns formed and matured, is that human nature, for the most part, doesn't change that much at its core.

The initial ritualised behaviour/actions are a direct response to a threat to survival. Once that threat has passed, the ritualised behaviour continues, not only because it gives people a sense that 'there is help out there if we get them on our side', but also because it gives a sense of control. With that sense of control comes hierarchy, with hierarchy comes more and more controlling actions in order to establish who should be where in the pecking order. Humans like to box and label things, to put their mark on things, and to be the 'one who knows' (hierarchy establishment).

Once you have a pattern of highly ritualised behaviour, you then have a situation where some are better at it than others. Those with obsessive compulsive tendencies will seek to express that through their ritualised behaviour – *that action needs me to do it with my left hand at this time and place, with my foot placed in a specific position, with a certain colour robe on, and I must bow three times before addressing the deity*. This obsessive compulsive behaviour usually triggers first as a stress response before settling into a longer term control response.

We see this sort of OC development in virtually every religion once it gets to a stable level of acceptance in a community: this is the early development of a priesthood and temple culture. Such development comes a long time after the initial catastrophe that triggered the actions in

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<sup>9</sup> Oral Tradition and the Creation of Late Prehistory in Roviana Lagoon, Solomon Islands – P. Sheppard,<sup>1</sup> R Walter<sup>2</sup> S Aswani<sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup>Centre for Archaeological Research, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, <sup>2</sup>Department of Anthropology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, <sup>3</sup>Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States of America. Records of the Australian Museum, Supplement 29 (2004)

the first place, and often the true nature of the event loses its original identity as it morphs into mythos. The changing of a natural disaster into a mythic story can take many generations, but once established, it can stay within a culture for thousands of years.

When we look at tribal societies today, often their mythos is clear enough that you can locate the original events that triggered the mythos. It becomes a story of remembrance, passed down orally from generation to generation, and the main reason for the continuance of the story is to learn its lessons - *when there is a bad earthquake, head to the mountains because flooding is coming*. This was very evident in the 2004 earthquake (9.3) and subsequent tsunami that struck on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004<sup>10</sup>. I watched the TV with horror as the reporting unfolded over a series of days, and then with intense interest when a military head was being interviewed about the safety of the indigenous tribes that populate some of the Andaman Islands.

Through his connections with people in charge of protecting the tribes, many of which were isolated and unintegrated to modern life, he managed to ascertain that the Shompens and Holschu tribes were totally unaffected by the event. The interpreter/warden for the tribes stated that, 'the tribes fled to the hills before the tsunami struck' – they knew it was coming. The knowledge that it was coming would have been linked to natural observations that are connected to their ancient stories. This was conveyed in a subsequent interview with one of the wardens: their mythos carried the information they needed to survive a disaster.

In societies that shift from hunter gatherer to farmer, such a shift needs organisation skills: someone has to measure the harvest, distribute, and also organise the workload. In the period of time that this essay is looking at, the communities we are looking at i.e. the various cultures of the Old World, were for the most part engaged in animal husbandry and early rudimentary agriculture with wild seeds. This societal structure facilitates organisation, ritualised behaviour, and consequently a more sophisticated response to disaster and the subsequent development of mythos, ritual behaviour and so forth, as we have previously discussed.

The stories that come out of such organised ritual structure become more and more steeped in mystique as the communicator of that story in each generation needs to assert a sense of status and control over the people. Often the disaster stories become vehicles for the asserting of societal morality: *if you are bad people the mountain will blow, and only those special people who are priests can talk to the mountain. And these are the ritual laws that you have to obey so that the mountain does not get angry*.

This micro controlling of actions, society rules, and the organising of ritual structures and behaviours, and the subsequent 'mystification' of the memory tales and mythos triggers the creation of behaviour that eventually develops into temple cultures.

At the time frame that we are looking at, we see evidence of '*who do I ask for help*' in the form of the anthropomorphic figures, the use of which spans thousands of years prior to the 8.2 kiloyear event and subsequent 5.9 kiloyear event. We also see the development of more sophisticated temple style behaviour with the creation and use of the megaliths at Göbekli Tepe, which appeared at the early phase of people trying to control their environment through animal husbandry and early agricultural experiments. The anthropomorphic figures found in

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<sup>10</sup> The Hindu News December 31<sup>st</sup> 2004 *All Primitive Tribes Safe* article by Suresh Nambeth



Europe, for example the Löwenmensch figurine (lion human) found in a German cave, which dates to around 35,000 BC, and the animal images at Göbekli Tepe tell us that the relationship between the animal kingdom and the human were of the utmost importance in terms of belief, and ritualised behaviour, and had been for millennia.

