

Shadow over Philistia: A review of the Cult of Dagon

John C. Day

Through the centuries, pantheistic deities have often been assimilated into different religious systems, a classic example being that of the Greek and Roman pantheons. With the advent of extensive occult activity at the turn of the nineteenth century, initiated by such individuals as H.P. Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley, a number of pantheistic deities were reintroduced into European minds and actively incorporated into magical acts. It is often impossible to identify key events leading to the integration of a deity into the religious framework of a society, or the evolution a deity has undergone to perpetuate its own existence. Here is presented a possible exception, that of the deity Dagon. Although primarily regarded as a Philistine god, Dagon was assimilated into their religious practices but more importantly has re-emerged as a key archetype in what has been described as the Cthulhu mythos.

This essay aims to examine the historical evidence surrounding the worship of Dagon in biblical times and, following the demise of the cult of Dagon, explore its influence on twentieth century writing and esotericism. From this body of work has emerged a mythos of Elder Gods from, what has been described as, the 'preeval aeons' - of which Dagon as a god of the

Deep has been attributed. This mythos has been employed as a foundation for the current manifestation of the Cult of Dagon and herein is present a summary of the history of the Order and its current position in the UK.

The Early History of the Cult of Dagon

Dagon (𐤔𐤁𐤍)¹ is most frequently described as one of the chief deities of the Philistines, although worship appears to have been extensive, for Dagon appears in a number of geographical place names beyond the Philistine country.² It has been claimed that the god Dagon originally belonged to a prehistoric and pre-Semitic people of the Upper Mesopotamia as the name was probably derived from Dagan. Dagan is a West-Semitic god, probably of Amorite origins and evidence for the cult of Dagan begins in the third millenium Mesopotamia, continuing for nearly two thousand years.³

In the Bible the god Dagon is mention three times: firstly in Judges 16:23 where a great sacrifice to Dagon was made by the Philistine lords; secondly in 1 Chronicles 10:10 where is described the placement of Saul's head in the temple of Dagon; and thirdly the story in 1 Samuel 5 where Dagon is confronted with the Ark. From these biblical texts it can be established that the worship of Dagon among the Philistines appears to have been carried out with a highly developed and elaborate ritual, possibly involving human sacrifice.

It is commonly held that the name Dagon is derived from the Semitic root dag (𐤔𐤁), and means, accordingly, 'fish', and thus Dagon appears to have been worshipped in the form of a fish-shaped god. This is supported in the Bible by an account of Dagon worshipped in the temple of Azotus, 'he had face and hands and a portion of his body resembled that of a fish', in accordance with the most probable interpretation of 'the stump of Dagon'.⁴ In the *Septuagint* (LXX),⁵ it is suggested Dagon possessed feet, leading some scholars to infer that Dagon could not possibly be a fish deity.⁶ However, it is not inconsistent with the representation of Dagon as ichthyomorphic, as pictures of a fish god show human face and hands, and in some examples, legs, on Mesopotamian cylinders and other monuments.⁷

Certain coins of various Philistine or Phoenician cities support the description presented in the Bible, where Dagon is represented as a composite figure, with a human upper body and a fish-like lower body.⁸ From this it may well be inferred that Dagon was a fish-god. Furthermore, he seems to have been the primary deity of such maritime cities as Azotus, Gaza (the early sites of which are supposed to be buried under the sand-mounds that run along the sea-shore), Ascalon, and Arvad. This has led to the suggestion that, with such a maritime history, it would be natural for the Philistines to connect their main god with a fish.⁹

However, another school of thought considers Dagon to be an avatar of agriculture. This opinion they rest upon the writings of Philo of Byblos who attributes Dagon with corn and discovering the plough. Philo lived at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century A.D. and claimed to have translated from Phoenician into Greek the work of Sanchuniathon. He further tells us (in Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*, I,6) that according to an ancient Phoenician legend, Dagon was one of four sons born of the marriage of the lord of heaven, Anu, with his sister, the earth. Philo identifies El, the most common Babylonian-Syrian-Arabian name for God and the supreme deity of the Canaanites, with Kronos in his account of Phoenician mythology. However, in the *Etymologicum Magnum*, Dagon is identified as the Phoenician Kronos, supported by Ugaritic sources that corresponds Dagon with Kumarbi, the Hurrian Kronos.¹⁰

