

Deity in Sisterhood

The Collective Sacred Female in Germanic Europe

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Abstract

The dissertation defines and explores the collective sacred female, embodied in groups of three or more goddesses or saints, particularly in its elaboration in the Germanic Europe of the past two millennia. These groups are named and honored collectively, and they work consensually for the benefit of those who serve them. This study, analyzing the persistent presence of the female collectives in this region, challenges the conventional wisdom that religion among the Germanic peoples is typically patriarchal and violent. The collectives exist within and alongside kyriarchal waves of religious expression, subverting or extending them, and show the Germanic

religious heritage to be more nuanced in its portrayal of deity. This dissertation is an interdisciplinary study investigating four of these collectives, classifying them over time, comparing them using the work of William Paden, and examining the meaning of each collective to its worshippers. The earliest collective is the *Deae Matronae*, three goddesses from the Roman era Rhineland offering a Germano-Celtic religion and collective deity to the Romans stationed along the Germanic frontier. These goddesses had close ties to the landscape and deep connections to the Roman ceremony of the vow. From the Viking Age in Scandinavia are the *Norns*, goddesses of the telling and setting of fate, and the *Dísir*, goddesses of guidance and protection from birth through love, war and death. Both of these collectives are goddesses of the entire life continuum. Out of medieval Catholicism, and remaining vital to the present day, is the collective of saints known as the *drei heiligen Jungfrauen*, or the Three Holy Maidens. The Jungfrauen provide healing, protection, help and succor for those who venerate them. Weaving together not only text, but art, artifact, folklore, folk art, prayer and hymnody, this study demonstrates the tenacity, meaning and importance

of the collective sacred female in Germanic Europe and offers some possibilities for contemporary thought.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the forest glades and sunny hilltops of western Germany not far from the Rhine River are hidden the ruins of temples to three goddesses. These temples were built during Roman times, about two thousand years ago, and the three goddesses honored there were called the *Deae Matronae*, the Matron Goddesses. They had many other names, describing them as goddesses of the local plants and animals, tribes and riverways. The goddesses were pictured as three adult women, two married and one unmarried, and worshippers all over the region raised stones to them in gratitude for vows taken and fulfilled. The Matronae were deities of all the people, not just high-ranking Romans, but also lower-ranking soldiers, and the local Germanic peoples, including women, daughters and villagers. The goddesses were not worshipped as single deities, with separate names, functions, or powers. Instead, they were and are a collective, a group of goddesses working consensually for the good of the people.

The *Deae Matronae* are only one of many collectives that exist in the religion and folklore of Germanic Europe, though they are perhaps the earliest. There are three collectives considered in this dissertation in addition to the *Deae Matronae*. From Scandinavian Iceland, in the tumult and creative chaos of the Viking Age and early Christianity, come the stories of the fateful *Norns* and protective *Dísir*, groups of goddesses both beloved of and feared by the Old Norse-speaking people. The *Norns* fill the pages of the Old Norse *Eddas* and sagas with their power to set the fates of deities, humans and other beings, from birth through love, battle and death. The *Dísir* are also goddesses of the entire life continuum, and family members—often led by women—

festivals are still being held today.

The final collective is not a group of goddesses, but of saints in the Roman Catholic Church. The *drei heiligen Jungfrauen* (the Three Holy Maidens) are a threesome of saints known throughout continental Germanic Europe under many names and guises. They are always three and generally sisters. The version of the collective studied for this dissertation comes from a village in the South Tyrolean area of Italy, the village of Meransen, and the saints there are named Aubet, Cubet and Guere. Veneration of this collective is known from documents dating to the fourteenth century, and is still potent today. Visitors and villagers petition the Jungfrauen for help, protection, assistance and succor in all the cares and concerns of life, especially life in a mountainous farming community.

*Collectivity* is a new way of thinking about deity, goddesses or the sacred female. The main similarity between the various deities and saints introduced above is their “groupness,” the fact that they are in a group, a triad or a sisterhood. Although it is not a requirement that collective deity be female, in Germanic Europe it is overwhelmingly the case. For this endeavor, I posit the following definition of the collective sacred female, or more broadly, collective deity. Collective deity is (1) a group of sacred or supernatural beings (2) collected under one group name (although they may carry additional individual names or epithets) (3) but not conflated into a single being; (4) worshipped collectively; (5) who act and wield their powers collectively and consensually. The collective sacred female is an underrecognized theme that winds through Germanic religious history, pre-Christian and Christian. The theme has variations, like the *Matronae*, the *Norns*, the *Dísir*

and the *Jungfrauen*, that take up the theme and embellish it in different areas of Germanic Europe, in different time periods, under different cultural conditions. The research

engages this definition, applying it to each of the collectives, determining their meaning, extent and historic expression. How did devotees or cultures conceive of collective deity, and how did they give it shape in art, artifact, text and folklore? What functions did the collective female sacred perform in devotees' lives? How did devotees worship or venerate these collectives? I also begin a new taxonomy, especially concerning the ideas of collectivity versus plurality in multiple deities.

The study is illustrative, not exhaustive. The collectives chosen for in-depth examination come from three different countries in Germanic Europe, three different time periods, and three different religious expressions. They follow the basic structure in Jan de Vries' chapter "Die in Gruppen auftretenden Gottheiten" ("Deities Appearing in Groups") from his monumental *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*.<sup>1</sup> I chose the collectives for their geographical, linguistic and chronological variety, their depth of source materials and opportunities for fieldwork. The first, the Deae Matronae, date from the early centuries CE, from the Rhineland area of western Germany near the cities Bonn and Köln. Their cultural milieu was that of the Roman provinces, with indigenous Germanic and Celtic strata. The second two collectives, the Norns and the Dísir, are from the Icelandic Old Norse literature, written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but possibly dating from several centuries earlier. The Old Norse literature mentions other

<sup>1</sup>Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 3. unveränd. Aufl., Grundriss der Germanischen Philologie 12,1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970). Bd. 2, 288-302.

collectives, such as the Valkyries, but the Norns and Dísir enjoy the greatest expression in the texts. The final collective is the drei heiligen Jungfrauen, in its incarnation as Aubet, Cubet and Guere from Meransen, South Tyrol, Italy.

The collective sacred female is an unexplored expression of the sacred female. In the past forty years, Women's Studies scholars and Religious Studies scholars have started the long work of filling the research gaps concerning women and religion, goddesses, women saints and other female religious figures. When studied, the goddesses and sacred females have largely been unitary, single beings. (The same is also true of the study of male beings.) This study attempts a beginning toward filling this gap in the research, offering a new form of sacred female figure for analysis, the collective sacred female. This dissertation also crosses into Germanic Studies. While some scholars have studied the German saints and religious women, there is much less research, especially in English, on the Germanic goddesses. Where the scholarship exists, it usually focuses on the Norse pantheon, and not generally on the collectives. Also, the Tyrolean saints are relatively unknown outside of German scholarship.

This dissertation also breaks new ground in its taxonomic work. Chapter 1 contains a section, "Toward a Taxonomy of the Multiple in Deity," which moves toward definitions not only of collective but plural deity, triple deity and trinity. The Germanic collectives demonstrate that collective deity is not the same as plural deity. This has theological<sup>2</sup> and historical implications, since both types of multiple deity exist in a

<sup>2</sup> Women coined the term thealogy (from the Greek θεά, goddess), discourse about goddess or goddesses. Naomi Goldenberg first used the word in her important

variety of cultures, and this study only begins exploration. Chapter 2 is of interest to readers curious about the theoretical and methodological questions and stances concerning the research. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 reveal the Matronae, Norns, Dísir and Jungfrauen as collectives of adult women: in some senses, and sometimes literally,

sisterhoods. They are groups of women bound together by bonds of concern for the same goals, usually of imparting health, wealth, well-being, fruitfulness, fate, life, death or rebirth for the people in their care. Sisterhood is a new metaphor for deity and offers a potentially empowering image of deity for women in community. This work is important in offering an image for deity that embraces, encourages and intertwines with community, providing an alternative to atomistic, individualized conceptions of deity encouraged under, for example, monotheism. This work is important for Goddess Studies, but is applicable far beyond.

Chapter 6 of this dissertation considers several possibilities concerning the collective sacred female for community, power and identity. One of the components of my definition of collective deity is the acting and wielding of power collectively and consensually. As part of this work I query the texts and artifacts concerning the power sharing action of the sacred beings. In all but a very few cases, the goddesses and saints make their decisions and do their work by consensus, without argument or questioning. They are a collective of individuals sharing power, not a group mind conflated into a

work, *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

single being. This is intimately connected with the image of deity as a sisterhood. In the best of sisterhoods, women share authority and hear all voices.

This study is also important to the broader work of theology. First, the presence of female deity in a religious system still interrupts and shifts one of the basic assumptions

of theology: that deity will be male. Even in studies of polytheistic, pre-Christian Germanic religion, the overwhelming amount of research concentrates on the gods with at best a chapter or section on the goddesses and female figures. It is still somewhat unusual to focus an entire study on goddesses and female figures. This study follows Melissa Raphael in her work *Introducing Theology* as

intended to contribute to the further development of Goddess Studies as an area of scholarship that breaks with patriarchal tradition and, at last, views goddesses and the Goddess as being of more than peripheral interest to religious people and to the study of religion.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the theological project is part of a larger project working in opposition to what feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls the *kyriarchy*, “a social political system of domination and subordination that is based on the power and rule of

<sup>3</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 12.

the lord/master/father.”<sup>4</sup> This sounds in many ways like a definition of *patriarchy*, but the key is the final term: lord/master/father. The word *kyriarchy* is meant to broaden the simple definition of patriarchy as the rule of men over women (the “father-rule”) and express the domination and subordination system of multiplicative structures of

oppression: gender, race, class, colonialism, affectional orientation (the “lord and master.”) A component of the kyriarchy is the Abrahamic religious insistence on God as Lord as well as Father, and the insistence that the single has charge over the multiple. Schüssler Fiorenza ends her revised edition of *In Memory of Her* with a reminder that the early Christian Church was in fact an *ekklēsia*, a public assembly of community, and she calls for *the ekklēsia of women*.<sup>5</sup> My work also highlights community and multiplicity, this time in the deity itself, as well as in the worshippers.

One of the important things about the feminist<sup>6</sup>theological project and the counterhegemonic struggle against kyriarchal structures is the intellectual work of

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), xix.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 343.

