

SACRED  
SHADOWS

Ice Age  
Spirituality

By

Tylluan Penry

# Sacred Shadows - Ice Age Spirituality

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ISBN 978-0-9570442-4-1

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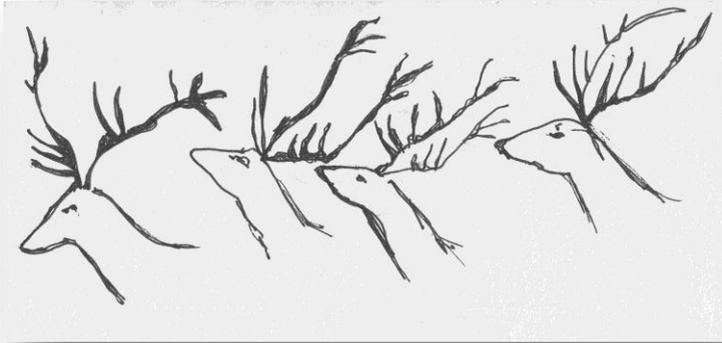
Cover Design and Illustrations by Tylluan Penry

Published by:           The Wolfenhowle Press,  
                                  Redcroft, Nile Road,  
                                  Trealaw, Tonypandy CF40 2 UY

[www.thewolfenhowlepress.com](http://www.thewolfenhowlepress.com)

Printed by:   Book Printing UK, Remus House, Coltsfoot Drive,  
Woodston, Peterborough PE2 9BF

This book is dedicated with grateful thanks to Dr.  
KCMH - the best and most inspiring of tutors.



*If the earth unveils its secret  
It will eventually show its origin*

Ferdowsi

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### **A note about references....**

References are placed within the text of this book using the Harvard style of referencing, i.e. Author, Year and, where appropriate, page number. This is neater and easier than struggling to find endnotes after each chapter. If you wish to consult the referenced work for yourself, just go to the Bibliography at the end of this book and look up the cited author; you will find the full reference set out there.

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## Chapter One

### The problem of time

**M**any people find time a difficult concept. It's not just a question of 'telling the time.' A decent watch, clock or even a mobile phone can do that for us. The problem is in understanding time and finding the right words to quantify it. 'Once upon a time' or 'Long long ago' can encompass anything from fifty years to several thousand or more. And as the distance in time becomes greater, so our perception often becomes more blurred.

For example, if we asked most people who lived first, Queen Victoria or John F. Kennedy, they would probably get the answer right. Victoria clearly belongs to the nineteenth century, with top hats and crinolines, while Kennedy belongs firmly in the twentieth century. Yet Victoria died in 1901 and Kennedy was born in 1917. There were in fact only sixteen years between the birth of Queen Victoria and the assassination of Kennedy when neither was alive.

Then, if we go further back and ask who lived first, for example, Henry II or Richard II then it gets trickier. Go back still further and ask which came first, Alexander the Great or Attila the Hun, it gets trickier still.

And from this we can see that any problems we have with the perspective of time are very similar with the ordinary perspective we have to deal with every day. Basically the further away something is, spatially or in time, the more difficult it is to distinguish what is really there.

The ancient Greek authors, Hesiod and Homer, were near contemporaries and provide some of our earliest surviving texts, but these are barely three thousand years old. Even if we go back to an ancient civilisation such as the Egyptians, we find their known history does not go back much beyond the fourth millennium BCE. What

should we make then of times so distant that we know virtually nothing about them?

It comes as something of a shock to realise that Mankind has been around for several *million* years. During that time people must have created many stories that were passed down for centuries if not millennia. Some of these may have eventually been written down, but most became little more than sacred shadows that haunt our dreams as they try to pierce the protective membrane we have created to protect our modern consciousness. Once the covering does break however, the past breaks through and reaches out, begging us to explore - and remember.

