

Blood Relics: Menstrual Roots of Miraculous Black Madonnas in Italy

by Mary Beth Moser

Throughout Italy, highly venerated images of the Virgin Mary portrayed with brown or black skin may be found. The traditions surrounding these dark statues, paintings and frescoes, which I have collectively termed Black Madonnas, are ancient. They are often the central image of honor in the cathedrals, caves, and mountain top shrines and sanctuaries where they are found, and are very often considered miraculous. In my thesis, *Honoring Darkness: Exploring the Power of Black Madonnas in Italy*, I studied the images, miracles and traditions of Black Madonnas for signs of power. While the striking imagery and living traditions are rich in ancient symbolism, in this article I will focus on the miracle stories, which are a clear manifestation of the power attributed to Black Madonnas. The miracles, in their elements of both creation and destruction, seem to hold relics of a more ancient and primordial power – the power of menstrual blood. In the following discussion, I will investigate some of the miracles and explore their details for markings of older, menstrual power.

A miracle is "an event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a divine or supernatural cause."¹ Miracles are a manifestation of the power of the divine.² In the Catholic tradition, they are equated to "special graces" that are extraordinary in character, and come from the Spirit.³

The miraculous is found in abundance in Italy. Testimonials come from the people themselves over the centuries through offerings, and from written accounts of legendary or authenticated miracles. At sanctuaries throughout Italy, there is visual testimony to the miraculous power of the Madonna in the form of *ex-voto*, Latin for "out of a vow." These are physical offerings that are given by the recipients of miracles in order to fulfill a vow of recognition or to give thanks. They are a public

¹ Random House College Dictionary

² Richard P McBrien. *Catholicism: Study Edition* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981). 328.

³ *Complete and Updated Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph number 2003. 539-540.

acknowledgement of the Madonna's intervention to protect, rescue, heal and cure.⁴ Most often they are in the form of *tavolette*, "little tablets" of cloth, metal or paper with a drawing or painting that depicts the details of the situation, usually desperate or catastrophic. Often they record the name of the recipient of the miracle and the date, and sometimes where the recipient is from, and a written account of the story. The words *Per Grazia Ricevuto*, "for grace received", or simply *PGR* may be inscribed as well. Floating above the scene will be a representation of the Madonna who bestowed the grace. The effect of seeing the sorrows and perils of everyday life throughout the ages is powerful.

In the region of Tuscany, for example, at the Sanctuary to the Madonna of Montenero, the hallways and rooms are lined with dramatic and moving *ex-voto*: children falling out of windows, men trampled by their horses, people sick in bed, accidents of every kind. There are war scenes to which have been attached pictures of beloved sons who were soldiers. One young woman made an *ex-voto* of the clothing she was forced to wear when she was captured and taken to a harem in Constantinople, according to the note in the frame, which also informs us that through the intercession of the Madonna of Montenero, she escaped. Sailors and sea-goers were particularly indebted to her as shown from centuries-old testimonials etched in stone or portrayed in large paintings.

Written records and archeological finds indicate that the offering of material objects to the divine is an ancient practice.⁵ Where there is now a church to the Black Madonna of Capo Colonna in the region of Calabria, for example, a major temple once stood to the Goddess Hera to whom treasures were given as *ex-voto*.⁶

⁴ Pope John Paul II, for example, donated the bullet that was fired into him in an attempt to kill him to Our Lady of Fatima in Lourdes, France, and his blood-soaked vestments to the Black Madonna of Czestochowa in Poland.

⁵ There are indications of *ex-voto* in the Hebrew world of the Old Testament, and they are abundant in the Roman period. A painted tablet addressed to the Goddess Isis says: "Now, oh goddess, help me [now]; of possible healing, indeed, the many painted tablets in your temple reassure me." Antonio and Filippo De Michele Troiano. *Ebbi Miracolo: Gli ex voto dipinti di S. Michele Arcangelo sul Gargano*, (Santuario S. Michele Arcangelo, Foggia: Edizioni Michael, Padri benedettini. 1992.) 15.