<sup>6</sup> The words “feminist” and “feminism” are of course contested, and one should more properly speak of *feminisms*. For the purposes of this dissertation, “there is a necessary activism in feminisms, an activism that wants to change what happens to biological women because of the social structures of gender. Feminisms are therefore

bringing to light some things that the dominant culture has hidden. Hegemony thrives when the rules of the dominant culture, gender or class are so pervasive that they are obscured from view. Brookfield quotes Althusser saying hegemony is evident in the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general

directions imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.”<sup>7</sup> The “spontaneous consent” is what is at stake in hegemony. The analysis in this work comes at the end of a generation of exacting feminist scholarship attempting to expose the workings of the dominant group in various forms of oppressive discourse, and attempts to offer a step out of hegemony into a counterhegemonic space. This is not to say that the collectives historically achieved a feminist alternative to powerful kyriarchal systems. However, they offered the possibility of a non-kyriarchal viewpoint, possibly left over from pre-Indo-European religions, and they offer new viewpoints for contemporary examination. The collectives existed within larger kyriarchal social structures, a fact that warns against totalizing narratives of the kyriarchy. Seeds of possible alternatives to the kyriarchy lived alongside and within. This dissertation reveals some of these seeds, and politicized discourses which uncover the symptoms of oppression, whatever their grounds, diagnose the problem and offer alternative versions of livable realities.” Cf. Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 7. Cf. also Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender & Empire Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 97.

argues against the typical power structures of kyriarchal space. It moves into another view of authority: collectivity or sisterhood. Bell hooks notes that women are taught by sexism that women are “natural” enemies, that their relationships diminish them, that they cannot and should not bond together. Hooks admonishes women to learn the true value of sisterhood.<sup>8</sup> This dissertation gives additional religious meaning to the word



sisterhood, a word that has long been used by Roman Catholic women religious for their communities but not their deity.

The collectives studied in this work cover a significant portion of Europe, and stretch over almost two millennia. The theme is sounded and re-sounded again and again. There is energy in the concept of the collective sacred female, energy for thinking, for feeling and for religious experience. The hundreds of years of devotion paid to the collective sacred female, just in Germanic Europe, suggest a need in the human community for this type of religious experience. Romans on the imperial frontier found so much meaning and solace in the Germanic Matronae collectives that they and their families were devoted to Matronae worship. The Norns and the Dísir surface repeatedly in the Old Norse texts, attesting to their real and symbolic power in the culture. The parish church devoted to the drei heiligen Jungfrauen of Meransen in the South Tyrol is after six hundred years still a popular pilgrimage site. There is meaning and power in the Germanic sacred female collectives. The best historical writing captures the reality of

<sup>8</sup> Bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 43.

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what was vital in the past, and if this work can express even a part of the significance experienced by the devotees of the collectives, it will achieve much.

Toward a Taxonomy of the Multiple in Deity

It becomes obvious when working with deities in multiplicities that such group deities or multiple deities exist in many religious traditions and cultures, and that they

have key differences among them. As this work progressed, I found a useful distinction between collective deity and plural deity, along with triple deity and trinity. These four terms comprise this tentative attempt at taxonomy of the multiple in deity. It is my hope that further scholarship will expand this work.

I have already offered a definition for collective deity, which I will repeat here for reference. Collective deity is (1) a group of sacred or supernatural beings (2) collected under one group name (3) but not conflated into one being; (4) worshipped collectively, (5) who act and wield their powers collectively and consensually. Collective deities are found all over Indo-European lands and are overwhelmingly female. Some Germanic collectives are the Matronae (3); the Valkyries (9 or unnumbered); Norns (3 or unnumbered); Nine Sisters, the Mothers of Heimdall; Nine Daughters of Aegir; Disir (unnumbered); Fylgja (unnumbered) and Hamingja (unnumbered). Baltic and Slavic collectives are the Laimas, Laumas and Vilas. Indic collectives mentioned are Rudra's mothers (3); Priest's mothers (7); Seven Danus; Seven Mothers; Seven Sisters. Celtic collectives are the Matres (3); Matronae (3); Gallizenae (priestesses, 9). A Persian collective is the Fravashis. Greek and Roman lands are particularly fertile homelands for the collective sacred female: Fates or Moirai (3); Parcae (3); Furies or Erinyes (3);

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Eumenides; Muses (9); Graces; Maenads; Bacchantes; Gorgons; Dirae; Harpies; Sirens; Vestal Virgins; Danaids (50); Potniai; Kharites (3).

Akin to the collectives but slightly different is what I call a plural deity or plurality. These are very common in Roman era and pre-Roman era Celtic religion, where a single god or goddess is depicted as tripled. There is an artifact of a triple Brigid, for instance, in which the same goddess is pictured three times, each Brigid holding a different

attribute of the goddess' powers. An artifact was found at Covetina's Well in Britain showing three copies of the goddess Covetina in three separate niches. These plural goddesses generally have a first name that is either simply called "triple" or has been pluralized. The plural deities exist as a group but have only one identity, character, and personality.<sup>9</sup> Miranda Green reports that many plural deities in Gaul were represented as triple-headed or triple-faced and may include an age concept like youth, maturity and old age.<sup>10</sup> There are single mother goddesses in Gaulish iconography but they don't carry a "first name" that is tripled into the Matronae epithets, at least in the Matronae of the Rhineland. It might be possible that some of the triple Matres or

<sup>9</sup> Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, New rev. ed., Library of the World's Myths and Legends (Thoughtam: Newnes, 1983), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Miranda J. Green, "Triplism and Plurality: Intensity and Symbolism in Celtic Religious Expression," in *Sacred and Profane: Proceedings of a Conference on Archaeology, Ritual and Religion, Oxford, 1989*, ed. Paul Garwood, et al. (Oxford: Oxford Committee for Archaeology, 1991), 101.

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Matronae of Gaul could be considered pluralities rather than collectives; those artifacts are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Greco-Roman religion also contains plural deities. Examples include a Greek artifact of Hecate, a tripled goddess of the crossroads, who looks in three directions. Rüger mentions the the *Iuones*, or Junos, of Rome; he also mentions the *Cereres* and *Suleviae*.<sup>11</sup> All of these are pluralities of a deity with a single first name, mythology,

attributes and powers.

Miranda Green writes of the multiplication of the cult image, especially triplication of the cult image, of Celtic male deity images in Britain and Gaul. *Genii cucullati* are three hooded men usually in attendance upon a mother goddess. There is a triple Mars from Lower Slaughter in Britain and a triple-faced god in Gaul among the Remi people. A carving from Wroxeter in Britain depicts a three-headed image, there is a three-faced head from Bradenstoke and a triple head from Corleck.<sup>12</sup> I would suggest that these triplicities are pluralities instead of collectives, where the god is tripled in order to emphasize his power and to reflect the power of the number three for the Celtic people.

<sup>11</sup> Christoph B. Ruger, "Beobachtungen zu den Epigraphischen Belegen der Muttergottheiten in den Lateinischen Provinzen des Imperium Romanum," in *Matronen und Verwandte Gottheiten* ed. Gerhard Bauchhenss and Gunter Neumann, Beihefte der Bonner Jahrbucher, Bd. 44 (Cologne: Rheinland-Verlag, 1987), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Miranda J. Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), 208- 09.

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Celtic religion also has a tradition of divine couples, in which a Celtic goddess is pictured in company with a god of Roman or Celtic origin.<sup>13</sup> There are powerful Celtic triads from literary tradition like the trio of war goddesses, the Morrigan, who in some ways acts like a collective and in other ways like a triple deity (see below). The so-called "oak of the three daughters" possibly indicates another Celtic collective sisterhood.<sup>14</sup>

The pluralities have some power, I would argue, similar to the collectives in the

counterhegemonic project, but not as strongly as the collective deities. There are a significant number of pluralities in the Celtic pantheon who are male, and the pluralities disturb the notion that deity is always single, entire unto itself. I would describe the pluralities as “of one mind” since they are one deity, have one identity, character and personality. The pluralities thus don’t have the consensual power-sharing attributes of the collective deities with their individual selves sharing authority and working together for the good of their worshippers. The tripling of the pluralities seems to have more to do with honoring the power of the deity than the sharing of power among a collective or a sisterhood for the good of the community.

Different yet from both the collectives and the pluralities is the triune deity or Trinity of the Christian tradition. One way to define the triune deity comes from the last verse of the well-known hymn, “Holy! Holy! Holy!”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 99.

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Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty!

All Thy works shall praise Thy name,

In earth, and sky, and sea;

Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and mighty!

God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity!<sup>15</sup>

“God in three persons” is the Christian Trinity, God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and

the Holy Spirit, mystically the same as the monotheistic “Lord God Almighty.” The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has almost two thousand years of theological discussion, exposition, debate and church fiat and it is impossible to even summarize the history here. In brief, the doctrine of the Trinity holds that God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit are coequal persons within God, all three being divine, all three being God, yet there is still only one God.<sup>16</sup> The New Testament does not actually contain the doctrine of the Trinity, but the doctrine was a creation of the early Church theologians as they dealt with the issues of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the early apostles. There was no universal agreement on these issues in the early years of the Church. An important figure, Arius (250–336), began an influential movement that held that God the Father created Jesus Christ, who was not fully divine. Arianism was popular with newly converted populations in the outlands of Europe.

Arians thought themselves to be more strictly monotheistic than other

<sup>15</sup> Words by Reginald Heber, 1827. Public domain.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 180.

believers. The Modalists looked upon the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as modes or manifestations of one God but rejected an ontological distinctness between the three.<sup>17</sup> (This is possibly more similar to the concept of the triple goddess, below.) The Council of Nicea (325) cemented the current concept of the Trinity, as did Augustine of Hippo (354–430) who declared that each person of the Trinity participated in one divine substance, which the three persons share. The insistence on one divine substance lets the Christian religion retain its status as a monotheistic religion, even with a multiple form of

deity at its heart. Laurel Schneider goes so far as to say, “Monotheism remains a Christian doctrine by virtue of ecclesial fiat rather than internal coherence.”<sup>18</sup> The triune God of the Christian religion has been one of the bastions of male monotheism despite the mystic triplicity.

The final form of multiple deity in this tentative taxonomy is the contemporary pagan triple goddess. I must first stress that contemporary pagan concepts of goddess or goddesses are multifaceted, embodied, extremely personal and very fluid. This description of the triple goddess occurs quite often but is no means universal. Classicist Jane Ellen Harrison perhaps described it earliest (1903), when she theorized that prehistoric Europe worshipped a threefold goddess: the maiden, ruling the living; the

<sup>17</sup> Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity*, Guides to Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Laurel C. Schneider, *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash against Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 165.

mother, ruling the underworld; and a third, unnamed figure.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, she developed her theory partly by noting the pagan Greek (triple) collectives such as the Fates and the Graces. The equivocal magician Aleister Crowley added to the idea of the triple goddess by writing in his 1929 work *Moonchild* of Artemis (Roman Diana), the Virgin Goddess; Isis of light and purity; and Hecate, barren, hideous and malicious.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps the most key in popularizing the triple goddess was Robert Graves in his *The White Goddess*. He took the work of Jane Ellen Harrison, half a century earlier, and

adopted it wholeheartedly into his poetic view of history. He believed there had been a matriarchal period in prehistory and people had worshipped the triple goddess: maiden, mother and crone. The maiden and mother had been recognized by Jane Ellen Harrison, and Crowley had recognized the crone with aversion, but Graves saw in the crone the waning moon and the most fascinating aspect of all, the “divine feminine who gives pain and death in order to give reward and new life.”<sup>21</sup>

Following these thinkers, many Goddess feminists, witches, Wiccans and other pagans affirm the triple goddess as maiden, mother and crone. They may do so in a polytheistic setting, essentially tritheism, finding goddesses that they consider as having “maiden” attributes widely from world mythology and honoring them, and doing the

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 192.

same with “mothers” and “cronen.” Or they may honor the maiden, mother and crone as part of a triple deity known as the Goddess or the Triple Goddess. In this case the goddess has different “phases” or “faces” yet remains one goddess. (This has some similarities to the Christian Modalists.) There are no hard and fast rules and different practitioners will follow different paths at different times.