It may seem surprising that the past - long dead and gone - has the ability to reach out into the present and call us in this way. By rights it should be impossible, and yet most people who try to follow a spiritual path of any description eventually seem to enter a period of psychic awakening. When this happens the unconscious starts prodding the subconscious which in turn sends its messengers, instinctual forces that try to wake us up and make us notice them.

At first this awakening can be frightening, because it often brings vivid dreams whose memory lingers far beyond what we might reasonably expect. This is because they contain so much energy, which demands not only that we acknowledge it, but also that we should work with it.

Unfortunately modern western culture often is unsure how to react to these messengers from our subconscious. The usual response is to pretend that instinctual forces don't exist, or that they are all in the mind. Yet we need these ancient shadows to teach us how to control the more extreme aspects of our own being, those emotions and reactions that we might prefer to deny exist within us.

Now of course, it's tempting to dismiss all this. The ancient past is dead and mostly buried apart from a few bits and pieces of stone and pottery, and people are quick to remind us that we cannot possibly recover any of their beliefs or rituals. And yet I suspect that much of the story lies still within us, as these inherited or even past life memories turn up troubling dreams and instincts.

It must be said that not everyone agrees with this theory. For example, Lord Raglan (Raglan 1936:79,8), claimed that, '...since history depends upon written chronology ... the Savage can have no history. And since interest in the past is induced solely by books, the Savage can take no interest in the past.' At a stroke, this attitude consigns millions of years of human history to the dustbin.

Luckily for us, however, history does not depend only upon written chronology and never has. We find it all around us in so many shapes and forms. For example, the landscape is a living map of its interaction with humankind over tens of thousands of years. People mark the landscape and are in turn influenced by it. A mountain takes us closer to the heavens and sky deities, and so it becomes regarded as sacred.

In areas without mountains, it is trees that push upwards, and so the tradition of the sacred (or World) tree is born. Later, when people created sacred buildings, they again aimed for the sky, with pyramids, ziggurats and even Medieval and Gothic cathedrals.

Looking again at Raglan's statement, we notice that he does not take into account how information could have been conveyed before the advent of writing. Writing does not prove anything other than literacy. It is not always even reliable depending on the bias of whoever wrote it. Besides, there were villages, towns, even cities and empires long before writing was invented and many of the great religious texts and myths circulated for centuries, if not millennia before being written down.

Then there are the archaeological finds. Often quickly removed from their original context, nevertheless they invite us to speculate about the people who originally made and used them. And when we begin to speculate like this, we are giving our subconscious a swift nudge. Jung believed that 'history could be constructed just as easily from one's own unconscious as from the actual texts' (cited in Henderson 1990, 104). History does not begin or end with the written word.

Nor should history focus exclusively on the famous, the kings and generals, politicians and heroes, battles and treaties. Ordinary people are history too, though they are rarely - if at all - remembered, let alone

commemorated. Yet their history matters – and it is our history too. It is easy to become so preoccupied with the history of kings and wars that we forget our past as it relates to us.

For example, how many of us can remember family anecdotes going back more than a generation or two? As a result, any sense of ancient or archaic time is usually lost for good. We abandon our own mythologies, instead either harking back to a golden age that never was or relying far too heavily on the written word, which is rarely interested in us as individuals. Thus our personal family history, the story of our ancestors, is quickly forgotten.

Years ago I researched my own and my husband's family history. I never fail to be amazed at the sheer struggle our ancestors must have had just to keep alive. Labourers in their eighties turning up in the census, still working and trying to provide for orphaned grandchildren. What stories they must have had to tell!

Yet even though these are only just outside living memory, less than two hundred years, their stories are already forgotten. Nonetheless, this is the stuff that real history, *our* history is made of. Their hopes, dreams, fears, strengths and weaknesses as they fought to survive another day, all run in our veins. And we ignore them at our peril.

In the West we tend to believe that humankind as we know it exists only *within* history. It is as though we are walking on some giant stage that has been thoughtfully provided for us and all we have to do is say our lines, play our part and exit. We have one chance to get it right (unless we believe in reincarnation) and no prompter to help us if we forget something.