⁶ Federico Bianchi di Castelbianco. *Giubileo in Calabria, Santuari e processioni: percorsi perpetui*, (Roma: Edizioni Schientifiche Ma.Gi.srl, 1999). 22.

Although many *ex-voto* have been lost, destroyed or stolen, more than ten thousand still exist at Black Madonna Sanctuaries in Italy and give testimony to her power.⁷ The clear message is that these powerful Madonnas can be called upon in the hour of need. No request is beyond her capacity. She is present at the moment of danger to rescue those who would ask her for help.

Legendary/Historical Accounts of Miracles

In addition to *ex-voto*, both legendary and historical written accounts also testify to the miraculous power of Black Madonnas. The origins of a sanctuary usually involve an event, like an apparition or the finding of an image. A shrine is built that later grows to a sanctuary, as more miracles occur and people make pilgrimages to the site.⁸ The apparitions are sometimes well documented, with dates and names, having been explored at length by the church officials to determine their validity. Common themes emerge around the finding of an image: that it arrived by sea – either washed ashore or carried by the Madonna's volition - that it was found in a tree or a cave by a shepherd, a peasant, or by animals; or that it was located from information given in a dream.

Umberto Cordier has published an Italian-language guide to 600 such miraculous sites in Italy, recounting a brief summary of the church or sanctuary's central miracle. Although miracle stories of saints and other entities are included, Mary is the dominant miracle-worker.⁹ For example, in the region of Calabria, 21 out of the 25 miracles discussed are Marian-related. In Piedmont, of the 42 miraculous events listed, 22 involve a Madonna-related miracle. Four of those events involve a Black Madonna, and an additional 16 of them have one or more clues that would suggest to me further

⁷ Umberto Cordier. *Guida ai Luoghi Miracolosi d'Italia*. (Casale Monferrato (AL): Edizioni Piemme, 1999.) Cordier cites 600 *ex-voto* for the sanctuary at Oropa, which I have added to the numbers cited by Michael P Carroll. *Madonnas That Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy Since the Fifteenth Century*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992). 85.

⁸ A modern-day example of this is happening with Padre Pio who was canonized as a saint on June 16, 2002. The church in Puglia where he prayed and is buried has been enlarged into a sanctuary. It is so popular with pilgrims that already plans are underway for a significant expansion.

⁹ All of the miracles are categorized and cross-referenced by region, type and feast day. One category, Marian Apparitions, in which there are 66 entries, is exclusively Marian. The other Marian-related miracles are spread throughout the remaining categories. This is a rich source for further analysis.

investigation as a possible or likely Black Madonna (ancient origins, found in a tree, carved from or painted on wood, etc.)¹⁰ Although numbers convey some idea of her influence, the fascination and mystery come from the details of the stories.

Before moving on to the details, it is worth briefly addressing two questions that arise: first, why are there so many alleged miracles in Italy? Author and sociologist Michael Carroll has compiled some revealing statistics that show the Italian peninsula has been a particularly dangerous place to live relative to the rest of Europe, having been subjected to repeated invasions, deadly earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and successive waves of plague.¹¹ All of these could have encouraged people to turn to the supernatural for help and to then credit the supernatural for protection. After the events of September 11, 2001, for example, church attendance in the U.S. rose dramatically, signaling a similar phenomenon to turn to divine power for help and protection. Catholicism fosters a certain mode of recognition of miraculous events (e.g. *ex-voto* and Vatican investigations) and Italy has long been a mostly-Catholic country. Major pilgrimage sites of ancient origin are located in Italy and this probably contributed as well.