Melissa Raphael notes that some modern pagans believe that the triple goddess is the model for all triune deities that have followed including the Christian Trinity.<sup>22</sup> But



where the Christian Trinity is triangular, with the Father God occupying the top position, the maiden, mother and crone aspects of the triple goddess are circular, none holding a position of importance over the others. Indeed they indicate a cycle that is never broken, being born in the cycles of the moon, the sun and the seasons. The maiden is at the beginning of the life and cultural cycle (biology and culture are both represented in the triple goddess; she is not simply a reference to women's biological and reproductive functions). The maiden has an innocent freshness but also a wild and untamed side. She is virgin in the sense of being independent of any partner. The mother is at the most creative, fruitful and ripening of all things. She can have a ferocious guardianship of those she nurtures. The crone is the bringer of death and darkness, the cauldron in which death moves into rebirth and regeneration. She carries the wisdom of these transitions.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-71.

To further complicate matters, in some cases a single deity can shapeshift between the various life cycles symbolized by the maiden, the mother and the crone. Flaith, Old Irish goddess of sovereignty, could change her shape and her position in the life cycle at will.<sup>24</sup> The Greek Hera had three surnames which reflected her points in the life cycle; also, her return to the maiden, or virginity, was renewable which indicates an ability to move among the life cycle stages. As maiden, Hera was “unwed again;” as mother and wife to Zeus, she was the “Completed One;” and during her times apart from Zeus she was styled “Widow.”<sup>25</sup> These are indications of single deities becoming for a

time multiple deities (perhaps pluralities, perhaps triple deities) or shapeshifters and they are not uncommon in mythology of goddesses.

It is interesting that the collectives and pluralities, and of course the Trinity and triple deities, are very often groups of three. Why three? Miranda Green argues that the mother goddesses in triadic form are particular to the Celts, that three had a special meaning in the Celtic world, and that the earliest myths of Ireland and Wales had abundant triplism.<sup>26</sup> However, as this dissertation will show, triplism is very important in Germanic religion as well. In an earlier article, Green suggests that threeness could

<sup>24</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, *Whence the Goddesses: A Source Book*, Athene Series (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 148.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>26</sup> Miranda J. Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins, and Mothers* (New York: G. Braziller, 1996), 106.

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symbolize not only triplism but other multiples. Very interesting is the fact that in Celtic religion the sky god and war gods are never tripled. Miriam Robbins Dexter has noted that the sky god and a patriarchal pantheon were part of the Indo-European heritage.<sup>27</sup> This indicates that the triplism found so strongly in Celtic religion could come from a pre-Indo-European religious stratum. Marija Gimbutas also thought there was a pre-Indo-European triple goddess and general sacredness of the number three.<sup>28</sup> Notice that these collectives and pluralities are distinctly non-hierarchical. For Dexter, the influx of Indo-European patriarchy brought a new tripartite social structure (sovereignty and priesthood,

military, and the nurturing professions).<sup>29</sup> Triplicities resulting from the new structure were hierarchal in nature and are quite different from the non-hierarchal female triplicities and pluralities covered in this section. Miranda Green thought that tripling a deity added to its power and intensity. She adds several other possibilities to answer the question, “Why three?” They might be the human family (father, mother, child); the three ages of man [*sic*] (youth, maturity and old age); time (past, present, future); but mainly

<sup>27</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, “The Roots of Indo-European Patriarchy: Indo European Female Figures and the Principles of Energy.” In *The Rule of Mars: Readings on the Origins, History and Impact of Patriarchy*, edited by Cristina Biaggi. (Manchester, CT: Knowledge Ideas & Trends, 2005), 147.

<sup>28</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 167.

<sup>29</sup> Dexter, “The Roots of Indo-European Patriarchy,” 144.

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she saw triplism as increasing the honor paid to the deity and the potency of the deity itself<sup>30</sup> as part of a phenomenon of plurality and exaggeration.<sup>31</sup>

I have noted several male gods as examples of Celtic pluralities and noted the Christian Trinity as an example of triune deity. Although the subject of this dissertation is not god figures, I discovered very few instances of male collective deity in Germanic Europe. Aside from some male collectives of Catholic saints,<sup>32</sup> all examples of collective deity that I found are female. This is highly suggestive and worthy of further research.

Key Conceptual Theorists

I have selected eight theorists from a variety of disciplines whose work is either important to the current interpretive framework of the study, or historically valuable. The theorists are all from Religious Studies or studies of mythology: pre-Christian Germanic religion, Indo-European religion and mythology, and Goddess Studies. Several bring a strong feminist viewpoint to their work. The eight theorists are Jan de Vries and Hilda Ellis Davidson (from the discipline of pre-Christian Germanic religious history); Marija Gimbutas and Miriam Robbins Dexter (from the discipline of Goddess Studies); Celticist

<sup>30</sup> Green, “Triplism and Plurality,” 107.

<sup>31</sup> ———, *The Gods of the Celts*, 201.

<sup>32</sup> Matthias Zender, “Die Verehrung von Drei Heiligen Frauen im Christlichen Mitteleuropa und ihre Vorbereitungen in Alten Vorstellungen,” in *Matronen und Verwandte Gottheiten*, ed. Gerhard Bauchhenss and Günter Neumann, Beihefte der Bonner Jahrbücher, Bd. 44 (Cologne: Rheinland-Verlag, 1987), 215.

Miranda Green; and Georges Dumézil, Jaan Puhvel and Michael York (from the discipline of Indo-European religious studies).

The first of these thinkers offers the structure for this dissertation. Jan de Vries’ *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* is the high point of Religionswissenschaft (history of religions) in the discipline of pre-Christian Germanic religious history. This monumental two-volume work is comprehensive, carefully researched and, as is usual for history of religions from the 1950s, quite comparative. Vries wrote a fifteen-page section “Die in Gruppen auftretenden Gottheiten” (“Deities Appearing in Groups”) and it is his first section under “Weibliche Gottheiten” (“Female Deities”).<sup>33</sup> The bulk of this section

covers the Deae Matronae. Vries discusses the Matronae as a cult of the mother goddesses (which I would not do, since one of the goddesses in the Rhenish collective is unmarried). He found that the center of the cult was the same place that I am covering in this dissertation, the area around Bonn and Köln in lower Germany. He takes up a common question: is this a Germanic or Celtic phenomenon and how do we tell? Vries finally concluded that it was a symbiotic mixture of the Celtic and the Germanic and its pedigree as a Germanic movement was cemented by the later phenomena of the Norse material and the drei heiligen Jungfrauen, the same collectives that I put forth in this dissertation. He does make the mistake of reasoning backward (“retrojecting the data”

<sup>33</sup> Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Bd. 2, 288-303.

according to feminist scholar Ann Suter)<sup>34</sup> from the Norse material being Germanic to the Matronae being also Germanic.

As I do in my chapter on the Matronae, Vries gives ample evidence of Germanic names of the Matronae. These are important linguistically because they are some of the earliest Germanic words in history, even though they appear in a Romanized context. After examining the goddess names, Vries goes on to discuss the Norse Dísir, Norns, Valkyries and fylgyr. He then turns his attention to Upper Germany and in the folk beliefs finds the drei Jungfrauen, in their names of Einbede, Warbede and Willebede. This conceptual framework follows very closely the structure of this dissertation, with the Rhineland Matronae (chapter 3), the Old Norse Norns and Dísir (chapter 4), and the drei

heiligen Jungfrauen of the Roman Catholic Church (chapter 5). Vries brings no feminist critique to his monumental study of pre-Christian Germanic religion. Although extensive, his sections on the goddesses and female figures are dwarfed by his huge overview of Germanic religion in general and the sections on the gods. Still, his contribution is key, and sets the standard for work in Religionswissenschaft where pre-Christian Germanic religion is concerned.

Hilda Ellis Davidson has written most recently and most extensively in English on pre-Christian Germanic religion. Most of her work focuses on the male-centered texts of

<sup>34</sup> Ann Suter, *The Narcissus and the Pomegranate: An Archaeology of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 8.

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the Old Norse religion,<sup>35</sup> but she wrote a well-known study on the goddess and realm of Hel.<sup>36</sup> One of her later works is a study of the Germanic goddesses called *Roles of the Northern Goddess*,<sup>37</sup> which includes Celtic and Germanic goddesses and compares them at times to other European goddesses. It is her unique contribution to present the northern European goddesses in chapters by “roles”: Mistress of the Animals, Mistress of the Grain, Mistress of the Distaff and Loom, Mistress of the Household, Mistress of Life and Death. The Matronae Davidson includes in the Mistress of the Grain role where she finds groups of mother goddesses in Gaul, Britain and parts of Germany under Roman occupation. She notes that attributes of the Matronae link them with the fertility of the earth because they hold cornucopia, baskets of fruit or bread.

Davidson also recognized that the Norse goddesses were not always worshipped as solitary beings. She notes that the sacred hall at Uppsala was to the Dísir, “goddesses in the plural.”<sup>38</sup> Davidson mentions the Norns as having roles both as Mistresses of Distaff and Loom and Mistresses of the Household, for their role at the birth of children.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977); Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).

<sup>37</sup> ———, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

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She also mentions them in the chapter Mistress of Life and Death, where unsurprisingly, the Valkyries are also found. The texts reveal the Valkyries at times as weavers, so they are also found in the Mistresses of Distaff and Loom role. The “roles” are an interesting comparative device. By looking back to far prehistory in most chapters, her work owes much to Gimbutas. Although I have placed Davidson’s work with Vries’ work as a study of pre-Christian Germanic religion, her study also fits within the framework of interpretation provided by Gimbutas and Dexter in the area of Goddess Studies. Davidson doesn’t write as an explicitly feminist author but her choice to pen a monograph on the goddesses of the Germanic and Northern pantheons is a decidedly feminist choice in a field dominated by male scholars and male scholarship.

Perhaps the most well-known scholar in Goddess Studies, and a powerful feminist scholar, is Marija Gimbutas. A renowned archaeologist, she was also fluent in many languages and a lifelong student of mythology and folklore. Aside from her own archaeological digs, Gimbutas gathered images of the female from every corner of prehistoric Europe. To make sense of the widespread and innumerable female images, she pioneered a methodology known as archaeomythology, a methodology combining archaeology, comparative mythology and folklore. She began an attempt to “read” the images from common symbols found on a wide variety of figurines and other artifacts from a broad range of cultures and dates, leading to her work *The Language of the Goddess*. Gimbutas concluded that prehistoric (and especially pre-Indo-European) Europe worshipped a great goddess, who was honored as the bringer of birth, life, death and regeneration. It is perhaps not unusual that such broad comparison has trouble finding extensive scholarly support during this particular postmodern time. However, the

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massive amount of data demands explanation. Few scholars have the abilities of a Gimbutas to undertake such a comparison. There is enough evidence to keep area studies scholars busy for decades. In this particular academic climate, work with this material by feminist scholars continues to draw heavy criticism. It is important to note that comparative studies draw criticism but much less venom as long as the conclusion of the comparative studies supports a patriarchal reading of religious or mythological material.