After the series of unfortunate events in our time frame of the 8.2Kiloyear event and subsequent fallout - the rapid climate changes, land instability, rising sea levels, and the male DNA bottleneck, we start to see a shift in ritualised behaviour. Remember that we can only draw conclusions from the archaeological evidence that we can access, the rest has to be hypotheses drawn from what we know of ritual behaviour, and what came later, as humanity in general is pretty predictable.

The shift in behaviour away from the animal/human relationship starts to emerge in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium. This is where we start to see ritual enclosures that appear to have their focus upon the behaviour of the sun. This makes sense to us in that the sudden and intense drop in temperature of the 8.2 kiloyear event and the subsequent hundreds of years of climate instability and cold will have etched itself forever on the collective memory of the people. Just as that series of events faded deep into the recesses of ancestral memory, we then see the societies suffer once more with the resulting climate upheaval from the 5.9 kiloyear event and subsequent long-term cooling.

When the sun no longer does its job of always shining and always keeping us warm, when it has become unreliable, then you have to work to ensure that the anger of the sun does not return again. You want the sun to be as predictable as it used to be, to not get angry, and to bestow its favours upon you – the crops, the animals and the human lives depend upon it.

This was also the time where people started to get rather serious about agriculture. The bounties of the land had become less dependable, the weather was constantly shifting and changing, and the resources were thinly spread. It made sense to have more control over your food supply by growing and storing it. In northern latitudes, with the shifting more towards agriculture, you would expect to see a shift in ritualised focus from predator/prey, to seasons, solar activity, and the appearance and vanishing of stars, as these tell you when to plant and when to harvest.

The rise in solar observing and worship appears in the fifth millennium around the northern hemisphere. It is likely they served multiple purposes: solar observation of the season through the alignment of the stones/solstices, a place for worship and sacrifice, and a place for tribal gatherings. This shift in focus from predator/prey/observation of the animal and plant kingdom, to focus upon the sun and stars is a major turning point in humanity's magical thinking that would affect the development of magic for thousands of years. So it is worth a closer look – let us look at some of these early solar ritual centres, as a closer look at them raises difficult or at least interesting questions.

### Early ritual solar circles

In the fifth millennium BC, we start to see the appearance of enclosures and stone circles that are aligned to the movements of the sun. This is quite a radical change from 30,000+ years of animal/human centered ritual behaviour we had seen so far. Two of the earliest that have

been found are Goseck Circle, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany<sup>11</sup>, and Nabta Playa circle in Upper Egypt (in the desert 100km west of Abu Simbel).

The Goseck circle is thought to have been built around 4,900 BC and was in use for approximately two hundred years. It aligned with the winter solstice at sunrise and sunset, and the site has evidence of human sacrifice. The winter solstice is the lowest ebb of the sun in the Northern Hemisphere, and would have been a time when people feared the sun 'would not come back'. It makes sense that ritualised behaviour patterns emerged to time in with the winter solstice, and even today in some tribal societies, that behaviour continues<sup>12</sup>.

Later, stone circles aligned to the solar procession started springing up all over Europe and western Asia over a three-thousand-year time period. The animals ceased to be the main focus, and the sun was the 'in thing' to watch and worship/ritually work with. A lot of these sites fell in and out of use over a long period of time, and quite a few of them have evidence of human sacrifice, or cattle sacrifice and of human burials (necropolis sites). The large amount of cattle bones found at many of these sites are thought to be ritual sacrificial animals, but I would like to add something to that hypothesis that may throw a spanner into the works of those theories and also of mine.

When I lived for a while in a tribal society, when it got close to winter (Oct/Nov) the tribe would be very active with hunting, and extended families would gather together to collectively skin, and then dry the meat. The drying of the meat was often a family affair where everyone came together to butcher and dry the meat over huge hanging racks positioned over low ember fires.