Secondly, why are miracles primarily attributed to Mary and saints, not to Jesus? The Madonna's prominence is reflected by the fact that 87% of the sanctuaries throughout Italy are dedicated to Mary.¹² Carroll draws on psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein to postulate that Mary, the saints and Christ represented parental surrogates to Italian Catholics whose power, although it was protective, was also considered harmful and needed to be psychologically splintered into several personalities to defend themselves against danger. The concept of Mary was separated into distinct personalities, and associated with distinct sanctuaries. The male saints became the "father image" surrogates rather than Christ because their physical bodies could more easily be dismembered into relics (physical remains that became a

¹⁰ All of these numbers are tabulated by me based on my translations.

¹¹ Carroll. 138-145

¹² Domenico Marcucci.. *Santuari Mariani d'Italia: storia, fede, arte*. (Milano: Edizioni Paoline, 1987.) 10. He cites a total of 1763 total sanctuaries, 1539 of them dedicated to Mary from data reported in 1982.

central element of veneration) since Christ's body was, according to dogma, raised into heaven.¹³

I propose an alternate explanation. My investigations along with the research of numerous scholars show a long history of honoring female divinity on the Italian peninsula that predates Jesus and perhaps any male deity. In addition to Greek and Roman goddesses, there were Asian, African and indigenous goddesses that were venerated. Archeological finds of figurines, painted pots and vases from Neolithic (New Stone Age) settlements and caves across the Italian peninsula indicate the presence of the sacred feminine; carved female figures reach back into the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age, for their origin.¹⁴ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, a feminist cultural historian who has written extensively about Black Madonnas, traces the ultimate origin of all dark mother images to Africa.¹⁵ She cites genetic, cultural and archeological evidence – namely the color ochre red and the pubic V, the earliest aniconic signs of the dark mother - to show that Italy lies along paths of African migrations 50,000 years ago to all continents of the earth.¹⁶ Such a long recognition of a divine female is not easily cast aside. Historical records show that pre-Christian goddesses were invoked for healing and protection, and were associated with miracles. As the Catholic Church became the dominant religion over the centuries in Italy, replacing the existing spiritual practices, Mary, as the only prominent female, was the natural heir. She became the primary embodiment of the most ancient female divine presence and traditions that have been honored there. The saints too, sometimes took on the characteristics of the primordial goddess.¹⁷

TYPES OF MIRACLES AND INDICATIONS OF MENSTRUAL POWER

¹³ Carroll. 145-155, specifically p.154

¹⁴ Marija Gimbutas. *The Language of the Goddess*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1989). 380. Index of Italian sites.

¹⁵ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. *dark mother. african origins and godmothers*. (New York: iUniverse, 2002). xxv.

¹⁶ Birnbaum. (2002). xxxiv - xxxv

¹⁷ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. *Black Madonnas: feminism, religion, and politics in Italy*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993). 45.

As I began to examine some of Mary's miracle stories I noticed that both benevolent and fierce powers were present: healing and harming; protection and lack of protection; calming the weather and raising it up; making trees sprout and bloom, and making them wither. The most powerful cure (restoring sight to a blind person, for example) could also be rendered as punishment (striking one blind) for a violation of a sacred effigy. The most powerful protection (preventing plague, drought, and famine) could be used as a threat (to not protect against plague) if the Madonna's wishes, communicated via an apparition, to have a chapel built to honor her were not followed. Generative power was indicated by the miracles of fertility, and resuscitating of dead babies. Birnbaum acknowledged this range of characteristics as well, noting that "the ferocity as well as the beneficence of the dark mother is recognized in most popular cultures."¹⁸

This power of both creation and destruction hearkens back to the power attributed to women's menstrual blood. Author and scholar Judy Grahn studied menstrual rituals around the world, both historical and mythological, to explore their link to modern culture. In her book *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* (Beacon Press, 1993) she writes that "for a multitude of peoples, menstrual blood was the primary life force, the generative principle."¹⁹ Grahn also cites a range of destructive menstrual powers: if blood was dropped on the path of someone who accidentally touched it, they could become infertile, or they could die; sexual activity during menstruation would harm the partner's genitals or person; the menstruant's gaze could cause a flood, or dry up ponds; her glance could wither plants and trees, cause crops to fail, make cows sicken and die; her touch could make weapons ineffective in the hunt, her speech could bring harm to her husband during the hunt.²⁰ Her ritual seclusion with strict taboos against seeing light, touching herself, letting her blood touch the earth, engaging in sexual activity, looking at someone or something with her powerful eyes, or speaking during menstruation, protected her dangerous power. Failure to keep these