Regarding the collective deities of this dissertation in particular, Gimbutas does of course note them in her work but she does not call them collectives. In *The Language of the Goddess*, the Matronae and the Norns are included in her chapter, “Tri-Line and Power of Three” where she concludes:



The triple source is linked with the triple Goddess, an astonishingly long-lived image documented as early as the Magdalenian epoch (cf. the relief of three colossal female presences with exposed vulvas at the Abri du Roc aux Sorciers, Angles-sur-Anglin, Vienne, France (Campbell 1982: 110). This tradition is continuous throughout the whole of prehistory and history.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Living Goddesses*, Gimbutas notes that the Celts called the Great Mother Matrona. She goes on to say that sometimes this deity is seen as a triad, bearing the name matronae, “the mothers.”<sup>40</sup> Gimbutas is noting what Miranda Green calls the “Celtic

<sup>39</sup> Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Marija Gimbutas and Miriam Robbins Dexter, *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 183.

predilection for tripling deities of well-being.”<sup>41</sup> Gimbutas seems to be thinking in terms of what I would call pluralities (see Taxonomy, above).

Miriam Robbins Dexter, another feminist scholar in Goddess Studies and linguistics, has done important comparative linguistic work on the Indo-European goddesses and has theorized which goddesses may have been original to the proto-Indo Europeans before dispersion. She remarks,

The Proto-Indo-European culture seems to have been male-centered. Their Goddesses did not play as powerful roles in their religion as their gods. The Proto-Indo-European Goddesses—those carried along by the pre-assimilation Indo-Europeans on their migrations—were few in number, and they

represented mostly natural phenomena: the sun maiden (daughter of the sun), the dawn, the earth, and a river-Goddess, Danu.<sup>42</sup>

According to the framework provided by Dexter's linguistic evidence, the collective deities studied in this dissertation did not come with the Proto-Indo-Europeans during their migrations over pre-Indo-European Europe. They are not in the list with Dexter's sun maiden, dawn goddess, earth goddess or Danu. This would indicate that the collective deities were either pre-Indo-European themselves or were a post-Indo-European construction. (In fact, both Gimbutas, above, and Dexter, below, would argue a pre-Indo-European source for the deities.)

<sup>41</sup> Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> Dexter, "The Roots of Indo-European Patriarchy," 146.

Dexter's encyclopedic *Whence the Goddesses* looks at textual evidence for goddesses in Indo-European Europe, allowing a comparative look at the myths through text. Since the Matronae are only represented as inscriptions, they are not included in the texts, nor are the Dísir or the Jungfrauen. The Norns, however, are represented textually. Dexter translates the portion of the Old Norse poem *Völuspá* where the three Norns emerge from the race of giants, disturbing the golden age of the gods. This myth will be further discussed in chapter 4. Dexter calls the Norns "plural deity," comparable to the Baltic *Laima*, the Greek *Moirae* and the Latin *Parcae*<sup>43</sup> since all were collective deities and all governed fate. Dexter sometimes follows Puhvel's method of comparative mythology, but being especially concerned with the surviving texts and their translation uses comparative linguistics as well. Comparative linguistics relies on the comparative

method to discern commonalities in words, language and proto-languages.

Miranda Green is probably the foremost scholar of Celtic goddesses, which is important to the study of the Matronae. Although, from Vries above, there is some argument as to whether the Matronae of the Köln and Bonn area (worshipped by the Roman garrison and the Germanic Ubii) are Germanic goddesses, there is really no argument that the Matronae are largely a Celtic phenomenon with some Germanic worship. There are differences with the Ubii collectives that bear scrutiny and may argue for a Germanic “type.” Miranda Green, as did Marija Gimbutas, notes that the Matronae are mother goddesses but this interpretation does not quite work for the Germanic collectives.

However, Green is the first person to take note of something else of

<sup>43</sup> ———, *Whence the Goddesses*, 100.

importance: the collectives have close ties to the landscape where they are worshipped.

Green also notes that these are “plural divinities.”<sup>44</sup> She does not use the words

“collective deity,” and she thinks of the mother goddesses as pluralities, not collectives.

The mother goddesses worshipped in Celtic Gaul were much more likely to include

babies as part of the iconography. The Germanic examples have no babies but do have

bread, fruit and money, which are also common in the Celtic materials. Miranda Green,

like Hilda Ellis Davidson on Germanic religion, has written extensively on Celtic

religion, including works on the gods. The work on the goddesses is certainly profeminist

work.

Georges Dumézil was one of the twentieth century’s most important theorists of

Germanic (and Indo-European) religion and mythology. He is still important in some

schools of thought. His work has been roundly criticized in others for its outdated modernist structuralism and formalism.<sup>45</sup> Dumézil examined Germanic mythology and, deriving ultimately from his theory of Indo-European mythology, found a *tripartite structure*. Although tripartite in nature, it bears no resemblance to the tripartite or collective nature of the deities under study in this dissertation, and in fact is quite patriarchal and based on social class. In Dumézil's tripartite religious-mythological scheme, each of the tripartite areas had its own special function. The first function was

<sup>44</sup> Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Michael York, *The Divine Versus the Asurian: An Interpretation of Indo European Cult and Myth* (Bethesda, Md.: International Scholars Publications, 1996), xii.

that of the priest-king, responsible for cosmic and social order. In Germanic religion, these were male gods, and the two gods responsible for the first function were Óðinn and Týr. The second function was that of the warrior class, again a male, represented in Germanic religion by the god Þórr. The third function was that of the cultivators of herd and field, the rest of the mass of society. The gods overseeing the third function were close kinsmen; in Germanic religion they were father and son Njörðr and Freyr. Dumézil notes that often, but not universally, the third function contained a female deity, in this case, the Norse goddess Freya.<sup>46</sup> Dumézil was aware that he did not sufficiently account for the Germanic goddesses in his work: “the whole band of goddesses besides Freya could not find space in this limited enterprise.”<sup>47</sup> So the tripartite structure is problematic from the point of view of goddesses and Goddess Studies and as a scholar he is aware of these problems. He makes no mention of the collectives of goddesses.

Jaan Puhvel updated George Dumézil's work in his *Comparative Mythology*. He orders his "Germanic Myth" chapter on the Dumézilian three functions, keeping some of the discourse of social class. At the end, he does mention some of the minor deities, most of these being goddesses. By working with the goddesses, Puhvel adds some feminist consciousness to his work. In this brief work on the goddesses he mentions the Norns Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld, "a threesome of the type of the Greek Fates, Klōthō 'Spinster',

<sup>46</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), xi-xii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi.

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Lakheis and Atropos taking the place of a single Moira."<sup>48</sup> Puhvel mentions the other Norse "multiple females": the Dīsir, Fylgja, and Hamingja and calls them "tutelary goddesses or guardian spirits reminiscent of the Celtic Matronae and the Iranian Fravaši and Daēnā."<sup>49</sup> This kind of comparison places Puhvel's work historically with the modernist comparative project; with a book title like *Comparative Mythology*, this is hardly surprising. However he is at heart a comparative linguist and his work, like Dexter's, relies rightly on comparativism in that respect. Puhvel's work can be seen as a corrective to some of the problems of Dumézil.<sup>50</sup>

Michael York is an Indo-Europeanist who seeks to offer an updated post Dumézilian analysis of proto-Indo-European and Indo-European mythology. He builds his analysis around a dichotomy that he calls "divine-asurian".<sup>51</sup> The divine includes the great round of birth, life, growth, death and regeneration. (This is very reminiscent of the

triple maiden, mother, crone goddess figure as discussed above in the Taxonomy

<sup>48</sup> Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 218.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> A comprehensive feminist effort in comparative Germanic goddess mythology and linguistics is a dissertation from 1999. See Mary Lynn Wilson, “The Origin and Function of Female Divinity in Pre-Christian Germanic Europe” (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> York, *The Divine Versus the Asurian*, xiv.

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section.) The asurian is nothingness, the void or chaos of pre- or non-existence. Since the round of birth-life-death-regeneration is so grounded in Goddess religion, it is perhaps unsurprising that York devotes his first chapter to the various expressions of the Indo-European goddesses. He begins not only with goddesses, but with a collective, the Norns, noting “the Indo-European tendency toward triplication of cult and mythic entities.”<sup>52</sup> Unlike my argument, in which the triads and other groupings are seen as collectives where the goddesses act collectively and consensually, York sees “an explicit or at least implicit single entity within Indo-European triads.”<sup>53</sup> (York’s view that the Norns are Indo-European triads is not uncontested; Dexter thinks that the Norns are pre-Indo-European in origin and fate goddesses such as the Hittite are dual rather than triple.)<sup>54</sup> He finds that the tripling stands for the magnitude of the deity’s power—this is similar to Green’s analysis—and for ideas that come in threes: past, present, future; birth, life, death. York provides a large number of examples of collectives, by far the largest number

from the Greek mythologies, and not all triads, but various sizes of groupings.

In all of these powerful collectives, York sees primordial and powerful mother goddesses, sometimes with a male attendant “inherited in part from non-Indo-European predecessors but also in part from the Indo-European’s own first encounters and

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>54</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, personal communication, April 5, 2008.

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perceptions of the dark mysteries of the earth and nature and death and life.”<sup>55</sup> So York also appeals to a pre-Indo-European origin for the collective female deities in Europe. As with all of the theorists in this review, York’s work is highly comparative. That his first chapter immediately begins with the Indo-European goddesses is a profeminist beginning. The goddesses typically fall into the “divine” category of his “divine-asurian” typology, although there are several female mythological beings that are asurian in nature.

These thinkers are relevant to the study in five ways. Vries’ provides the overall structure for the work. Green’s work with plural deity is key for the taxonomy of the multiple in deity. Dexter’s work with proto-Indo-European goddesses, York’s concern with the origin of the tripled cult entities and Gimbutas’ views on old Europe offer structures for thinking about the possible pre-Indo-European origin of the European collective sacred female. Davidson provides important secondary comment for chapter 4

on the Old Norse materials. Puhvel and Dumézil write about triplicity and tripartite structure in Germanic mythology specifically. I will return to Vries' structure of the Matronae, the Norns and Dísir, and the Jungfrauen in chapters 3 through 5; chapter 2 discusses some methodological and theoretical considerations in the approach to the material.

<sup>55</sup> York, *The Divine Versus the Asurian*, 7.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical and Interpretive Approaches

Rita Gross, who works in history of religions in Buddhist Studies, also engages in feminist theology:

Because I am not following already well-laid-out methodological pathways, I wish to articulate the methodological vision that drives my work. That method is perhaps best summarized as the simultaneous or inseparable practice of theology and the history of religions. I believe it...offers a fuller and more complete understanding of religion than most other methods.<sup>1</sup>

In this dissertation, I also practice a combination of history of religions and theology. Theology (from the Greek *θεός*, goddess) is “discourse on the goddess.”<sup>2</sup> The research questions about the nature of the collective goddesses, the functions of the deities, the definitions, and the taxonomy with plural deity are all theological questions. The history of religions discipline attempts to scientifically study all religious phenomena, in



historical and cross-cultural perspective, comparatively when necessary. The research questions about the extent of the collective sacred female, its historic expression, the conception, the art, artifact, text and folklore, the worship and veneration, the changes over time are all questions in the history of religions. For Gross, the special virtue of the history of religions approach is not just its pure accurate knowledge of a

<sup>1</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 305.