This produced large quantities of dried meat that was then equally distributed between family members. It was a remembrance of survival mechanisms for a food supply that would last the harsh and bitter winters. No matter that there were supermarkets an hour away in a car, the drying of the meat was something still done as winter fast approached. It was also done, incidentally, upon the death of a hunter. Meat would be dried and handed to the widow to ensure a food supply for the months ahead.

It is important to remember that as we look at these sites and their evidence, we do so from the comfort of a warm home that has a good food supply. We do not have the survival concerns that our ancestors did seven thousand years ago, so we tend to think only in terms of purely ritual behaviour, when often it was more likely that these behaviours served multiple purposes, including highly practical ones. And it is also pertinent to remember that these often highly practical acts worked well as survival and also bonding mechanisms, and they often persisted in closed and tribal societies right up to present day – if it works, why change it?

The second very early stone circle is a little more perplexing and is also far more relevant to us as magicians digging around in the underpants of history. Nabta Playa<sup>13</sup>, out in the western

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<sup>11</sup> François Bertemes, Peter F. Biehl, Andreas Northe, Olaf Schröder: *Die neolithische Kreisgrabenanlage von Goseck, Ldkr. Weißenfels*. In: *Archäologie in Sachsen-Anhalt*. NF Bd. 2, 2004

<sup>12</sup> Salish/ Pend d'oreille tribes on the Flathead reservation in Montana still practice 'Jump Dance', a ritual nightlong stamping dance done around the time of the winter solstice to remind the sun to come back.

<sup>13</sup> Wendorf, Fred; Malville, J. McKim (2001), "The Megalith Alignments", in Wendorf, Fred; Schild, Romuald; Nelson, Kit, *In Holocene Settlement of the Egyptian Sahara, vol. 1, The archaeology of Nabta Playa*, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum

desert of Upper Egypt is an ancient centre of activity, with the first evidence of activity dating to around 10,000BC. In the period between 6,500 and 5,000 BC we start to see a highly organised community with clear ritualised behaviour. The settlement had deep wells, organised 'streets', and they appear to have been importing goats and sheep from western Asia. There is evidence of the ritual burial of cattle in stone roofed chambers lined with clay<sup>14</sup> (very interesting parallel to the later burials of the Apis Bull in Egypt), and also of numerous large hearths (think about the drying of meat at collective slaughters).

The actual stone circle complex of Nabta Playa was thought to have been erected around 4,800 BC, and there has been much debate about its meaning. It is clear that it aligns to the summer solstice, and is therefore a solar circle, but there have also been theories also about its alignment to various stars, namely the Orion constellation, and Sirius. This theory was postulated by Wendorf, but later revised by University of Colorado (Boulder) astronomy professor J McKim Malville. It is a complicated thing, to work out what stars align to what stone circle, as there is the date consideration (the sky slowly processes), and also the fact that, and this is the least scientific of terms, if you have a circle of stones, and a load of stars in the sky, each stone or pair of stones is going to align to something. But it was and is very clear that the circle layout of prominent stones aligned to the zenith of the sun at summer solstice.

I can understand a solar stone circle in northern Europe where the sun appears to be vanishing in the winter, but why was there solar stone circles in a land where the sun always shines? The authors of the archaeological study of Nabta Playa, hypothesise that the site links to Sirius in connection with the rising of the Nile waters, and that the solar solstice is connected with the heavy rains that trigger the rising of the Nile. There are problems with that hypothesis.

The first problem is that the monsoon rains that feed the Nile inundation happen in Ethiopia and South Sudan, not Egypt, and those rains begin in late April/May, and appear in Aswan in July<sup>15</sup>. The other more obvious issue with the circle purported to be a way of watching the impending Nile inundation, is the position of the stone circle itself, and the terrain in which it was built. It was built at a time when that area was not desert: it was still lush and had a good water supply (and small lakes surrounding it). Its local inhabitants were pastoralists, and its position, most important of all, was 100km west of Abu Simbel – it was far away from the Nile, in an area that is now desert. What would be the reason to build a stone circle connected to the Nile, so far away from it? And by pastoralists who did not rely on the Nile for their herds and rudimentary crops?

As an aside, the 'received wisdom' regarding the rise of Sirius, and the goddess Sopdet being connected to the impending inundation now appears to be on shaky ground. The theory of connection between Sopdet (Sirius) and the Nile inundation, was largely based upon an ivory tablet, supposedly showing Sopdet and the Nile. (Ivory tablet from the reign of Djer 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty). I looked at this tablet, and struggled to see the connection, and upon further research I found this theory to have consequently being debunked by Egyptologists.