¹⁸ Birnbaum. *dark mothers*. 131

¹⁹ Judy Grahn. *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). 6

²⁰ Grahn. (1993) 18

taboos could impact the health, fertility and life of the menstruant as well as that of her family and community; keeping the taboos could ensure prosperity.²¹ By prohibiting the menstruant from seeing light, and requiring her to remain silent, menstrual seclusion rites may have reenacted the very origins of human consciousness.²² Her menstrual powers associate her with the creation of human consciousness and thus hold all the creative and destructive powers.²³ Grahn calls her theory of the menstrual beginnings of human consciousness "metaformic theory," and uses the term "metaform" or "metaformic" to refer to cultural forms having menstruation or menstrual rites as their basis.²⁴

The following is a discussion of miracles associated with Black Madonnas including apparitions, appearances of images, healing, protection, fertility, punishment, and bleeding. For each type of miracle I will explore their possible menstrual roots (as indicated in the section heading), as well as other observations of the nature of their power.

Miraculous Apparitions of Mary: affecting weather; seclusion; untouched

Probably the most prominent miracles are apparitions of the Madonna. In these accounts, she appears to someone and requests or demands that sacred space (a chapel or church) be built to honor her. She is often very specific about where she wants it to be built. For example, according to a tradition still celebrated today, the Madonna caused snow to fall in August in Rome so she could outline where she wanted her church to be built. It was built and became the major Roman Basilica, known as *Santa Maria Maggiore* in which is venerated a powerful Black Madonna, *Madonna delle Neve*, Madonna of the Snows. Sometimes no request is necessary, as the vision alone is sufficient to cause a place of honor to be built at that location. Other times it takes several requests or an additional sign of power, to convince an uncooperative church official, or to aid a seer whose word is not believed.

²¹ Grahn. (1993) 18.

²² Grahn. (1993) 17.

²³ Grahn. (1993) 18.

²⁴ Grahn. (1993) 20.

Menstrual power is suggested by the Black Madonna's ability to make it snow: very broadly, the menstruating woman was believed to have control over the weather.²⁵ Such a miracle also indicates autonomous power. The Madonna is not leaving it up to chance or someone else's idea of where a church should be. She is in control of the situation. This self-authority seems to be the very essence of the symbol of the Virgin, someone who is not under the control of any man, someone who is independent. According to art historian Elinor Gadon, among others, this was the sense of the virgin Goddesses before Christianity imposed the idea of chastity on virginity.²⁶

The Madonna's instructions are consistently clear about the geographical location of sacred space, and often she has requested her church to be built on existing sacred space or a natural healing site. Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome for example is near the site where a temple to Juno Lucina once stood.²⁷ The Black Madonna of Canneto in Abruzzo National Park is located on the site of a temple to an Italic divinity, and sacred ground for at least two millennia.²⁸ At the Black Madonna Sanctuary of Oropa, there is an ancient fountain, with sacred waters and a rock believed to impart fertility.²⁹ The water and land of the earth itself become a medium for healing. Her power is the life force of the earth. Earth, divine power and healing are linked. Numinous power is within the earth, as it is within the body of sacred woman, and especially when she is in a numinous state.

The magnitude of the Madonna's power may be indicated by the location of her major sanctuaries, which are generally far away from where the people live, up steep hills, on bays, or in forests. Carroll noted that "the most powerful madonnas in Italy are almost always those whose images are kept in distant rural sanctuaries." He cites as an

²⁵ Grahn. (1993) 18.

²⁶ Elinor Gadon. *The Once and Future Goddess*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989). 191.