<sup>2</sup> Raphael, *Introducing Theology*.

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given tradition but its ability to increase empathy and respect for self and others in a pluralistic world. On the one hand, many historians of religion and area specialists strive to give the impression that they have no passion about the religions they study, when in fact they often are very passionate, if not practitioners of these very religions. On the other hand, theologians, if they take history of religions seriously, can de-absolutize their worldviews and let their myths and symbols speak to them in a new way.

Gross maintains that the only possibility for scholarly neutrality and objectivity when working with both theology and the history of religions is the consciousness and declaration of one's own particular evaluative stance. My work on this scholarly reflexivity and evaluative stance can be seen below, in the section "On Being a Scholar Practitioner." For me, as for Rita Gross, the goal is to blend, but not confuse, the typically separated work of history of religions and feminist theology or thealogy. The scholar who can do this will evince both objectivity and empathy. "The engaged study of religions, with its combination of dispassionate and de-absolutized understandings and passionate

existential commitment to just and humane values, is the single most powerful lens through which one can view religion.”<sup>3</sup>

#### History of Religions and Area Studies

The history of religions or *Religionswissenschaft*, to use its German name, sets as its task nothing less than the study in historical and cross-cultural perspective, of all human religious phenomena. It includes in its purview not

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 317.

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only sophisticated, literate, philosophical, and theological materials, but also popular expressions of human religiosity such as festivals, life cycle rituals, myths and practices that are found only in oral traditions.<sup>4</sup>

The discipline collects evidence on all religious phenomena: deities and texts, rituals and practices, artwork and music. The researcher accurately describes the phenomena, places them in context, and interprets them. In this dissertation, the phenomena under study are widely varied. In chapter 3, covering the Rhineland Matronae goddesses, the evidence is descriptive epithets (linguistic analysis); votive altars (religious history, art history, and epigraphical analysis); and temple sites (archaeological analysis). In chapter 4, covering the Old Norse collective females, the primary source material is textual: the *Poetic Edda*, the *Prose Edda* and the family sagas. These may not be the “sophisticated, literate, philosophical and theological materials” mentioned by Kinsley, but they are vital sources on Old Norse religion and some of the bardic poetics is very sophisticated, complex, and theological in its own way. In chapter 5, covering the

drei Jungfrauen of the South Tyrol, the evidence lies in Roman Catholic Church art, folklore, folk art, landscape and hymnody.

<sup>4</sup>David R. Kinsley, “Women's Studies in the History of Religions,” in *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women's Studies*, ed. Arvind Sharma, McGill Studies in the History of Religions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1.

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History of religions as a theoretical and interpretive approach has its critics from both feminism and postmodernism. Women's Studies shows that the history of religions is often the history of men's religion. Wryly, Kinsley notes, “What is particularly embarrassing is that historians of religion seemed completely unaware of this state of affairs. They assumed that men's religion was synonymous with human religion.”<sup>5</sup>

Kinsley, quoting Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, calls for a hermeneutics of suspicion as Women's Studies scholars approach the history of religions. There have been decades of bias in the discipline. Rosalind Shaw goes further in her critique of mainstream history of religions from the point of view of feminism: “the relationship between feminism and mainstream history of religions is not merely awkward; it is mutually toxic.”<sup>6</sup> Shaw is criticizing a concept important to scholars such as Mircea Eliade (perhaps the “father” of history of religions) that of religious data as *sui generis*, unique data that cannot be subsumed in larger concepts. The concept of religious data as *sui generis* seemed congenial to me, as I disliked the reduction of religion to things like Marx's opiate of the people or Freud's neurosis. However, Shaw correctly points out that religion as *sui*

*generis* is socially decontextualized and ungendered, standing in contradiction to the premises of feminist scholarship.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup>Rosalind Shaw, "Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies," in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, Controversies in the Study of Religion (London: Cassell, 1999), 175.

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There is no such thing as a "pure" religious datum, outside of history, for there is no such thing as a human datum that is not at the same time a historical datum...But admitting the historicity of religious experiences does not imply that they are reducible to non-religious forms of behavior.<sup>7</sup>

The religious evidence in this dissertation is very much inside of history, placed in historical context and interpreted historically. Like Shaw, I agree that this does not reduce the evidence to non-religious forms of human behavior. Even though I interpret historically, I do so carefully. I do not intend to argue that the collective female deity in Germanic Europe existed unchanged for two thousand years or that the forms of collective deity I study necessarily gave rise to one another, although it may be likely. Instead, I place religious evidence in historical periods, noting that the theme of female collective deity or sacred being exists over an extended period of time in Germanic religious history, in many different guises.

David Kinsley offers several possibilities for bringing the history of religions more in line with feminist scholarship. Like this dissertation, he finds that the choice of Goddess

Studies, as part of a wider interest in female symbolism, is one important area in which historians of religion have been influenced by Women's Studies. More women and men have undertaken books and monographs like this one, that attempt to study in depth, in historical and sometimes cross-cultural perspective, the textual and non-textual materials related to a goddess phenomenon. But to truly offer feminist goddess

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 171.

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scholarship, it takes more than as Rosalind Shaw says, archly, to “add goddesses and stir.”<sup>8</sup> It is required to situate the scholar, the goddesses and the women of the time in the context of their power and experience. In this dissertation that will require historical analysis of the context of the Matronae goddesses, their worshippers and worship, and the same with the Old Norse material and the contemporary Roman Catholic material. And, as Shaw notes, just because the religious evidence about the goddesses have a historical context does not mean that they can be reduced to non-religious data.

History of religions is in its way the successor discipline to comparative religion. Comparison has fallen out of scholarly fashion in the postmodern era, when drawing comparisons between disparate objects, peoples, phenomena, and, yes, religions is considered highly suspect. In a formative essay, Jonathan Z. Smith decried the comparative dimension to most religious studies, “for as practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity... The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.”<sup>9</sup> I do not intend to argue that the forms of collective deity necessarily gave rise to one another or have no differences among them. However, it seems to beg the question to assert that *no* comparison between the various

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>9</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 25-26.

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Germanic female collectives is possible. Comparison has some validity in postmodern scholarship.

This dissertation has one advantage over cross-cultural comparison in that it falls fairly cleanly into what is known as area studies. Many history of religions scholars began as area studies scholars and remain rooted in area studies. Area studies scholars rigorously study all religious data, place them in context and interpret them, but confine their researches to a single religious tradition, historical period or geographical location. Area studies scholars might be scholars of Buddhism, for instance, or medieval Christianity, African religions, or, like me, Germanic goddess traditions. Scholars delve deeply into their material, learning the languages of scholarship and primary sources, learning the cultural context of text, myth or material and may use comparison. Generally, fullness of description is prized by area and the understanding of what the religious phenomena mean, or meant, to the people who practiced them. As Wendy Doniger describes the practice of studying mythology in area studies,

The way to study them is to *study* them, learning the languages in which they were composed, finding all the other myths in the constellation of which they are a part, setting them in the context of the culture in which they were spawned—in short, trying to find out what they mean to the people who have created and sustained them, not what they mean to us.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 16 (emphasis hers).

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Of course, history of religions and area studies are reaching for a perhaps unreachable ideal; repeating Kinsley, they aim for “nothing less than the study in historical and cross-cultural perspective, of all human religious phenomena.” Doniger’s above comments on area studies are similarly difficult, “trying to find out what they mean to the people who have created and sustained them.” Both of these are splendid impossibilities, being only goals that can be striven for and never quite achieved. The insider/outsider question, which will be discussed in some depth below, applies here as well. The outsider may be purposefully kept from some of the most sacred or important information. The insider may miss what is taken as given and in her analysis miss what is as natural as breathing. The difficulty of the enterprise should not and does not keep scholars from doing the work, but as in the insider/outsider question, the humility of obtaining only partial, even ambiguous, truth should be honored and expected. In a hopeful collection entitled *A Magic Still Dwells*, Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray have collected essays from historians of religion and area studies scholars who still find use for their partial truths and the discipline of comparative religion in a postmodern world. Patton and Ray find that their contributors are committed to the “pragmatic, contested, and negotiated nature of the comparative enterprise.”<sup>11</sup> They no longer concentrate on finding totalizing, universal sacred realities. Nor are the excesses of postmodernism the only alternative. A middle course is possible.

<sup>11</sup> Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2000), 14.

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William E. Paden offers five elements within which comparison can be used in a postmodern world. This comparison is possible because of the common human actions of what Nelson Goodman calls “worldmaking”:

Humans as a species make inviolable boundaries and objects, interact and communicate in linguistic fields with agents believed to be endowed with prestige and power, reiterate sacred histories and defend traditions, follow the examples of ancestors and leaders, and absolutize or cosmicize symbols of authority and moral order.<sup>12</sup>

Since human beings routinely participate in this “worldmaking,” there is possibility for comparison. First, for Paden, the nature of comparison is *bilateral*; comparison should reveal both similarities and differences. The comparative pattern can bring into focus unforeseen differences as well as unrecognized connections. “Comparativism misses its potential if it only collects parallels or only makes data illustrate an already conceived type.”<sup>13</sup> In the comparative analysis of chapter 6, I apply bilateral comparison with pattern, similarities and differences to the various collectives, especially in the areas of conception of divinity, their veneration, their religious

<sup>12</sup> William E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 183.



<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 184.

traditions, their sisterhood, their use of the number three and questions of origin and continuity.

Second in Paden's schema, the comparative categories are by nature *heuristic*. Simply identifying patterns is not the final step in the analysis, but is a starting point for investigation. Points of comparison are not static entities, pinned down for all time. By stating that the categories are heuristic, Paden declares them to be instruments of further discovery. The comparative process is thus dynamic and iterative, and the patterns are not timeless archetypes but open to further exploration and refinement. This element addresses the postmodern critique that comparison brings together incomparables. In this study for example, comparison of the magical number three opens into further exploration into the historical placement and origin of the "theme" of the collective sacred female in Germanic Europe.

Third of Paden's five elements is the insight that the scholar can expand and enlarge the concept of *pattern*. The evidence under comparison may begin in the area of culture that called "religious," but the concept of pattern can be enlarged to common bridging factors like the metaconcepts of power, gender or discourse, class-empowerment or a process such as urbanization. This allows a movement away from the problem of religious data as *sui generis* without contextualization from other fields of inquiry. In the case of this dissertation, the discussion of comparison will "open out" into ideas and possibilities in theology, feminism, sisterhood, community, collectivity and identity. All such material can constitute "patterns in comparative religion...this criss-crossing of

religious subject matter with cumulative and newly generated reference points reshapes the evolution of religious studies itself.”<sup>14</sup>

The fourth of Paden’s elements asks the scholar to to keep a *controlled aspectual focus*. “By defining the exact feature of the object being compared, the exact point of analogy or parity, the comparativist understands that the object at hand may be quite incomparable in *other* respects and for other purposes.”<sup>15</sup> This dissertation keeps a controlled aspectual focus on the areas of collectivity and femaleness of deity in Germanic Europe, their conception of deities, their veneration, their sisterhood, their magical use of the number three, and their place in their religious traditions. There are countless other features of the Matronae religion, the Old Norse mythology and Roman Catholic faith and practice that are not comparables; they are not “all the same thing.”