Philo goes on to characterise Poseidon explicitly as the god of Beirut whilst a Palmyrene inscription identifies El with Poseidon.¹¹ Lipinski¹² poses the question 'if Kronos corresponds to the old Semitic god Dagon, while Poseidon is identical with El, why did Philo then distort these traditional identifications and identify El with Kronos? Lipinski fails to offer a satisfactory answer. However, a suitable answer can be found if El is identified with Dagon as proposed by Joseph Fontenrose.¹³ Thus, if Dagon is El, both are identified with Kronos, and subsequently Dagon can be identified with Poseidon enforcing the association as Gods of the Deep.

Dagon and literature: HP Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos

Although mostly attributed with the biblical texts, Dagon makes a number of appearances in English literature through history, with references to the Philistine God ranging from the works of Milton (1608-1674)¹⁴ to Herbert Gorman's *The Place Called Dagon*.¹⁵ Other than in the Bible the most dramatic and influential depiction of Dagon can be found in the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft's literary reputation rests on a very small body of work, consisting of around sixty short stories that have been placed alongside the works of Edgar Allen Poe and Arthur Machen. These stories are interwoven with a complex body of ancient, monstrous mythology that Lovecraft manifested in his writings, composed of destructive deities from strange realms clambering to find egress to our world. These gods are collectively known as the Cthulhu mythos.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born on August 20, 1890, at his family home in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. Lovecraft was a precocious youth, reciting poetry at age two, reading by the age three, and writing stories by the age six or seven. His earliest enthusiasm was for the *Arabian Nights*, which he read by the age of five; it was at this time that he adapted the pseudonym of 'Abdul Alhazred,' who later became the author of the mythical *Necronomicon* in Lovecraft's published stories. From 1908 to 1913 Lovecraft was a virtual hermit, doing little save pursuing his astronomical interests and his poetry writing. It was in the amateur world of 'pulp' magazines that Lovecraft recommenced the writing of fiction, which he had abandoned in 1908. Friends, noting the promise shown in his early tales, urged Lovecraft to begin writing fiction once more and this he did. One of the first pieces produced was that of *Dagon*¹⁶ a story set in a strange nightmare landscape 'putrid with the carcasses of decaying fish'. *Dagon* was partly inspired by Lovecraft's dreams and openly describes his own plight in the dream: 'He pulls himself along in the detestable ooze, tenaciously though it clings to him. I know, for I dreamed that whole hideous crawl, and yet feel the ooze sucking me down!'.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Lovecraft also had a deep disgust of eating seafood.¹⁸ From the texts

of certain ancient writers it can be found that for religious reasons most of the Syrian peoples also abstained from eating fish, possibly in order to appease a fish deity.

Dagon again appears in a second story by Lovecraft called *Shadow Over Innsmouth*.¹⁹ In this tale Lovecraft envisioned a cult devoted to an ancient sea-god. The members of the Cult of Dagon interbreed with sea creatures resulting in an amphibian chimera born human in appearance but gradually become more fishlike over time, eventually retiring to the ocean fully formed.

It is interesting to compare these avatars of Dagon with an interpretation of the *Septuagint*. One of the arguments against the depiction of Dagon as a fish god is based upon the description in I Samuel 5.4 of the *Septuagint* LXX that describes Dagon with both arms and legs.²⁰ Fonterose¹³ interprets this depiction to mean Dagon's human members fell away and only his fish-body remained, thus revealing him for what he was, a fish. It appears that Lovecraft thought along these lines, but on a more eugenic fashion.