²⁷ Frances Berstein. *Classical Living: Reconnecting with the Rituals of Ancient Rome*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000). 60. The Goddess' specific association with the dark moon is a further indication of menstrual roots in this case, given strong associations of menstruation and its seclusions with the period of the dark moon.

²⁸ web site <http://www.Madonnadicanneto.it/history.html>

²⁹ Cordier. 25.

example the *Madonna dell'Impruneta* whose image is kept in a sanctuary outside the city of Florence, yet was repeatedly (seventy-one times between 1354 and 1540) brought into the city and carried in procession for protection of the city and its inhabitants during times of war, famine, drought, excessive rain, and plague.³⁰

My research in Italy verified this. Several of the Black Madonna sanctuaries I visited, excluding the urban cathedrals, were on a high hill or mountain top (for example, Montenero, Montevergine, Loreto, Oropa, Viggiano, and Tindari). More than once during my travels in Italy, I followed the brown road signs labeled "*Santuario*" to a remote location. These sanctuaries are clearly separated from the population, hard to find, and sometimes even hidden. As an example, finding the sanctuary of the Black Madonna Adonai involved traveling down dirt lanes and following hand-lettered road signs to a bluff above the sea and most definitely outside the town. It was much the same searching for the sanctuary of the Black Madonna of Viggiano. After driving for hours through the remote inner landscape of southern Italy, I still had to hike for an hour up a steep rocky trail to reach the mountain sanctuary, which came into view only at the very end. The remoteness of these sanctuaries, especially considering lack of modern transportation when they were built, cannot be overemphasized.

This "setting apart" (which is the literal meaning of the word sacred) of the most powerful sanctuaries is characteristic of the menstruant during seclusion.³¹ The power of the menstruant, of her gaze and of her blood, was so great she was kept secluded. These seclusion rites were celebrated around the world, and according to Grahn's theory, provided the basis for all human ritual.³²

Another frequent miracle is the appearance of an image of the Madonna on a wall, or in the form of a statue or painting. Often these images, like the apparitions of Mary herself, have very strong ideas about where they should be honored. The origin story of

³⁰ Carroll. 26. Although the painting of her appears white, the origin story says it was painted by St. Luke, indicating to me that she probably was at one time portrayed dark.

³¹ Grahn. (1993). 15.

³² Grahn. (1993) 15-17.

the Madonna of Montenero near Pisa, the now-whitened protector of Tuscany, says that a peasant found the icon, painted on wood. It became too heavy to move when it reached its desired location: the top of a hill, and quite an uphill distance from the legendary place of its finding. Like the Madonna apparitions, the images of the Madonna are quite clear about where sacred space should be built. They will control the weather, or defy the laws of gravity to be taken to the place they desire, often already sacred ground. According to the legendary arrival of the Black Madonna of Tindari, the ship that was carrying her image was forced to take anchor in the Bay of Tindari in a storm, and was not allowed to sail until her image was taken from the ship, where it was then carried to the former temple site of the Goddess Cybele.³³ Menstrual powers, as I said earlier, are indicated by the Madonna's control over the weather.

Traditions claim that some of the images of the Black Madonna are *acheropita*, untouched by human hands, which means heavenly forces created them. This narrative sends a strong message about "touch," which, drawing further on Grahn's metaformic theory could be an indicator of menstrual roots. Menstrual, and particularly menarche (first menstruation), rites around the world prohibited the menstruant from touching others or herself during menstrual seclusion.³⁴ The origin story of these "untouched" Black Madonna images suggest that they link back to pre-Christian menarche practices of hundreds of thousands of village women in Italy, practices brought from Africa in the earliest migrations.

Healing and Protection: affecting bodies of water, crops, natural disasters, and disease; procession

Healings are especially frequent miracles over the centuries, as discussed previously for *ex-voto*. Water from the river adjacent to the Black Madonna Sanctuary of Oropa has long been considered sacred. Obtained through an ancient, octagonal fountain

³³ Tornatore, Guiseppe. *Santuario di Tindari*, (brochure- no date printed – purchased in 1995). 5, 20. Giordano (p.82) and the church murals say it was a temple to the goddess Ceres.