The fifth of Paden’s elements asks me as a scholar to keep separate the distinction between the comparativist’s (outsider’s) and the insider’s domains of meaning. The comparativist works with what Paden calls a “wide-angle lens” to recognize and understand relationships between and among religious data that the insider may not. The comparativist links what is learned from all traditions and forms generalizations, where the insider recreates one religion’s particular world. The comparativist and the insider have different, but equally valid, vocabularies, roles and discourses.

Thealogy

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 187-88.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 188 (emphasis his).

The specific feminist theologian whose work sets the stage for this dissertation is Laurel Schneider, from her work of constructive feminist theology, *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology*. Schneider asserts that feminist theology (including theology) rests on two opposing (in the sense of lively tension with one another) taproots: the *metaphoric exemption* and *experiential confession*. Schneider concludes that theology performed using the metaphoric exemption and experiential confession must perforce yield a vision of multiplicity in deity.

Schneider's metaphoric exemption arises out of the philosophical work of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich and the scientific view of Enlightenment modernism, out of functional social constructionism. Social theory adopts a rationalist stance that places divine ideas secondary to social organization and the insights of social theory are indispensable to feminists' deep criticism of misogynist, racist and triumphalist doctrines and traditions. The metaphoric exemption claims that all language and images and ideas, being products of human imagination, do not fully define or embody divinity. This social constructionist skepticism is a healthy reminder of the fallibility of human ideas of the divine.

Experiential confession, on the other hand, allows for the radical freedom of divinity to become present to humans and offers vigorous new ideas of divinity to real people.

Schneider asks, "What is the place of this kind of lived experience in the work of feminist theologies that seek to guide and inform...various communities and individuals

in their spiritual explorations?”<sup>16</sup> Schneider acknowledges the difficulty, if not impossibility, of theorizing the vast multiplicity and variety of real, lived experiences of the divine. “Feminist theologies cannot yet account for feminist spiritual experience...in such a way that the implications for some kind of carefully nuanced reference are not dismissed entirely.”<sup>17</sup> This was not a problem for premodern theologians who could rely on revealed doctrine and tradition and needn’t deal with functional social constructionism. To solve this dilemma, Schneider looks to Edward Farley’s reflective ontology. “Farley suggests that human beings are fundamentally shaped by a need to distinguish what is real and true...Human beings are constituted by this passion for reality and profoundly wounded by our inability ultimately to possess it.”<sup>18</sup> Feminist theologies pursue this passion for the real both in the metaphoric exemption, which seeks to deconstruct outdated theologies, and in the experiential confession, which robustly creates new experiences. Feminist theologies don’t confuse either with anything fully and finally real, which as Schneider points out, is their strength and their vulnerability.

Constructive feminist theologies, then, are organic and energetic relationships between opposing poles. One pole skeptic, one pole affirmative, they are in mutually corrective, lively relation, rather than opposed and contradictory. For Schneider, these poles construct something surprising. “Feminist theologies at their best support

<sup>16</sup> Schneider, *Re-Imagining the Divine*, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 135.

assumptions of *multiplicity* in their concepts of divinity.”<sup>19</sup> Neither the metaphoric exemption nor experiential confession supports the exclusivist notions of monotheism because this exclusivity implies a limitation of divine scope and a normative claim to one metaphor above all others.

Because of the metaphoric exemption, [feminist theologians] have lost any basis on which to claim that better ideas and metaphors are closer to divine essence. This could be depressing if the goal of theological construction were to describe that essence in authoritative, universally normative, and final terms. Authoritative finality and universality, however, are the first things to go in the acids of metaphoric exemption. And this is not a problem if divinity is understood metaphorically in terms of multiplicity and responsive participation in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Schneider wishes to allow for the possibility of individuals’ and communities’ robust and lively visions of deity to be part of feminist theology’s understanding of what is real and true. This requires multiplicity for everyone’s vision to be accommodated. This dissertation argues that certain Germanic religious communities envisioned a collective sacred female, working consensually for the people’s good. Not only is this a particular historical vision of deity but the multiplicity is envisioned within the deity

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 154 (emphasis mine).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 161.

itself. I suggest an extension of Schneider's argument to include collective deity under the umbrella of multiplicity that she calls for in her constructive theology.

### The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

This dissertation also employs in its analysis a feminist "hermeneutics of suspicion." The term was

coined in the 1970s by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur for a method of interpretation which assumes that the literal or surface-level meaning of a text (including the Bible) is an effort to conceal the political interests which are served by the text. The purpose of interpretation is to strip off the concealment, unmasking those interests.<sup>21</sup>

Hermeneutics usually have to do with theory and interpretation in textual study. The information on women found in canonical Biblical texts, for instance, is not value neutral but rather the outcome of bitter polemics. The definition especially notes Biblical texts but the comments are well applied to the texts studied in this dissertation, the Norse *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* and the sagas, as well as Roman Catholic Church texts dealing with the Jungfrauen and much of the secondary literature on the Deae Matronae. The information found on the women and goddesses in these texts is not value-neutral but was written by kyriarchal, mainly Christian, men in the service of male monotheistic religion

<sup>21</sup> D. G. Myers, *Taxonomy of Biblical Interpretation*, [http://www.english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/hermeneutical\\_lexicon.html](http://www.english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/hermeneutical_lexicon.html) (accessed May 2, 2009).

or in the service of the academy, also a kyriarchal institution. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion can take into account the possibility of a more nonpatriarchal vision and praxis.

It is important to immediately problematize the concept of hermeneutics of suspicion because of its link with text as source material. Often Religious Studies accords "religions of the book" more importance than religions that have left behind no textual evidence, or current religions being practiced that have no sacred texts. This study deals largely with religions that left no sacred texts. The *Matronae* chapter of this work uses source material such as goddess names, inscriptions, votive altar artwork and temple sites. The chapter on the Old Norse material uses texts—the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* and some of the Norse sagas—written down for various reasons by Christian men. They were intended to be antiquarian works on poetics or mythology, not intended to be religious texts. The chapter on the *Jungfrauen* uses Roman Catholic Church art, hymns, festivals, folk art and artifact as primary source material.

This study does not accept the hegemony of text in Religious Studies. John Cort is aware that scholars of religion tend to rely on texts as sources of information in their research on religion and he questions that reliance. The research on religion has been text based for much of the history of the discipline. Cort notes that this has also had an impact on women's visibility in the research since most religious texts are written by and about the activities, thoughts and perceptions of men. Cort, though not discussing the interface of history of religions with women's studies, thoughtfully wonders "what a study of religion would look like that took as its starting point not texts but instead material

who study archaic religious expression that can only be studied through archaeological data, and to some extent that describes the Matronae in this dissertation. But my study of the Jungfrauen continues up to the present time and there is very little text as primary source material. My hermeneutics of suspicion is suspicious of “religions of the book” and written text as the only proper source material for religious studies.

Former president of the American Academy of Religion Vasudha Narayanan also questions the primacy of text in Religious Studies. She calls for an “epistemic pluralism” not only limited to gender, class and race but also to different ways of apprehension and different ways of knowing.<sup>23</sup> Methodology becomes embodied as source material includes dance, temples, food, healing. “The privileging of the written text and beliefs by dominant, hegemonic cultures has led to the marginalization of other ways of knowing, other sources of knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> She suggests decolonizing methodologies and dismantling authority paradigms based on text alone. This work follows that decolonizing and dismantling by using a wide variety of source materials.

#### On Being a Scholar-Practitioner

<sup>22</sup> John E. Cort, “Art, Religion and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1996): 615.

<sup>23</sup> Vasudha Narayanan, “Embodied Cosmologies: Sights of Piety, Sites of Power,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2003): 495.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.



general, is the insider/outsider question.<sup>25</sup> Is the scholar an insider: a believer or practitioner of the belief system or tradition being studied? Or is the scholar an outsider: a nonbeliever in that system or tradition, a believer in another tradition, or perhaps best, a believer in no tradition at all? Scholar-practitioner Nikki Bado-Fralick notes how quickly these two categories become binary oppositions “outsider/objective/theory against insider/subjective/practice.”<sup>26</sup> With modernism’s (and academe’s) long insistence on objectivity as the only measure of truth, it is unsurprising that the study of religion has favored the scholarship of the outsider. Even William Paden’s elements of a new comparativism favored the position of the outsider. The same tension can be seen in Schneider’s metaphoric exemption and experiential confession.

One possibility encouraged for the scholar of religion is a position of “methodological atheism” in which the scholar is expected to approach any belief study from a position of atheism (the disbelief in a deity or deities specifically), or disbelief (assumption that a belief or belief system is untrue). Skepticism (or systematic doubt) is assumed to keep the scholarship objective and free from bias. Folklorist David Hufford

<sup>25</sup> See the wide variety of essays in McCutcheon’s *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*.

<sup>26</sup> Nikki Bado-Fralick, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

religious issues and issues in other areas of belief studies.<sup>27</sup> Atheism, disbelief and skepticism are, after all, profoundly held beliefs and philosophies themselves. Calling them “objective” is what Hufford calls “a serious, systematic bias that runs through most academic studies of spiritual belief.”<sup>28</sup>

Instead, Hufford, Bado-Fralick, Rita Gross and many others influenced by postmodernism argue for scholarly reflexivity, a critical self-reflection and inclusion of the self in the scholarship, as opposed to an attempt to remove the self from the scholarship in the name of a false, unachievable objectivity. Reflexivity should honor the importance of the scholar’s deeply held viewpoints and perspectives but it need not dissolve into solipsistic navel-gazing. Like Hufford, Monaghan<sup>29</sup> suggests two voices in scholarship: the scholarly voice and the personal voice. The first-person, personal voice in scholarship allows a site for reflexivity and alerts the reader to the situated embodied knowledge of the scholar. The scholarly third-person voice alerts the reader to the scholar’s attempt at unbiased objectivity, always keeping the reflexive self in mind. Even

<sup>27</sup> David Hufford, “The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Patricia Monaghan, "Partial Truth: Scholarly Narrative and Personal Voice" (paper presented at Margins, Boundaries and Thresholds Symposium, Montpelier, VT, October 10 2003).

viewpoint that exists among multiple voices, not the one final truth, the only voice for all time.

I argue for two voices and two perspectives, the modernist objective self and the postmodernist reflexive self. I acknowledge that the two together offer only partial truth.

Nevertheless, I do not deny that scholarly work should move toward a lack of bias. Scholars need not utterly discard the traditional aims of science. Though they can never be achieved absolutely, they still have central value as a direction in scholarship. Religious Studies scholar Donald Wiebe goes much further in a scathing critique of the American Academy of Religion (at least in its leadership) for an over-embracing of postmodernism and an almost active suppression of science as an approach to religion:

By “scientific” I mean essentially that the study of religion in the context of the modern research university aims at achieving what we might call “public knowledge of public facts,” mediated through intersubjectively testable sets of statements.<sup>30</sup>

Intersubjective verifiability, the ability of a concept to be communicated among individuals and reproduced, is perhaps the central idea to the definition of empirical scientific study. When Wiebe proposes that scholars of religion replicate findings of other scholars using the tools of empirical science (communication and reproducibility rather

<sup>30</sup> Donald Wiebe, “An Eternal Return All over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2006): 691.

what can be studied in the areas of belief studies. I don't mean in this brief section to solve the competing truth claims of modernism and postmodernism, science and the self. Suffice it to say that I believe truth has two eyes and both are needed to see subjects with any depth. Besides, why have all this concern about reflexivity anyway? Bado-Fralick's professors advised her "to study a religion that was either long ago or far away—preferably both."<sup>31</sup> In this monograph I work with a religion practiced in the earliest centuries of the Common Era in the Roman-Germanic Rhineland, Norse religions of a thousand years ago and the veneration of the Jungfrauen in a tiny village in South Tyrolean Italy. They are all long enough ago and far enough away. In none of them can I be seen as a practitioner.