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<sup>14</sup> Wendorf, Fred; Schild, Romuald (November 26, 2000), Late Neolithic megalithic structures at Nabta Playa (Sahara), southwestern Egypt

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nile-River/Climate-and-hydrology>

I also came across a piece of research that closely looked at this supposed connection, and these researchers also tossed the theory out of the window based upon astronomical calculations across the time periods of Egyptian history – the inundation did not happen like clockwork and relied heavily upon the timing of the monsoon, which had variability. If the inundation was late, the Egyptians would add an extra month of their agricultural calendar. It is also pertinent to understand, if you look into this yourself and come across various popular sites, that the Egyptians had a solar civil calendar of 365 days, so their months processed around the seasons over time, and an agricultural calendar that started each year with the rising of the Nile, so it too was variable, and the timing of the heliacal rising of Sirius slowly processed through the months over the millennia (today it rises in August). Often some of the websites confuse the Egyptian civil calendar with the agricultural one, so watch out for that mistake. Here is an excerpt of the research text that I found, that essentially debunks the theory.

Regarding the rise of Sirius and the Nile inundation

*It is shown that the only text that describes this event is formulated very vaguely. It makes impossible to derive a reliable astronomical dating. Modern interpretations of this text are based on the free interpretation of the original source, and often do not match. According to historical evidence of Greek authors and later Egyptian texts, flooding of the Nile based on heliacal rising of Sirius could be predicted at the beginning of I millennium AD. This fact is confirmed by astronomical calculations<sup>16</sup>.*

So we have a ritual centre inland from the Nile, that built up over thousands of years, and around 4,800BC they built a stone circle that aligned with the summer solstice. Why? I find it fascinating that around the same time, in two very different locations (there could be more, we just don't know yet), people decided to build these ritual structures that focused upon the sun. They appeared (along with later subsequent ones scattered around the northern hemisphere) in the very early days of agriculture, where animal husbandry was far more prominent.

The common theory about the rise of stone solar circles links to the seasonal cycles for agriculture, and yet, solar stone circles appear in such very different places that have different seasonal structures: summer solstice in the area that was to become Upper Egypt was very different in terms of agriculture/weather to the areas of northern Europe where other solar stone circles emerged at the same time. And keep in mind that we are talking about a time when the people who built these early structures were still, for the most part, farming animals and harvesting wild seed.

We also must not forget that these early ancient peoples moved around a lot and travelled great distances – stories travel with people, ideas move around, and people copy what is different and cool, particularly if it appears to work. It is very likely that the huge and prolonged disturbances in climate, sea levels, and temperature affected those in more northerly climes far more severely than it did the people in the area that became Upper Egypt, but it would have affected them none the less. And if they encountered tales passed on along trading routes about the 'sun being angry', those tales may have been scary enough, coupled

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<sup>16</sup> Heliacal rising of Sirius and flooding of the Nile – Nickiforov, M. G.; Petrova, A. A. AA(Sternberg Astronomy Institute of the Moscow State University, 119991, Moscow), AB(Institute of Oriental Studies, 107031, Moscow)Bulgarian Astronomical Journal, Vol. 18, No. 3

with their own ancestral memory of a period of ‘bad times’, and a renewal of those bad times, to prompt a shift to solar worship – there was also evidence at the Nabta Playa site of serious and prolonged drought (desertification from the 5.9 kiloyear event).

*Ra grew angry with mankind. He tore out one of his eyes, and threw it as Hathor down to earth, ordering her to destroy mankind. The goddess turned in to the shape of a lioness, Sekhmet, and became the Lady of Pestilence and the Goddess of Vengeance. She was so successful at this, nearly wiping out the whole of humanity in her bloodthirsty killing spree, that Re grew alarmed and decided to put an end to the slaughter. He played a trick on Sekhmet: to quell her bloodlust he got her drunk on beer coloured like blood, in her drunken stupor she forgot to continue killing, and transformed back into the gentle Hathor.*

- The story of Sekhmet and the destruction of Man from the Book of the Holy Cow.

## Chambered Tombs in Northern Europe

In the colder more seasonal north we see a continuation and development of the ditch/enclosure circles that developed in to large and complex stone alignments. In both cooler and also warmer climates, we have evidence of human sacrifice, usually at high status burials in the warmer climates, and at the solar circles in colder climates.

