

Our Lady of the Dark Forest: The Black Modonna of Einsiedein

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by Karen McCormick

DARKNESS is the one true actuality, the basis and the root of light, without which the latter could never manifest itself, nor even exist. Light is matter, and DARKNESS pure Spirit.

H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1:70

A MILLION PILGRIMS journey each year into northern Switzerland to see "her." • "She" is carved of wood in late Gothic style, is painted coal black, and is not quite four feet tall. She is perhaps some five hundred years old, but her spiritual history reaches back another 600 years. Who is she?

Arrayed in elegant brocades embroidered with golden floral accents with beaten gold clouds and lightning exploding all around her, the Black Madonna of Einsiedeln, Switzerland, resides at the center of one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Europe. She holds the Christ child on her left arm, and he in turn holds a black bird. Both mother and child have golden hair and golden crowns. Her right hand clasps a majestic and powerful scepter, while a chain with a Sacred Heart hangs from her arm.

This Black Madonna holds sacred court in her black marble Lady Chapel, which is completely enclosed within the nave of the larger basilica of the massive Benedictine abbey at Einsiedeln. Small painted plaques grace the dark walls of the chapel—votive offerings from devotees who wish to memorialize their deep gratitude to Our Lady for her healing or intervention in their lives. Crutches and braces have been discarded to the side of the chapel, with the heartfelt devotion of the healed supplicant. In confirmation, the official "miracle books" of the Monastery record many reports of the Black Madonna's interventions.

"Einsiedeln has evolved into a healing shrine, where for many centuries people have come and found relief from their mental and physical ailments," writes Fred Gustafson in his Jungian treatise *The Black Madonna*. "Like the other black goddesses of Europe, she is associated with healing ability and miracle working. This is usually more common among the Black Virgins than among their white counterparts."

The Story of St. Meinrad

Recorded history of the Black Madonna of Einsiedeln begins with the story of St. Meinrad. He was born in the family castle at Sulchen during the last years of the eighth century, during the reign of Charlemagne. Having taken the vows of a Benedictine monk at the age of twenty-five, Meinrad sought a more complete solitude as the years passed, and so entered the Finsterwald—the Dark Forest—of northern Switzerland as he neared the age of forty.

One day in the forest, Meinrad noticed that hawks were threatening two young ravens nesting in a tall fir tree. He rescued the ravens, fed them, and raised them. Meinrad also built a single cell for himself, with an adjacent chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, whose statue had been presented to him by Abbess Hildegard of Zurich. The two ravens, as the legend goes, stayed on as his familiars or allies. The entry of Meinrad into the Finsterwald and the rescue of the ravens is indeed the starting point of a great work that developed into the Cult of Mary, which later emphasized her blackness, reflects Fred Gustafson.

Meinrad spent twenty-five years at this site until his death in the year 861. One morning, while celebrating Mass, he foresaw his own murder, which occurred later that day. The two ravens screeched as the saint was martyred, pursued the fleeing murderers, and revealed to the nearby villagers the miscreants' hideout at a local inn. To this day, the monastery flag features the images of those two ravens.

In *The Secret Doctrine* (1:443), H. P. Blavatsky records the presence of ravens and blackbirds in a number of mythic cosmogonies: "What is the real meaning of all of those black birds? They are all connected with the primeval wisdom, which flows out of the pre-cosmic Source of All."

The present Black Madonna chapel is said to be located over Meinrad's original hermitage. The name of the town "Einsiedeln" means "The Hermitage." After Meinrad's death, other priests and monks came to live in cells that were built around Meinrad's original chapel. St. Eberhard, a French nobleman, arrived in Einsiedeln in 934 and became the first abbot of the Benedictine community that had gathered there. He placed the monks under the protection of "Our Lady of the Hermits." Lay devotees were beginning to make pilgrimages to Einsiedeln about this time, as well.

Schwartzmuttergottes, the Black Mother of God

The lineage of the present Black Madonna statue at Einsiedeln is not entirely clear. Today's holy figure is not Meinrad's original Virgin from the ninth century. It is likely that the reigning Black Madonna is a statue carved in the fifteenth century and restored in the eighteenth.