However, the situation is complex. I am a practitioner of contemporary goddess religion, a specifically feminist, often gender-separatist, widely eclectic religion that finds much inspiration in goddesses and goddess religions of places far away and times long ago. Largely a European and European-American phenomenon,<sup>32</sup> contemporary goddess

<sup>31</sup> Bado-Fralick, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> The phenomenon and its concerns are by no means limited to Europe and North America. For just one example, see Hildebeitel, Alf and Kathleen M. Erndl, eds. *Is the Goddess a Feminist?: The Politics of South Asian Goddesses* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). The Asian examples differ from the European and North

mythopoetic narrative created by and used by many European-American practitioners of goddess religion goes somewhat thus:

*Once long ago in European prehistory people saw their primary deity as a Goddess, in her three aspects of Maiden (symbol of beginnings and new growth), Mother (symbol of birth-giving and creativity in all forms) and Crone (symbol of death-bringer in the natural way of things). Women as images of the Goddess were powerful in their communities and religions. Community life was seamless, with religion, art and creativity integrated into the daily activities of obtaining food and maintaining life. Societies were peaceful, not warlike, and ecologically sustainable. Hordes of patriarchal invaders broke this peace by overrunning the goddess-worshipping communities of Europe and setting in their place societies that were patriarchal, warlike and hierarchal. The patriarchal invaders displaced the Goddess as primary religious figure and replaced Her with male gods. Women lost their equal and powerful places in society, becoming the property of men. The goddess religion went underground and women kept the religion alive through folk traditions, folksong and folktale handed down generation after generation. Women retained some of their old wisdom in their work as healers and midwives. The women paid dearly for practicing these crafts, however, in times like the Roman Catholic Church's Inquisition when millions of women were burned for practicing their craft as wise-women. Nonetheless, the folkcraft of the wisewomen survived, and current*

American examples, since there has been no break in goddess reverence over several thousand years.

This is a powerful mythopoetic narrative to be bringing to one's study of ancient religion.

My religious autobiography contains other powerful elements as well. My early upbringing was in German Lutheranism, highly dogmatic and sometimes complicated by troubled systems that used religion to maintain control. The church permeated my life with its structured liturgical services, its grand musical tradition, its endless Bible studies, Sunday School classes, confirmation classes, special services, events, youth groups, trips and Midwest potlucks. As I entered my late high school and college years, my family delved into Lutheranism's "charismatic movement," a neo-Pentecostalist movement within the Lutheran Church that valued direct manifestation of gifts from the Holy Spirit, highly emotional worship, and a much more conservative approach to Biblical scripture, church dogma, life values and politics. In college the Lutheran liturgical services so familiar from childhood seemed to me staid, unemotional and lacking in spiritual experience and depth. I sought out the campus charismatic group. The group worshipped together in a dorm lounge on Wednesday nights with singing, praying, and quite often, members speaking in tongues. Our Sunday worship was with a large non-denominational charismatic church in the town. I loved the rush of emotion in the singing and chanting but was somewhat embarrassed by the speaking in tongues, the veracity of which I questioned, certainly in myself. From these religious experiences, I emerged rather

<sup>33</sup> For a not unsympathetic reading of the feminist spiritual historiography and some of its possibilities and pitfalls see Raphael, *Introducing Theology*, 75-96.

troubled and fearful and with a strong desire for religious certainties. My journey away from Christian religious fundamentalism took the better part of the next decade and the work of scholarship played no small role in this journey. The work of critical thinking,

the work of evaluating source material and secondary comment, is a strong antidote to thinking that follows the crowd. I went back to the staid old Lutheran Church for awhile and then drifted away from practicing religion entirely.

I first found Goddess on the back porch. My spouse is a fan of the late science fiction great, Philip K. Dick. Periodically, I delve into one of Dick's novels that my spouse regards as particularly fascinating. Thus I found myself on the back terrace of our apartment building one late summer day reading *The Divine Invasion*. In the novel, the main character keeps encountering a powerful and mysterious female. As she reveals more and more of herself, he continually asks, "Who are you?" The question didn't particularly resonate with me until he suddenly, wonderingly, knows:

"You are Pallas Athena, the spirit of righteous war; you are the spring queen, you are Hagia Sophia, holy wisdom...you are my companion, my friend, my guide...but what are you actually? Under all the disguises? I know what you are, and—" He put his hand on hers. "I am beginning to remember...It is hard. It hurts."

She said, "I will wait." Seated on her throne she waited. She had waited for thousands of years, and in her face he could see the patient and placid willingness to wait longer, as long as was necessary. Both of them had known from the beginning that this moment would come, when they would be back

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together...All he had to do was name her. To name is to know, he thought. To know and to summon: to call.

"Shall I tell you your name?" he said to her.

She smiled, the lovely dancing smile, but no mischief shone in her eyes; instead, love glimmered at him, vast extents of love.<sup>34</sup>

Like probably every practitioner of contemporary Goddess religion I have met and with whom I have discussed the spiritual journey, I knew goddess for the first time and sensed I had finally come home. It still took many long years before I felt free of sin in my change of love from God to Goddess, but that day did finally come.

This brief religious autobiography highlights the intense emotionality of just one scholar's religious life and it underscores the need for reflexive critical thought about that religious life in light of the scholarly enterprise. Even reflexivity might not give enough protection from the personal. Anthropologist Ruth Behar has done much thinking on the insertion of personal passion and personal stories in research. "No one objects to autobiography in its own right...What bothers critics is the insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal social facts."<sup>35</sup> It is safer to stick with the metaphoric exemption, where everything is a social construction,

<sup>34</sup> Philip K. Dick, *The Divine Invasion* (New York: Timescape Books, 1981), 192.

<sup>35</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 12.

rather than allow for experiential confession, where passion and the divine break through and create something new.

Several issues come to mind that might impact my thinking about this particular dissertation project and indeed much of my recent scholarly work: the mythopoetic



narrative of the ancient goddess religions, the portion of that narrative that affirms the retaining of ancient elements through folklore, and the Germanic element in my family and religious background.<sup>36</sup> Melissa Raphael devotes a chapter of her book *Introducing Thealogy* to “Thealogy and History,”<sup>37</sup> a critically sympathetic reading of spiritual feminist history, of the same mythopoetic narrative that I have recounted above. Raphael makes clear, as I have not yet done, that spiritual feminists are producing and publishing historiography based on this narrative, not simply mythopoesis, publishing in scholarly as well as popular circles. This publication (some would say confusion) of mythopoesis under the guise of historiography is one of the most common criticisms of scholarship by the scholar-practitioners of the goddess religious movement.

<sup>36</sup> My family is ethnically German. However, except when speaking of family background specifically, my use of the term “Germanic” should be taken in linguistic terms, i.e., the countries in which a Germanic language is spoken. The most common Germanic languages are English, Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, Flemish, Faroese, Frisian, German, Low German, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, and

Yiddish. <sup>37</sup> Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, 75-96.

Historiographical scholarship based on this narrative is not always widely accepted by the larger scholarly communities in the fields in which it is published, by male scholars, and sometimes by female scholars as well. These scholars most often question particular methodologies of interpreting ancient artifacts, archaeological items or sites, mythology or folklore. It is possible to study goddess religions and other portions of the mythopoetic

narrative with more conservative methodologies, yet still remain committed to feminist scholarship. A representation of the more conservative methodologies is found in such studies as the anthologies *The Concept of the Goddess*<sup>38</sup> and *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*.<sup>39</sup> None of the essays affirms the spiritual feminist project in its totality. In fact, the editors and writers of the volumes in their introductions specifically state that they are offering an alternative to the goddess movement's story. Yet all the essays are feminist scholarly forays into the realities of goddess religions in religious history. The scholars use many of the same source materials used by spiritual feminist scholars: artwork, text, figurine and folklore. The scholars tend to draw narrower conclusions rather than affirming something as broad as the spiritual feminist mythopoetic narrative. Some parts of the narrative are affirmed, but that is not the purpose of the scholarship. There is obviously room to be critical of the

<sup>38</sup> Sandra Billington and Miranda J. Green, eds., *The Concept of the Goddess* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, eds., *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

mythopoetic narrative as historiography while choosing fragments of that narrative for scholarly inquiry.

As a scholar-practitioner of contemporary Goddess religion, I see a two-pronged approach to the mythopoetic narrative. First, it is necessary for my scholarship that I “bracket” any belief I might have in the goddess movement's mythopoetic narrative as

one would for phenomenological work. I must clearly understand the difference that Rita Gross points out between the scholar's *accurate* past and the practitioner's *usable* past.<sup>40</sup> However, like the scholars in the Goodison and Billington/Green anthologies, and Margaret Ehrenberg with her work on women in prehistory,<sup>41</sup> it is possible to choose elements that appear in the mythopoetic narrative for scholarly inquiry.

Like Juliette Wood, writing in *The Concept of the Goddess*, I am choosing to be aware of contemporary folkloric methods.<sup>42</sup> In the mythopoetic narrative, folklore, folksong and folktale are carriers of the old religion of the Goddess: despite the suppression of the Goddess religion by the Christian Church and other forces of patriarchy, parts of the religion survived in folklore. This doctrine of folklore as “pagan

<sup>40</sup> Rita M. Gross, “Response,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 68 (emphases mine).

<sup>41</sup> Margaret R. Ehrenberg, *Women in Prehistory*, Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

<sup>42</sup> Juliette Wood, “The Concept of the Goddess,” in *The Concept of the Goddess* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8-25.

survivals” is rooted in the work of such nineteenth-century scholars as Edward Tylor and James Frazer,<sup>43</sup> but the work of contemporary folklorists ties folkloric collection to living communities without assuming long unbroken ties with a mythic past. While it is no doubt true that folklore can be extremely persistent, it does change with the needs of its community. I will be using some Germanic folklore in this study, especially having to do

with the Jungfrauen, and find reflexivity on the subject deeply important. My particular area of interest, the folklore of the Germanic countries, is particularly fraught with difficulty due to the history of Nazism. German folklore studies (*Volkskunde*) spans from the well-meaning activities of the Brothers Grimm dreaming of the creation of a unified Germany through to the genocide perpetrated by National Socialism and beyond.

The Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, stand among the giants of Germanic folklore and linguistic scholarship. Their work survives because of its breadth, depth, passion and excellence, but it needs to be seen within their own drive to define a separate “Germanness” in a nineteenth-century Germany of petty principalities when other European countries around them were filled with revolutionary and nationalistic fervor. The Grimm Brothers identified the typical Germans as hard-working common folk, a

<sup>43</sup> See excerpts of their work in Olson’s volume, Carl Olson, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings* (Belmont CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003). Edward B. Tylor, “From *Primitive Culture*,” 65-61. James George Frazer, “From *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion and Totemism and Exogamy*,” 61-69.