Kenneth Grant and the Cthulhu Mythos

Half a century after the Esoteric Order of Dagon was envisioned by Lovecraft in *Shadow over Innsmouth*, the Order materialised on the mundane plane as a working magical lodge composed of a small handful of initiates. The current incarnation of the Esoteric Order of Dagon began with the Announcement in 1982 of the imminent reification of the 'Aeon of Cthulhu Rising'. Formulated by a then unknown Oregon student of the Cthulhu Mythos, this formal Announcement was published in various occult journals worldwide initiating a chain of connections of devotees of the 'Lovecraftian Gnosis'.

A key figure of the Cthulhu mythos during this time of change was the occultist Kenneth Grant, Outer Head of the Order of the 'Typhonian O.T.O.'. The *Ordo Templi Orientis* (O.T.O.) is the name applied to an arcane tradition that, in the 18th century, appeared under the leadership of Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830) then known as the Order of the Illuminati.

In the late 19th century Karl Kellner an Austrian magical Adept gave to it a new impetus and the name by which it is now known, the *Ordo Templi Orientis*. In 1923 the English magician, Aleister Crowley, took the Order's leadership, becoming the third Grand Master. After his death in 1947 the affairs of the O.T.O. were conducted by its Treasurer, Karl Germer. In 1955, Kenneth Grant assumed leadership of the Order, dissolved its Masonic structure, although not the Order's Masonic affiliations, and realigned it with the Stellar Wisdom Tradition and it was therein known as the Typhonian O.T.O. He also initiated within the Order an independent cell, known as the New Isis Lodge, for the purpose of channelling extra-terrestrial transmissions. The Lodge operated between 1955 and 1962, during which period the Stellar Wisdom was fully aligned with the magical Current of Thelema (93) with which the Order had first been inspired under Crowley's leadership.

In a series of books known as the *Typhonian Trilogies* dating back to the 1970's, Kenneth Grant initially presented a series of affinities between the writings of H.P. Lovecraft with aspects of Crowley's Cult.²¹ Later on, Grant's writing provides qabalistic associations between deities of the Cthulhu mythos and the Tree of Life, although warning these correspondences are not absolute, and gives strange recollections of occult workings based upon the deities made manifest by Lovecraft, known as the Cthulhu mythos, with which the New Isis Lodge operated.

In the *Typhonian Trilogies* Dagon is associated with Neptune and the worship of which 'was a survival into historic times of the vastly ancient cult of the Deep Ones.' Furthermore it is suggested that the symbol of the Dragon of the Deep may have been introduced into ancient mythology by 'actual encounters on earth between amphibious extraterrestrials and primitive humanity'.²² Grant employs a qabalistic method known as gematria in his occult studies and many references to this are found in his work. Gematria is based on the relative numerical value of words with each letter having a numerical value. Words of identical numerical value are considered to be thus associated and explanatory of each other. Grant describes Dagon as the Chief Atlantean deity and uses gemantric methods to equate Dagon

qabalistically to the number 777. In this, Grant is using an alternative spelling of Dagon, דגון, as opposed to the more conventional form of דגון. Replacing ג with the more guttural ע presents a perfectly viable alternative and subsequently results in Dagon as 777 corresponding to עולם הקליפות, 'the World of the Qliphoth', a qabalistic term describing the regions of the Tree of Life that are inhabited by soulless entities known as the Adverse Tree.²³ Grant makes a further connection with Dagon as 777;

Aiwas, as 418 (AiFass), is the active form of Spirit. 359 (Shaitan) is half 718 (the number of the Stele of Revealing, and of Aossic-Aiwass). Shaitan-aiwass is therefore the formula of Pan, or All (i.e. AL), the Baphometic Goat of the Templars and the Cock of the Yezidi, as well as Shaitan-Aiwass and also the total number of the Paths and Power-Zones of the Tree of Life.²³

The Revival of the Cult of Dagon

By the mid-1980s, invitations to join the Esoteric Order of Dagon had been issued by the pseudonymous 'Randolph Carter',²⁴

to such individuals already privately working the Mythos, and the structure of the Order had begun to cohere into a network of semi-autonomous Lodges. Each of these Lodges operated under the control of its respective Lodgemaster or Lodgemistress (designated XIII*), all in turn under the central Directorship of Frater Zkauba XXIII*.²⁶

In 1987 the office of Director passed to Soror Azenath XXIII* when Zkauba entered into his 'Greater Magickal Retirement'²⁷ and a new phase in the evolution of the Order began. Soror Azenath made contact with a young Englishman deeply influenced by the *Typhonian Trilogies* of Mr Grant and engrossed in the iconography of the Cthulhu Mythos. It was to this man that the Directorship passed. Subsequently, the Grand R'lyeh

Lodge found a new home in the United Kingdom under the guidance of Frater Nephren-Ka XXIII*.