The greatest mystery is when, how, and why she became black? In 1799, Johann Adam Fuetscher, the statue's restorer, supposedly wrote: "The carved wooden face was thoroughly black. This color is not attributable to a painter, but to the smoke of the lights of the hanging lamps which for so many centuries always burned in the Holy Chapel at Einsiedeln. It was very clear to me that the face had been initially entirely flesh-colored."

When Fuetscher restored the statue, the common people demanded that he paint the entire Madonna black. Perhaps the original was indeed flesh-colored in the beginning, yet the

"blackened" Madonna had grown precious to her devotees over the centuries. Some researchers believe that the Catholic Church may have circulated the theory of the "Smoke-Blackened Madonna" to help discredit the mysterious origins of some four hundred Black Virgins found throughout Europe.

"The Virgin Mary is one side of the life principle, a light feminine side of the psyche, but the Black Madonna picks up another side of this life principle, in relatively isolated places such as Einsiedeln and Czestochowa in Poland," Gustafson observes. "Here can be seen, in incarnate form, the 'black aspect' of life and its right to exist."

In *Isis Unveiled* (2:94 -5), Blavatsky quotes from *The Gnostics and Their Remains* on the subject of the Black Virgins of France:

“Immaculate is Our Lady Isis, • is the legend around an engraving of Serapis and Isis, described by King, . . . the very terms applied afterwards to that personage [the Virgin Mary] who succeeded to her form, titles, symbols, rites, and ceremonies. . . . Thus her devotees carried into the new priesthood the former badges of their profession, the obligation to celibacy, the tonsure, and the surplice. . . . The “Black Virgins,” • so highly revered in certain French cathedrals . . . proved, when at last critically examined, [to be] basalt figures of Isis.

Carl Jung apparently believed that the Black Madonna of Einsiedeln was also a manifestation of Isis, representing the cult that migrated from southern Egypt to the Mediterranean, and then spread throughout much of Europe. Many observers, including the mythologist Joseph Campbell, have noted the similarities between statues of the Madonna and Child, and Isis and Horus, with Isis often depicted as black in her original representations. "Like the Madonna of Einsiedeln, Isis too is considered a Virgin, the Mother of God, and . . . the 'black healer,'" writes Gustafson.

China Galland, author of *Longing for Darkness: Tara and the Black Madonna*, had these feelings after her visit to Our Lady of the Dark Forest:

Seeing the Madonna at Einsiedeln gives me the sense that she is a Western remnant of the ancient Dark God[dess]—be she the Indian Kali, Durga, lesser known forms of the Tibetan Tara, the African-Egyptian Isis, the Roman Cybele, or the Greek Artemis or Demeter (Ishtar or Inanna)—all contain aspects or have manifestations of the Black Mother. . . . this is the darkness of ancient wisdom, of people of color, of space, of the womb, of the earth, of the unknown, of sorrow, of the imagination, the darkness of death, of the human heart, of the unconscious, of the darkness beyond light, of matter, of the descent, of the body, of the shadow of the Most High.

It is likely that many of the Black Virgins in Europe were located at natural energy centers that had been the foci for the celebration of Earth Mysteries for hundreds or even thousands of years previously. Perhaps St. Meinrad was intuitively attracted to some potent electromagnetic fields in the Dark Forest and celebrated the site with devotions to Our Lady. It may have been a location for some ancient worship that preceded him. In any case, the Dark Forest was probably a strong

geomantic area of the kind described in the *I Ching*: "Heaven and Earth determine the place. The holy sages fulfill the possibilities of those places. Through the thoughts of men and the thoughts of spirits the people are enabled to participate in these possibilities." St. Meinrad may well have been just one of those "holy sages" in his "holy place," preparing the Dark Forest for the installation of one of the most powerful and compassionate Mother Goddesses of all time.

Whatever the exact origins of this highly venerated Black Madonna at Einsiedeln, the dispenser of miraculous graces, she is praised each day at 4:30 PM, just as she has been for the past four hundred years, when the Benedictine monks sing the "Salve Regina" • :

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our Life, our sweetness, and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning, and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, our advocate, your eyes of Mercy toward us. And after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy Womb, Jesus. O Clement, O Loving, O Sweet Virgin Mary.

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