³⁴ Judith Rae Grahn. *Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs? An Application of Metaformic Theory to Menarche Celebrations And Goddess Rituals of Kerala, South India*, (California Institute of Integral Studies, Ph.D. Dissertation, September, 1999). 328. Also, Grahn. (1993). 38

near the chapel where the Black Madonna statue is venerated, the water is said to be efficacious for a wide range of infirmities, especially mental disorders.³⁵ An ancient wooden statue of Santa Maria ad Martyres (now removed) was revered at San Giuliano Terme in Tuscany, where the water is considered wonder-working.³⁶ At Sacro Monte di Varese, a very ancient wooden statue of a Black Madonna, Santa Maria del Monte is venerated. The water that rises up there is considered "*taumaturgiche*," wonder-working.³⁷

Menstrual power also may be indicated by the Madonna's ability to affect water. For many ancestral peoples, the menstruant was believed to have the power to affect bodies of water as well as rain, and had to keep her powerful gaze from streams, lakes and ponds, lest they dry up.³⁸

Closely tied to healing is personal protection from danger or accidental death, as shown in the *ex-voto*. There is also a territorial or communal aspect of Black Madonnas' protective power over the most deadly and uncontrollable forces and events, such as plague, earthquake, famine and drought. Accounts tell of people fleeing to the *Madonna dell'Arco* sanctuary during volcanic eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius. The Black Madonna at Santa Maria Maggiore was invoked by the Pope to protect the city of Rome in the 6th century against the plague and again in the 19th century during the cholera epidemic. Her name testifies to her power: *Salus Populi Romani*, salvation of the Roman people.

The dark Madonna of Romania in the basilica in Tropea was carried in procession in the 17th century by the bishop, as she instructed him to do in a dream, to prevent damage from earthquake. A devoted parishioner in Tropea told me that this Madonna, who is described as *bruna*, brown, in the church literature, prevented bombs from exploding that were dropped near the church in World War II, thus sparing the life of his mother, who was praying inside.

³⁵ Carroll. 25-26

³⁶ Cordier. 183. The site has been desecrated and the statue moved.

³⁷ Cordier. 103. Tradition says the statue was brought there by St. Ambrosia after the Virgin appeared to him in a dream.

³⁸ Grahn. (1993) 18.

An important aspect of these communal protection miracles is that the image is "exposed", that is taken from its niche or tabernacle in the church and "processed," that is, carried in procession through the streets. Carroll found from his research that the images of patron saints are carried around to associate them with the space they are being asked to protect; sometimes this is just down the main streets to symbolically represent the whole town or city.³⁹ Similar processions with an image of the Madonna on her feast day are widely celebrated and well-attended today in Italy, and are a major focus of the festival. Processions and festivals both figured in celebrations of menarche; for example, in South India even into recent times when maidens of some communities were carried or walked in procession during menarche rituals attended by hundreds and even thousands of people.⁴⁰

Protection can apparently be transmitted via other materials. People used the oil from the *Madonna dell'Arco* sanctuary to anoint themselves during times of plague as a protecting unguent. The *Madonna L'Incoronata*, who tradition says appeared in an oak tree near Foggia to a shepherd in the year 1001; she blessed the shepherd's oil, leaving it prodigious. Oil was (and still is) distributed at the Sanctuary L'Incoronata for both healing and protection. Oil is a further correlation to some menstrual practices of South India, where sesame oil is used to bathe the head of the maiden and as a menarchal food.⁴¹

The ability to protect against the very forces of nature would suggest a strong affinity with nature. The idea of deity providing a "perimeter defense" has ancient precedent in Anatolia (modern day Turkey). Reliefs depicting the Phrygian Goddess Cybele, whose cult was brought to Rome in the 3rd century BC and earlier to the island of Sicily, were frequently placed on the boundaries of the city near gates.⁴² Grahn observes

³⁹ Carroll. 40-41. He is discussing saints, but this is true for the Madonna cult as well.