After five years, Frater Nephren-Ka entered into his Retirement. Having been unable to make the transmission of the XXIII* to a new Director, he took the decision to place the Order into a Period of Silence, of indefinite duration.²⁶

In 1997 an ex-Initiate of the Order of Dagon, known as Frater Bokrug, successfully petitioned the Yaddith Lodge for permission to open a new Lodge of the Order, thus ending the Period of Silence. In due course, Bokrug assumed the office of Director left vacant by Nephren-Ka, taking the name of Frater Eibon XXIII* and re-establishing the full Degree System and Lodge Structure of the Order on the Outer. Following the resignation of Frater Eibon, the Directorship was transferred, by the three members of the ruling Yaddith Lodge, to Frater Tutulu XXIII*. As a result, for a number of years now the E.O.D. has been affiliated with the Typhonian O.T.O. with some members active in both Orders although each has retained its own identity and programme of magical work.²⁸

Members of the EOD regard the imagination as a mental realm not restricted to the individual but essentially forming a boundless collective unconscious vaguely analogous to the *Amenta* of the Ancient Egyptians,²⁹ the Elysian Fields of the Greeks³⁰ and the *Mauve Zone* of Kenneth Grant,³¹

It is the work of our initiates to explore this realm of the cosmic Imagination, to forge their own connections with the forces and entities which lie beyond human awareness, and hence to incarnate strange children in the matrix of imagination. How they do this is conditioned by their inherent means of expression - writing, painting, carving, drawing, etc. The *Esoteric Order of Dagon* is a magical order, but recognises that magic covers a much wider field than might be immediately apparent. All creation is magical, in that it is the reification of an impulse, a primal dream.³⁶

This has opened a new chapter in the history of the Esoteric Order of Dagon, 'with a concerted commitment to the re-earthing of the current of magical creativity which had originally inspired Randolph Carter, two decades ago'.²⁶

Conclusion

The early history of the worship of Dagon remains shrouded in mystery. The etymology adopted by Philo Byblius is possibly due to a misapprehension of the name. The true origin of Dagon is open to question and a great weakness of the human mind is to 'reconstruct the whole dinosaur from a single bone'. However the majority of evidence points to a fish deity of the Deep. Yet along the Mediterranean shore a twofold conception and representation of Dagon was probably developed in the course of time.

In twentieth century Western occultism, Dagon along with other manifestations of ancient deities, clearly re-emerged as a direct result of the writings of H.P. Lovecraft and such leading occultists as Kenneth Grant. The subsequent manifestation of the Esoteric Order of Dagon is a testament to the survival and the powerful presence that an ancient Mesopotamian god has in contemporary society. The cult of Dagon has undergone what can only be described as punctuated evolution but the existence of the current manifestation means that Dagon will be extant for some time to come.

