

Saint Sarah Empowerment



Alasdair Bothwell Gordon

2012

Alasdair Bothwell Gordon

EdD, DMin, PhD (USA), DD, FWMSC, RGMT, RH (WMA), MPWR

Saint Sarah, also known as Sara the Black (Romany: *Sara e Kali*), is the patron saint of the Roma (Gypsy) people, although she has never officially been declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. The centre of her veneration is Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, a place of pilgrimage for Romany Gypsies in the Camargue, in southern France.

Legend identifies her as the servant of one of the Three Marys, with whom she is supposed to have arrived in the Camargue.

According to legend, during the persecution of early Christians, often dated to the year 42 AD, Lazarus of Bethany, his sisters Mary (Magdalene) and Martha, Mary Salome (the mother of the Apostles John and James, the sons of Zebedee), Mary Jacobe, Maximin and Sidonius were sent out into the Mediterranean in a boat equipped without sail by their persecutors.

After sailing eastwards they arrived on the southern shore of the Mediterranean coast of Gaul (France), close to the mouth of the Petit Rhône at the place now known as Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the Camargue

According to various legends:

- Mary Magdalene went on to Sainte Baume, where she spent the rest of her life in a cave.
- Mary Salome remained in the area, in time becoming an object of veneration to the local people.
- Mary Jacobe was a sister (or cousin) of the Virgin Mary. This Mary also remained in the area where the boat had come ashore and became an object of veneration to the local people.
- Martha (the sister of Mary Magdalene) went to Tarascon, where she prevailed against a monster (the Tarasque) that

used to rise out of the waters of the River Rhône to devour people and livestock.

- Lazarus went to Marseille and became its first Bishop
- Maximinus went to Aix.
- Sarah had originally been left on the shore but begged to be included. By a miracle she was able to reach the boat by walking on the water.

In the Middle Ages, people fervently believed the miracle stories as recounted in works such as the *Golden Legend*.

King René d'Anjou ordered the building of an oratory where the two local Marys (Salome and Jacob) were allegedly buried, in December 1448. The crypt, in which the image of Saint Sarah stands, dates from the time of these works. Excavations at that time revealed several human heads arranged in the form of a cross and the bodies of two women. An altar of compacted earth was also found, as well as a smooth marble stone that was later to be called the "Saints' Pillow".

This discovery was taken as confirmation that the bodies were the two Marys. King René thus put Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on the pilgrim map. At a ceremony in the presence of King René and his wife, Queen Isabelle, the relics were placed in two reliquaries and stored in an upper chapel above the main altar.

These reliquaries were destroyed at the time of the French Revolution, but local priests had the foresight to secure the actual relics, so that after the Revolution two new reliquaries were made, and the bones reinserted in them. The provenance of these relics is no better – and no worse – than many other relics in European churches.

Of the various saints supposed to have landed at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the focus of this Empowerment is Saint

Sarah. Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is the centre of her veneration and a place of pilgrimage for Romany people throughout the world.

The first known written account of the Three Marys arriving in France dates from the thirteenth century *Golden Legend*, but Sarah does not feature. Saint Sarah makes her first appearance in the sixteenth century in Vincent Philippon's book *The Legend of the Saintes-Maries* (1521). However, it has to be remembered that many of these traditions pre-date written accounts, often by many centuries. She is portrayed as a charitable woman who helped people by collecting alms, which led to the popular belief that she herself was a gypsy.

According to some traditions, Sarah was not a native of Palestine but was the black Egyptian maid of one of the Three Marys, usually taken to be Mary Jacobe. She had come to Palestine as the maidservant of Mary Salome and Mary Jacobe. While the women were travelling by sea, as they fled Palestine, they encountered a severe storm and Sarah guided the occupants of the vessel, by means of the stars, to safety in Gaul.

Other stories present Sarah as the Egyptian Abbess of a convent in Libya. In yet others, she figured among a group of Persian martyrs, who arrived at Gaul by ship with the Three Marys and Martha. According to one variant, citing an apocryphal text from the eleventh century, Sarah had been with Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Martha when they found the empty tomb of Jesus on Easter morning.

A Church chronicler named Raynaldus mentions in the thirteenth century that the Cathars of the Languedoc had long regarded Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus. More recent sources have promoted the view (which is far from new) that Jesus Christ and

Mary Magdalene were married and had children, or at least one child.

These ideas were popularised by Baigent, Lee and Lincoln's book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and by Dan Brown's pot-boiler novel *The Da Vinci Code*. In *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, it is claimed that Jesus not only had descendents who lived in what would become France, but that their blood merged with the royal Merovingian dynasty. Some authors, such as Margaret Starbird (*The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*) suggest that Sarah might actually have been the daughter of Mary Magdalene and Jesus.

According to others, Romany Gypsies actually worship Mary Magdalene and do so in the guise of Saint Sarah. Another thread is that of the Black Madonna. There are many black statues of the Virgin Mary in France. Some scholars suggest that they are actually Christian adaptations of Isis. There is yet another suggestion that Mary Magdalene - and not the Virgin Mary - is represented as a Black Madonna. (See the manual for my own Black Madonna Mystical Empowerment.)