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simple people that achieved through effort what others are simply given.<sup>44</sup> The brothers had political dreams as well as their dreams of discovering and preserving a pure German literature, language and folklore. They hoped for a unification of Germany, democracy and a defeat of the French. They called for a rediscovery of the *Volkspoesie*, the natural and genuine literature of the people. To this end, they collected, wrote down and edited numerous versions of the three great subdivisions of Germanic folklore: myth (in

*Teutonic Mythology*), sagas (in *Deutsche Sagen*) and folktales (in the famed *Kinder- und Haus-Märchen* or *Children's and Household Tales*).<sup>45</sup>

In the twentieth century, the drive of a desperate people for a positive German identity found its expression in the Third Reich, in National Socialism and in genocide. What is less well-known is that those in power meant folklore to play a critical role in supporting and justifying their actions. Hannjost Lixfeld describes this in disturbing detail

<sup>44</sup> Jack David Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, The Thomas D. Clark Lectures, 1993 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 6.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. James Steven Stallybrass (New York: Dover Publications, 1966); Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, Translation in Folklore Studies (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981); Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- Und Haus-Märchen* (Berlin: in der Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812).

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in his *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute For German Volkskunde*.<sup>46</sup> In 1935, the Institute founded an “Office of Ancestral Inheritance,” which in Lixfeld’s blunt assessment “forcefully violated scholarship.”<sup>47</sup> The department was designed to trace and discover a German “essence,” and clear it of foreign elements. Scholars were to examine folk and fairy tales, ancient symbols, house signs, clan symbols; they were to reach back into the Germanic past, before Christianity, for an unbroken German continuity. They

were to look all the way back to the *Germania* of the Roman author Tacitus and bring back Germanic tribal characteristics, gods and cults, death beliefs, festivals, blessings, magical charms, the swastika, the need-fire (*Notfeuer*) and legal precedents. This list brings to mind many of the aims of contemporary revisionist Germanic religious movements such as the Norse Reconstruction movements *Ásatrú* and *Vanatrú*, as well as my own well-meaning search for a feminist Germanic identity through the Germanic goddesses. Reflexivity was nearly impossible for the scholars during the Third Reich when job loss, disgrace and death were in the hands of the government. As a scholar of the early twenty-first century, I suddenly find reflexivity an honor as well as a requirement.

<sup>46</sup> Hannjost Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute for German Volkskunde*, trans. James R. Dow, Folklore Studies in Translation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

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The tendency in scholarship with Germanic materials might be overcompensation, a tendency toward conservatism in research projects or method. But this need not be. Another German scholar sounds a call for innovation. Dietrich Kramer is a leader in the ethical consideration of the history of German folklore:

There is no such thing as unpolitical scholarship. We need only remember the discussions of our discipline under fascism. Even retreating into an ostensibly

“unpolitical” sphere of “pure science” has its political function. It is an alibi for the status quo, and it neutralizes potentially critical iconoclastic intelligence and knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

Melissa Raphael points out that spiritual feminist historiography has one especially significant purpose: to show that patriarchy is not natural or biological or God given (this is the same insight as Schneider’s metaphoric exemption) but *historical*, and therefore changeable and able to be brought to an end. This does seem to pose a vital question and feminists in many fields are amassing research that comes to that

<sup>48</sup> Dieter Kramer, “Who Benefits from Folklore?,” in *German Volkskunde: A Decade of Theoretical Confrontation, Debate, and Reorientation (1967-1977)*, ed. James R. Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld, *Folklore Studies in Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44.

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conclusion.<sup>49</sup> As a feminist scholar, I am not neutral about ending the human systems of oppression, about ending patriarchy, racism, poverty, classism, homophobia or any system that oppresses human beings and divides them from one another. As a feminist historian of religion, I search for as accurate a past as possible, hearing from as many different voices as possible. I hope that this project, from this one, reflexive, embodied scholar can be part of the conversation.

<sup>49</sup> See Ehrenberg, *Women in Prehistory*, for her argument that women and men lived in an equalitarian social structure through the first part of the Neolithic until what Andrew Sherratt calls the "secondary products revolution."

### Chapter 3: The Rhineland Matronae

The Deae Matronae, the earliest Germanic sacred female collective, were venerated in the Rhineland area near the contemporary cities Köln and Bonn and the basin and upland Eifel area to the west. Romans and Germans worshipped the Rhineland Matronae in the first through fourth centuries CE. The German-language secondary literature concerning the Matronae is extensive<sup>1</sup> and history of religions scholars included them in some encyclopedic<sup>2</sup> and monographic<sup>3</sup> sources. However, no sources develop the idea of collective deity. Vries and Davidson call the collective, groups; Garman calls them a triad. These goddesses are a true collective. They are a group of goddesses, known by a single name plus epithet, but not conflated into a single being. They are worshipped collectively, and do their work of bountiful giving collectively and consensually.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the most recent symposium on current scholarship, Gerhard Bauchhenss and Günter Neumann, eds., *Matronen und Verwandte Gottheiten: Ergebnisse eines Kolloquiums Veranstaltet von der Göttinger Akademiekommision für die Altertumskunde Mittel- und Nordeuropas*, Beihefte der Bonner Jahrbücher, Bd. 44 (Cologne: Rheinland Verlag, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Bd. 2, 522-27; Also Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 79-84.



<sup>3</sup> Alex Gustav Garman, *The Cult of the Matronae in the Roman Rhineland: An Historical Evaluation of the Archaeological Evidence* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

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This chapter has several interlocking purposes as it begins detailed exploration of the research questions. The chapter argues the Rhineland Matronae as a collective, not a plurality or triple goddess. It places the Matronae historically in the second through fourth or fifth centuries CE, and explores the three main (surviving) ways in which the Romano-Germanic culture gave the religion expression: in stone artifact, in deity names and inscriptions, and in temple architecture and landscape. These surviving expressions of deity give voice to the worshippers' conception of these goddesses and the functions they may have performed in worshippers' lives. The goddesses were connected with all aspects of life on the land: tribes, rivers, trees, lands, animals, fish. Devotees conceived of these goddesses as bountiful givers, intimately concerned with their lives and with their landscape. This chapter shows that worship and veneration took place both at temples and non-temple locations, and in some cases followed the Roman *votum* ceremony. I observe that these goddesses were venerated by all types of worshippers: men and women, military and non-military, villager and city-dweller. The Roman military commanders found as much meaning and solace in these native deities as the local Germanic people.

### Historical Background

The *Matronae* or *Matres* were often a Celtic phenomenon and many examples of their inscriptions are found in Gaul, Italy, Spain and even Africa, where Celts lived and traveled. But during one historical period, the Matronae are known as an expression of Germanic religion. In an area of lower Germany, the worship of the Matronae by a Germanic tribe known as the Ubii flourished. Official Roman occupation of this area

began with the arrival of Julius Caesar in 58 BCE.<sup>4</sup> For some reason that is not clear in the historical record, the Romans requested the Germanic Ubii tribe in 51 BCE to move from their homeland on the eastern bank of the Rhine River, to the western bank, around the future city of Köln. The Ubii were farmers, could produce an agricultural surplus, and Rhinelanders up and down the river knew them to be successful traders. The Romans were probably counting upon the Ubii as producers of a constant food supply for Roman troops.<sup>5</sup> The Romans led the Ubii, apparently quite easily, persuading them into resettlement across the Rhine. Gechter proposes that this may have been due to a lack of

<sup>4</sup>Julius Caesar, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars: With the Supplementary Books Attributed to Hirtius* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869) <http://repo.lib.virginia.edu:18080/fedora/get/uva-lib:475778/uva-lib:bdef:100/getFullView> (accessed May 2, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Very few articles, two dissertations, and one new book in English are available on the subject of the Matronae. One very fine dissertation is the historical dissertation by Vincent T. Burns, "Romanization and Acculturation: The Rhineland Matronae" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1994). Burns' work shows that the Romanization of the Germanic Ubii tribe was by no means one-sided. The Rhineland Matronae religion, celebrated by Ubii and Roman alike, shows a two-way acculturation of Roman to Ubii and Ubii to Roman that gives a more nuanced view of influence and acculturation on the Roman frontier. The new book in English is Garman, *The Cult of the Matronae in the Roman Rhineland*.

native Ubii nobility and leadership.<sup>6</sup> He guesses that battle or social unrest destroyed the Ubii nobility before their first contact with Rome. The social structure of the tribe was, however, sufficient enough to agree to the resettlement across the Rhine. The situation described by Gechter is quite interesting. Perhaps the Ubii, lacking their own nobility, were already a tribe accustomed to consensus decision making. The collective aspect of the Matronae could have been congenial to them and they may have already worshipped them on the eastern bank of the Rhine.

The Ubii and the frontier Romans living among them enter the historical record with epigraphic inscriptions on stone votive altars to a collective of three goddesses known as the Matronae. The inscriptions are always to the Matronae and include a title or epithet such as *Matronae Aufaniae*. Over one thousand of the stones exist in the Rhineland area, most with just the title Matronae and an epithet.<sup>7</sup> A small subset of the stones feature sculpted artwork, most usually of three seated females presumed to be the

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gechter, "Early Roman Military Installations and Ubian Settlements in the Lower Rhine," in *The Early Roman Empire in the West*, ed. T.F.C. Blagg and Martin Millett (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1990), 99.

<sup>7</sup>In progress is an epic work cataloging all the Rhenish Matronae votive stones, Christoph B. Rüger and Brigitte Beyer-Rotthoff, "Index Epigraphischer Zeugnisse Mehrzahliger Weiblicher Gottheiten in den Lateinischen Provinze des Römischen Reiches," *Epigraphische Studien* 15 (forthcoming). It was unavailable for viewing during a visit to the library at Das Rheinische Landesmuseum Bonn in July 2005.

Matronae goddesses, along with images of worship, general images of fecundity or decoration and mythological scenes. Archaeologists have found Matronae stones in temple sites, pits, general excavations or under the Cathedral in Bonn.

Perhaps the Ubii had a tradition of women in religion that made them more open to the worship of female deities. In the *Germania*, Tacitus writes of the Germanic people,

They believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice or lightly disregard their replies. In the reign of the emperor Vespasian we saw Veleda long honored by many Germans as a divinity; and even earlier they showed a similar reverence for Aurinia and a number of others.<sup>8</sup>

The time period of the Rhineland Matronae veneration is a matter of some contention among scholars. The uncontested time period belongs to the dated votive altars, votives that give a particular date or reign of an Emperor. Only fourteen dated votives exist. These cluster in the years 164 CE–251 CE. The earliest known votive is the famous altar commissioned by Q. Vettius Severus with a date of 164 CE. Burns notes that the dated votives do not come from a cross-section of all votives to the Matronae but almost all come from two sites: Bonn and Nettersheim.<sup>9</sup> There was a busy military roadside temple site at Nettersheim and archaeologists found several votives and other

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Burns, “Romanization and Acculturation,” 166.