During the period from 4,200BCE to 3,900 BCE in Europe we see continued climate instability, with the 5.9Kiloyear event (3,900BCE) with once again rapid cooling and intense cold winters.<sup>17 18</sup> Once again we see a ritualised response to this dramatic change and harsher living conditions.

Britain around the time period of 4,000BCE to 3,500BCE, from a ritual cultural perspective, appeared to have focused upon two things: solar precession, and death (sounds very Egyptian!). It is in this period that we find the chambered tombs<sup>19</sup>: complex stone constructions that housed one or more bodies. By approx. 3,000BCE stone circles and alignments were cropping up in various places in NW Europe and the tradition continued for another two thousand years.<sup>20</sup>

One of the major themes in magical history can be found in the ancient Dynastic Egyptian culture, and that is the theme of death and the afterlife. The sun and the progression of the soul through death and the underworld are major themes in ancient Egyptian theology: the souls of the dead undertake a series of ‘tests’ as they travel through the underworld, and at times they rest in caverns of the underworld until it is time for them to release and re-join their journey of development through the Gates of the Duat<sup>21</sup>. The light that guides the souls on their path of development and awakening is the light of Re, the sun as it travels in the underworld.

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<sup>17</sup> Bond, G.; et al. (1997). “A Pervasive Millennial-Scale Cycle in North Atlantic Holocene and Glacial Climates”. *Science* 278 (5341): 1257–1266. doi:10.1126/science.278.5341.1257.

<sup>18</sup> Bond, G.; et al. (2001). “Persistent Solar Influence on North Atlantic Climate During the Holocene”. *Science* 294 (5549): 2130–2136. doi:10.1126/science.1065680.

<sup>19</sup> Pearson, Mike Parker (2005). *Bronze Age Britain* (Revised Edition). London: B.T. Batsford and English Heritage.

<sup>20</sup> Burl, Aubrey (2000). *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

<sup>21</sup> Sheppard, McCarthy, Littlejohn (2017) *The Book of Gates*: Quareia Publishing UK ISBN 978-1911134220

With that in mind, the chambered tombs in the British Isles are worthy of a look. Of the many chambered tombs that litter the British Isles, there are three that are worthy of inspection as good examples.

The first is Newgrange (*Brú na Bóinne*) in the Boyne Valley, County Meath, Ireland<sup>22</sup>. It is a large impressive passage chambered tomb from the Neolithic era (3,200BCE). It is aligned with the winter solstice, so that sunlight at that time flows through a ‘roof box’, an opening that allows sunlight to flood the inner chamber at the winter solstice. When it was opened, human remains and grave goods were found, so it was most definitely used as a tomb. There are quite a few chambered tombs in Ireland that align with the winter solstice. So here we have burials, placed in ‘caves’ (underworld) where the sun at its lowest in the year falls into the cave and lights it up.

The second of interest is Bryn Celli Ddu in Anglesey, Wales<sup>23</sup>. It also dates to the Neolithic period and post hole remains that have been carbon dated show activity from around 4,000BCE. It started out as a henge within a stone circle and later was developed as a chambered tomb mound. It is aligned to the summer solstice, unlike many others that align to the winter solstice, and it makes me wonder is the different alignment is a throwback to its earlier days as a stone circle/ditch. This would make sense with the much earlier circles we looked at earlier.

What caught my eye in particular was a serpent stone that is in the mound. When the mound was opened up, a ‘patterned stone’ 6ft 6inches high was found buried *under* the mound: the shape of the carving was very reminiscent of the later depictions in ancient Egypt of the ‘Mehen’ serpent that protects the solar god Re as he traverses the underworld.

The Bryn Celli Ddu serpent stone was dug out and stood back up where the excavator thought it would have stood when the henge was active, so it’s original placing within the chamber is unknown. The theme of underworld spaces, serpents, and the sun in the underworld is an ancient and persistent motif in various places in the North hemisphere. It was also a strong theme in the ancient Egyptian theology, with the underworld populated by various serpents (i.e. Apep, Mehen, Glister, etc.) some of whom were helpers to the human souls, and some who were arch enemies.