However there are other viewpoints. For example, the theologian and philosopher Henri Corbin, Professor of Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne believed that : '...history is *in man* . . . history whose events do not take place in exterior world of objects, but in the subtle world of lived states' (Corbin 1981, 13).

Now Corbin's view poses some interesting questions. If we accept what he says, then instead of being on the stage acting out history and

later forgetting most of it, we are in fact the vessel that contains history itself. We become the carriers of history within us, while at the same time acting out a history of our own. If true, then that throws everything into an entirely different perspective.

For a start, it takes us back literally into the mists of time. Even the ancient Greeks will be modern by comparison. Herodotus, (Book II *The Histories*) writing 2,500 years ago in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE said that Homer and Hesiod gave the gods their names. There has been an unfortunately tendency to accept this at face value, as though there was nothing before Homer and Hesiod (who were both long dead before Herodotus was born) began writing.

Of course this simply is not true. Tens of thousands of years earlier, people had been dancing by torchlight, painting herds of animals wandering across cave walls, and even they were modern compared to those who made tools dating back half a million years and more. From a spiritual point of view therefore, we have to recognise that we are dealing not with the beliefs of 1000 or 2000 years ago, but with figures so vast that the human mind usually boggles and retreats when confronted with them.

At this stage it's worth getting some idea of the approximate times and of the various ages and epochs. For our purposes we will look at five main ages, the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age; Mesolithic; Neolithic or New Stone Age; Bronze Age and Iron Age. Within these groups there are many further subdivisions and we also have to remember that different areas across Europe entered these ages at different times.

The Palaeolithic period is made up of the Lower, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic epochs. The most ancient art (sometimes called Ice Age art) belongs to the Upper Palaeolithic which may date back as far as thirty thousand years (Maringer 1979:215). Artefacts from this period are found in caves, on rocks, and small pieces of bone, horn and ivory. Obviously other organic media (plants, wood or even cloth) may also have been used but this has not survived.

While thirty thousand years may seem mind boggling to us, it is a drop in the ocean in the history of our ancestors. Man's oldest known work

of art is thought to be a decorated ox-rib found at Sarlat in the Dordogne, which has been dated at between 100,000 – 230,000 years old (Davenport 2002:55). This is a staggering leap backwards, into a past so ancient we cannot begin to imagine it.

Although we may refer to 'The Ice Age' there were in fact several, and during each one the temperatures can warm and then cool again. They are thought to occur approximately one hundred and fifty million years apart, each one lasting for about a million years. Over the past 2.6 million years, for example, there have been extremes of cold punctuated by warmer, interglacial intervals. Ten percent of the world is covered with ice nowadays, but this has been as much as thirty percent. And the ice is not a mere surface sheet, sometimes it could be several miles thick. Even land that escaped glaciations was affected by the extreme and persistent cold temperatures.

While the freezing process was relatively gradual, taking the best part of ninety thousand years to reach its coldest point, the thaw was quicker, taking approximately ten thousand years. In the last Ice Age, the ice sheets covering Canada and northwest Europe did not completely disappear until c. 7,000 years ago in Canada and northwest Europe. This marked the beginning of the modern, Holocene epoch (Peltier 1994:195).

All this has interesting implications. It is quite possible that civilisations have risen, flourished and then been virtually wiped out several times. Destruction of home and family due to natural disasters beyond our control leaves a massive imprint on the human psyche. The ice may eventually recede, but the memory of it still evokes terror in those who survived and their descendants.

The most recent Ice Age only started to recede around fourteen thousand years ago, which, as we can see, is nothing in human terms. Even when the beautiful caves of Chauvet and Lascaux were being painted, the climate was far, far colder than anything we can imagine today. The ice receded slowly, a process of one step forward and two back, which meant that people could only adapt very gradually to the changes.