Sources record a church in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer from the ninth century, although there is evidence of a very much earlier Christian presence. The present building, dedicated to Saint Michael, dates from the twelfth century. A statue of Saint Sarah resides in the crypt. Apparently, until 1912, only Romany Gypsies were permitted to enter the crypt, but now it is open to everyone.

In the crypt is an ancient altar, possibly of pre-Christian origins. In the centre is a later Christian altar, believed to date from as early as the third century. To the right, stands the statue of Saint Sarah. She is dressed in real clothes, which are regularly changed. She stands on a black rock, swathed with

tapestries, and placed at an appropriate height so that her devotees can easily kiss her face. A wooden monument beside her statue holds letters requesting healing and attesting to her miracles. None of these miracles has been officially verified by the Roman Catholic Church,

Upstairs in the main Church are altars dedicated to Mary Salome and Mary Jacobe. Relics of both saints are also on display.

A two day ceremony at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on 24 and 25 May each year is attended by many Romany pilgrims. At this time, gypsies from all over Europe head for the fortified Romanesque Church of Saint Michael and particularly the statue of Saint Sarah in the crypt.

The pilgrims arrive in droves a week before the two days of celebration and make evening visits to the crypt accompanied by violins and guitars. Each pilgrim adds a candle to the mass of candles already lit within the shrine.

On the afternoon of May 24, statues of the two Marys are lowered from the top of Saint Michael's church. As they slowly descend, members of the congregation try to touch them before they reach the ground in order to receive healing and blessing. The statue of Saint Sarah is then brought up from the crypt below. The statue is adorned in bright new robes for the occasion.

She is carried on the shoulders of four gypsies, in a procession that winds its way through the narrow streets to the beach, escorted by guardians riding white horses. On the beach, the bearer party wade knee-deep into the water where the image of Saint Sarah is symbolically submerged. The bearers then turn around, go back and return the statue to the church.

At the Church the three saints are venerated for the rest of the day. On the following morning (25 May), the statues of the two Marys are placed in a boat also taken out to the sea, then returned and honoured.

This second parade is more of a local Provençal festival, with gypsy participation. The event offers Romany pilgrims an opportunity to renew family and social contacts, negotiate betrothals, conduct business and see their children baptized in the Church.

The story of Sarah and the Three Marys, not surprisingly, has provided fertile ground for all types of conspiracy theories. That fact should not blind people to underlying esoteric and mystical truths. It is always easy to dismiss what we do not fully understand, especially if evidence is ancient and even conflicting.

Here are a few relevant pieces of information that may help to clarify:

- Archaeological excavations confirm local legends that the site of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer has been venerated since prehistoric times, through Celtic, Greek and Roman times into the Christian era, originally focused on a holy spring.
- In Celtic times, worship was offered to the Celtic triple water deity Matres. This was superseded by Roman temples dedicated to Artemis, Cybele, Isis and Mithras. Christianity later adopted many hundreds of older sacred sites.
- From linguistic and genetic evidence the origins of the gypsies is now better understood. They left Northern India as a group of nomads around 900 AD, reaching Persia in 950, and were in Egypt by 1230 and France by 1370.

- It is not known when and why the local church became sacred to the gypsies, but it was some time after the early 1400s.
- There were no bones or other relics of Sarah. It is her statue, not her relics, that is so paramount in the annual procession. The present statue is of relatively recent origin.
- Europeans believed (partly correctly as it turned out) that gypsies came from Egypt. The name "gypsy" is derived from the word Egypt. The connection with Egypt would provide a link for folk histories involving vestigial memories of other Egyptian elements, such as Ra and Isis.
- The earliest Romany people would probably have been Hindus.
- Hindus worship a Hindu goddess known as Kali.
- Kali is the feminine of kala "black or dark coloured"
- Kali is represented as black, which would have greatly helped the confusion with identifying Sarah as a Black Madonna.
- Saint Sarah is also known as Sara e Kali by the Romany people.
- In origin, Kali was a figure of annihilation, comparable to the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet. From her violent origins, Kali evolved into a benign Mother Goddess. Like the Virgin Mary, she is also revered as Bhavatarini, literally "redeemer of the universe",

The worship of Sarah at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is not unique. Similar statues were worshipped by gypsies in Eastern Europe. All of these ceremonies involved carrying a statue into the nearest body of water, where a small boat was lowered into the water, as at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is not the only location where Gypsies have converted Kali into a Christian saint. In Mexico, Mexican

gypsies venerate the Virgin of Guadeloupe, believed to be another Christian substitute for Kali.

As with all such issues, it is up to individuals to make up their own minds on such matters.

Taking this Empowerment does not require signing up to any one particular belief system. The most important point is that there is spiritual energy in the story of Saint Sarah. Please take from that energy what you find to be appropriate.

This Empowerment is of a reflective, inspirational and self-empowering nature. It does not constitute medical or psychological treatment and should be used with common sense.

Alasdair Bothwell Gordon

Reiki Master and Teacher
Lightarian™ Facilitator
Registered Chios™ Healer

Scotland (UK)

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Alasdair>