The third chambered tomb, Maes Howe<sup>24</sup>, on Mainland Orkney, Scotland, is truly astonishing and was very likely not a tomb at all. It is a vast chambered ‘tomb’ where the rear wall illuminates at the winter solstice. When it was opened, there was no grave goods and no human remains – it was never used for burial and was likely a ritual chamber. Once again, we have the ‘cave’ where the winter sun at its lowest shines into the ‘cave’ casting its light into the darkness.

This pattern of the light of the sun shining into the darkness at the darkest part of the year has magical parallels to one of the deep mysteries in magic: the light of the sun falling upon the

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<sup>22</sup> O’Kelly, Michael J. 1982. *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*. London: Thames and Hudson.

<sup>23</sup> Yates, M.J.; Longley, David (2001). *Anglesey: A Guide to Ancient Monuments on the Isle of Anglesey. Third edition*. Cardiff: Cadw

<sup>24</sup> Renfrew, Colin (editor) (1985). *The Prehistory of Orkney BC 4000-1000 AD*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

seeker in the darkness of the underworld, as they start the long journey up out of the darkness and up to the stars – the path of mystical ascent. It is one of the most prominent themes today in mystical magic – could this early ritualised behaviour be the far distant ancestor of today’s magical mystical theme of ascent/rebirth from the darkness?

We have no way of knowing if this deep and ancient part of the magical mysteries was indeed what these ancient people were working with, or whether it is a total coincidence – were they simply copying the ebb and flow of the sun through the seasons, particularly in light of the harsher winters they were suffering? That is the usual hypothesis that is put forward, and yet we see the same pattern emerge in countries that do not and did not have such distinctive winters.

As a magician, I can say that these powerful dynamics and patterns are inherent within the magical human consciousness, not because magicians have been told it is, but because that is what you experience in vision when you tread the magical mystical path, regardless of what you ‘know’ or don’t know of historical patterns. A person going through deep magical development will experience these patterns in some form whether or not they have been exposed to the concepts.

But that then also poses a very interesting magical question: did these inner presentations that the magician stumbles across in vision arise naturally, as organically forming structures of consciousness, or are they imprinted upon the collective inner consciousness of humanity because they have been purposefully worked with, in a visionary and ritual sense for millennia, and have thus formed as a created inner structure? Did the various dramatic climate events first cause an outer social and ritual response, and then a deeper inner magical response, which in turn created inner visionary experiences that persist in human consciousness to this day?

*The swimmer in the Nu is one with the darkness and silence. The swimmer does not know he is a swimmer: he is and is within the Nu. The golden rays of Re fall upon the swimmer, lighting up what was within the darkness. The swimmer reflects the light of Re, and thus is no longer one with the Nu.*<sup>25</sup>

Excerpt from the Egyptian Book of Gates: ninth gate scene 58

*O those being filled, who are in the water,  
The swimming/golden/molten, who are in the Nu,  
Look upon Re who is passing through,  
In his barque which is great of Mysteries.  
Now he ordains the design of the Gods:  
Now he formulates the business of the Radiant.  
Oho! Stand up, ones who are in the Nu:  
Behold Re as he ordains your designs.*

*Says to them, Re:*

*A coming forth for your heads/best, those who are diving,*

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<sup>25</sup> J McCarthy. (2018). The Quareia Apprentice Study Guide 9781911134329

*Plying for your arms, those who are slack,  
Swiftness for your hurrying, those who are swimming/golden/molten,  
Breath for your noses those who are expanded.  
A coming into power for you through your water,  
Be you at peace in your cold refreshment.  
Your setting out is in the Nu,  
Your strides are of a stream.  
Your Presences, which are on earth, they are at peace,  
Meaning they breathe, and there is no destruction for them.*

*Their extension is the peace of the Earth.*

*Now, putting forth what is theirs on Earth  
Means coming into the power of one's peace on Earth<sup>26</sup>.*

Taken from the Book of Gates, a ritual funerary text from New Kingdom Egypt. The Book of Gates first appears (so far as we know today) in fragments during the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty (approx. 1323 BC), and is the ritualised passage of Re (Solar deity) through the twelve hours and gates of the underworld. It appeared on royal tomb walls and also in fragments upon the golden sanctuary of King Tutankhamun.

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<sup>26</sup> Sheppard, McCarthy, Littlejohn (2017) The Book of Gates: Quareia Publishing UK ISBN 978-1911134220