Basically they were faced with two choices, to either stay and try to acclimatise while the cold tundra slowly turned into forests, or they could move north, following the herds. (We sometimes forget that plants and animals were affected by the Ice Ages too.) Those people who moved north would eventually become what we know as the Celtic, Germanic and Nordic tribes.

Once they had a reasonable choice, the survivors must have moved in many different directions. However no matter where they went, they must have taken something with them of their old beliefs, earlier cultures and memories. This may explain how people who were separated by such wide geographic distances still seem to have words and gods in common.

The change in climate from temperate to Ice Age and back again may have brought about other changes too. As the natural world appears more hostile and uncontrollable so the individual is drawn more towards the invisible world of religion and ritual. Conversely, when we no longer worry so much about providing ourselves with food, warmth, shelter and fertility then there is less need to appeal to the divine to provide it.

The dates of the different eras tend to be rather confusing and can vary considerably. Generally speaking, the are the approximate dates used in this book are as follows:

- Lower Palaeolithic ca. 2.5 – 2 million BCE
- Middle Palaeolithic ca. 2 million to 40,000 BCE
- Upper Palaeolithic ca. 40,000 – 8000 BCE
  
- Mesolithic ca 10,000/ 8,000 – 7,500/5,000 BCE
- Neolithic ca 8,000 – 3,000 BCE
- Bronze Age ca 3,000 – 1000 BCE
- Iron Age ca 1000BCE

There are also various cultural epochs in amongst these periods, especially the Upper Palaeolithic. They are named after French cave sites and include the Mousterian (associated with Neanderthals)

Aurignacian, (c.30,000 - 20,000BCE), Perigordian, Solutrean and Magdalenian (c.15,000 - 8,000 BCE) etc. These are useful terms for defining specific groups in certain areas or with particular characteristics although their dating tends to fluctuate wildly.

There is also the term Pleistocene which covers a huge period, approximately 2.6 million to 11,700 years ago. During this period there were a series of Ice Ages, alternating with warmer periods. However, not every part of the world entered into (or left) each 'Age' at the same time or in quite the same way.

As a very general guide, the dates for the different Ages in the Old World tended to be earlier than in the New World. For example, the Neolithic period began in and around the Middle East as early as c.8000BCE; however it would be another six thousand years before it reached the western coasts of north and south America.

Likewise the Bronze Age may be as old at ca 3000 BCE in the Middle East, but took up to another thousand years before reaching the westernmost areas of Europe or the easternmost parts of Asia.

Even in the Old World, there are some noticeable differences. The 'Stone Age' reached Scandinavia for example much later than, say, France, and the Neolithic period persisted as late as 2000 BCE in Scandinavia, while the Scandinavian Bronze Age did not really get underway until c. 1500 BCE. Scandinavia was still hunting while people in the south of Europe and also in western Asia were well-established with farming practices.

We must remember therefore that there is no generic 'Stone Age Man' - this tag is only the very roughest generalisation. We are dealing with periods, people and places we know very little about and time scales of thousands, even tens of thousands, of years.

Think about the changes we have seen in the last fifty years. Look back a hundred, two hundred years and then multiply these by, say, a hundred. And of course people vary a great deal depending on exactly when and where they live, their own personal traditions, ideas and beliefs. The idea of a Stone or Bronze Age etc., is only the very roughest

of guides. Ideas, beliefs and rituals must have changed enormously, even within any given 'Age'.

Also it would be quite wrong to believe that our ancient ancestors cannot offer us anything of interest. Primitive religions and spirituality are every bit as much a response to the divine as modern ones. Unfortunately, the ancient world has often been regarded with curious suspicion. Even when compelling evidence has been recovered, people have sometimes refused to consider it simply because it is 'too old' and people must have been 'too primitive'.