Notes

1. James Hastings, (Ed.) *A Dictionary of the Bible*, (Edinburgh:T. & T. Clarke, 1909, 1963).
2. For example *Beth-dagon* in Judah (Josh. 15:41 and 19:27).
3. Itamar Singer, Towards the Image of Dagon, the god of the Philistines Syria : *revue d'art oriental et d'archéologie*, 69 (1992) 431-450.
4. I K., v, 5
5. The ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek by the Jews. This translation was made in Alexandria by 70, or more accurately 72, Jewish scholars and subsequently derives its name, *Septuagint* (LXX).
6. H. Schmökel, *Der Gott Dagan* (Borna-Leipzig: Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1928)
7. Katharine Shepard, *The Fish-Tailed Monster in Greek and Etruscan Art* (New York, 1940).
8. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume IV, (New York, Gilmary Society, 1908).
9. Knut Holter 'Was Philistine Dagon a Fish-God? Some New questions and an old answer' *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 1 (1989) 142-147.
10. E. Laroche, in: *Ugaritica V*, Paris 1968, 523-525 as cited by Lipinski (see endnote 12).
11. J. Cantineau, 'Tadmorea, 31° : Un Poseidôn palmyrénien', in : *Syria* 19 (1938) 78-79, cited by Lipinski (12)
12. Edward Lipinski, The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos. *Bibliotheca-Orientalis* 40 (1983) 305-310.
13. J. Fontenrose, 'Dagon and El.' *Oriens*, 10 (1957) 277-279
14. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*.
15. Herbert Gorman, *The Place Called Dagon* (London, 1927).
16. *Dagon* was written in 1917 and published in the amateur journal *The Vagrant* for November 1919. The story was subsequently published in *Weird Tales* for October 1923.

17. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, 'In Defence of Dagon' (original 1921) from *Miscellaneous Writings* (Sauk City, Wisconsin, Arkham House, 1995).
18. Explanatory notes S.T. Joshi in *The Call of Cthulhu and other Weird Stories* (New York, Penguin, 1999).
19. Written in November and December of 1931. Published as a booklet in 1936 by the Visionary Press.
20. Schmökel, *Der Gott Dagon*
21. Kenneth Grant, *The Magical Revival* (London: Muller, 1972)
22. Kenneth Grant, *Nightside of Eden* (London: Muller, 1977), 52 (fn).
23. Kenneth Grant, *Hecate's Fountain* (London: Skoob, 1992) 250; *Outside the Circles of Time* (London: Muller, 1980) 177: THE STELE OF REVEALING WAS AN EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHIC TABLET THAT WAS EXTREMELY INFLUENTIAL IN THE WORK OF CROWLEY, AL IS CROWLEY'S BOOK OF THE LAW, AND AOSSIC IS THE MAGICAL TITLE OF KENNETH GRANT. THE MAGICAL FORMULA DISCUSSED IMPLIES THAT DAGON IS CLOSELY LINKED WITH, OR IS ANOTHER FACET OF, THE ENTITIES WHICH CROWLEY CONTACTED (Ed.)
24. Randolph Carter was one of Lovecraft's characters appearing in four tales by the writer. This character has been ascribed deconstructively as having an existence independent of the writer and 'for many years Randolph Carter patiently waited in the parallel world that men and women of this world can sometimes visit in dreams for someone to discover the clues to the Mythos that Lovecraft had unconsciously revealed in his stories.'²⁵
25. 'The Esoteric Order of Dagon – An Introduction Revised by Frater Nephren-Ka XXIII*' (Privately Published for Order members by 'The Miskatonic University Press', 1992).
26. Frater Tutulu XXIII* *The Esoteric Order of Dagon – Preliminary Statement* (Privately published for Order members by 'EOD Publishing', 2002). In order to present an unpersonalised representation of the Orders history, herein magical names will be employed to refer to lodge members of the EOD.
27. The 'Grand Magickal Retirement', indicated by XXXIII*, is 'a period whereby a Director attends to their own personal Work in solitude, and

await further transformations' - *The Esoteric Order of Dagon – An Introduction*

28. Frater Tutulu XXIII*, Personal communication.

29. *Amenta*, the place or land of the Egyptian god *Amen*, i.e. the Underworld.

30. *Elysium*, in Greek religion and mythology, the Otherworld for heroes favoured by the Gods. In later tradition and in *Virgil*, Elysium is a part of the Underworld and an abode for the righteous dead.

31. The Mauve Zone is first described by Kenneth Grant in *Hecate's Fountain* as highly charged dimensions existing between the realms of dreaming and dreamless sleep, and is analogous in the symbol of the 'Crimson Desert' of the Arabs.



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Shadow over Philistia: A review of the Cult of Dagon
SOURCE: J Acad Study Magic no1 2003

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.sasm.co.uk/journal.html>