This leads to the assumption that only the present (and the recent past) are 'civilised' but the rest is not. For example, when the Abbé Breuil petitioned UNESCO for funds after the Second World War in order to study the Lascaux cave paintings (which had only been discovered in 1940) UNESCO refused, on the grounds that the paintings were obviously fraudulent! (Davenport, 2000:59).

Part of the problem is the tendency to ignore the fact that what we call 'civilisation' is actually a very thin, very modern veneer. It's a bit like an iceberg, no matter how big it looks above the surface of the sea, this is nothing compared to what lies beneath. In this case what lies beneath is our primordial past, which - whether we realise it or not - forms much of the foundation for how we live today.

The problem with veneers of course, is that they tend to be fragile and before long, the cracks begin to appear. Usually this happens when we are under stress and we can often give way to some rather primitive behaviour. Indeed, I've known myself go out into the garden and give a great long silent scream as a way of releasing stress. Some days it's not even all that silent! Yet for many of us, instead of seeing this type of reaction as an important way of releasing tension, we tend to regard it as weakness.

Dealing with this vague feeling that something isn't quite as it should be can be very difficult, especially since we live in a world where we may be able to explain the mechanics of most things, but really don't understand their true nature. For example, what are we to make of our innate sense of wonder? That feeling we get when we touch

something old, gaze at the stars or look at pictures of ancient cave paintings? We may not understand that wonder, or know what to do with it, but it's there all the same and we sense it.

Dealing with an ancient past that keeps trying to nudge us into some sort of awareness is not easy. We may accept evolution as an idea, but emotionally we still persist in rejecting as a reality (Sabini 2008:46). This may be partly because the implications are so disturbing but also because we cannot countenance such huge time spans. Certainly most people know little family history beyond their great grandparents. Photographs prior to 1860 are rare, and even then, we often cannot identify who is shown in them.

In trying to recover our ancient past, we have to try and reach out to people who lived 10,000 or even 100,000 years ago. We know almost nothing about them and much of what we *think* we know is often misleading. Indeed, if we think of ancient man as primitive and apelike, we're not even sure that we want to identify with him! Part of the problem is that mankind has created a past that terrifies us. No wonder we set up barriers to protect ourselves by making it impossible to reach back very far.

Yet if we refuse to even try and reach back and connect through some sort of inherited memory, we are in effect distrusting the power of our own minds. How often do we hear the comment, 'It's all in the mind' as though the mind is some kind of rubbish heap? It isn't. The mind is so powerful that even now we understand very little about its true capabilities.

If we keep denying these vague yearnings for something we feel we know but cannot quite remember, then it's no wonder we feel adrift sometimes. The gods and archetypes of the ancient past still lurk deep in our hearts, minds and souls, yet we keep on denying them.

I should perhaps point out here that this is not about what religion we follow. It's much deeper than that. At its heart it this book is about recovering our own, personal ancient history, about understanding where we come from. And the irony is that while genealogy sites

continue to thrive as people attempt to trace back their family trees for a century or two, we still try to avoid thinking in ages.

I suspect this may be due to fear of the unknown. And of course not only is fear is contagious, but it is also a very powerful means of manipulating people. For example, the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Borgia Pope, Pope Calixtus III forbade Spaniards to carry out rites in caves that had pictures of horses in them. In 1598 Lope de Vega wrote a play describing cave paintings at Las Batuecas in Salamanca as frequented by powerful demons. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, local people still often avoided the caves and their paintings, believing them to be dangerous haunts of malevolent spirits (Kühn 1966: xxi).

For too long we have been conditioned to associate the unknown with chaos, as though the two are walking permanently hand in hand. They are not. Chaos - wars, famine, unspeakable atrocities - has occurred well within living memory, let alone within the historic or prehistoric period. Yet the 'unknown' may produce pleasant surprises, everything from scientific knowledge to artefacts of great beauty. It really is nothing to fear.

As the great dancer, Isadora Duncan, is reported to have once said, 'You were once wild here, don't let them tame you.'