⁴⁰ Grahn. (1999). 191-192.

⁴¹ Grahn. (1999) 167.

⁴² Lynne E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1999). 52. The cult to Cybele (known as Kybele in Greek) was widespread throughout Asia.

that the concept of village goddesses as boundary protectors is practiced in contemporary villages in South India.⁴³

Menstrual powers included the ability to affect disease. If a menstruating woman glanced at cows, they could become sick and die.⁴⁴ The well-being of the whole community could be impacted by the failure of the menstruant to keep taboo, and conversely a community could be kept healthy by her strict adherence to rules of menstrual taboo.

Protection against disease seems to be a common power associated with Black Madonnas. It was never actually stated in the miracles I have reviewed that the Madonna causes the disease - only that she threatens to not protect against it. Carroll, however, concludes based on studies he has gathered, that to the Italian Catholics, the Madonna and the saints are perceived as the source of danger.⁴⁵ Perhaps, like the Goddess Kali of India, the Madonna is thought to embody the disease and is therefore able to fight against it.⁴⁶

Generative and life-giving miracles: affecting fertility, generation

In some miracles, the Black Madonna is attributed with the power to bestow fertility and even life. A dark boulder called *roch dla vita* in local dialect, "rock of life" at the site of the Sanctuary to the Black Madonna of Oropa has been used since antiquity for its fertility bestowing aspects. Known as a rock of fecundity, the original rites involved entering a split in the rock. When a chapel was later built that mostly covered the rock, women continued to rub against the part that was left exposed with their womb or genitals, a ritual still practiced today by some, although made more difficult by blocked access.⁴⁷ Local women in Monte Sant'Angelo refer to the Madonna of

Major archeological sites have been found in Italy as well. See maps at the frontispiece.

⁴³ Judy Grahn, Personal communication, July, 2005.

⁴⁴ Grahn. (1993). 18.

⁴⁵ Carroll. 138.

⁴⁶ The Indian Goddess Kali "is sometimes understood to take smallpox upon herself in order to protect her devotees." Grahn. (1999). 283.

⁴⁷ Cordier. 25. (miracle #10)

Constantinople (appearing dark in an older photograph, but now cleaned and appearing white) as the *Madonna del Parto*, Madonna of Childbirth.⁴⁸ Numerous *ex-voto* are on display at the Sanctuary of the *Madonna del Sangue*, the Madonna of Blood, to acknowledge the birth of babies.

Creative powers are indicated by these examples since without procreation and fertility, without generation of new life, there is no life. Like the Madonna, the menstruant, too, was believed to have the power to affect fertility. As mentioned previously, in at least one example from world rituals, a single drop of her blood on a path could render someone infertile if they stepped on it. And, if the maiden in seclusion broke taboo, she too could become infertile.⁴⁹ Menstrual blood itself was considered to be the generative principle.⁵⁰

The Madonna di Trava in Friuli was invoked by women to resurrect dead babies long enough to be baptized so they could go to heaven, according to an inquisitor's report from the 17th century.⁵¹ In the miracles, designated women, who had first presented themselves to the altar of the Madonna, acted as the receivers of the dead babies. They performed the baptism when the miraculous sign of life (tears, movement, breathing, passing of urine or saliva) was perceived. Both the public and local clergy believed in these resurrections,⁵² which indicate that the Madonna was thought to have powers of life and death, and also the capacity to work around and challenge the authority of the orthodox belief that only baptized persons could go to heaven. This was not an isolated practice as there were at least a dozen *santuari del respiro*, sanctuaries of the breath, in the region of Trentino-Alto Adige alone.⁵³

Punishing miracles: serious consequences (sickness, death) for violation of taboo

⁴⁸ During my visit in 2000, the priest said the stone statue had been cleaned for the Jubilee celebrations.

⁴⁹ Grahn. (1993). 18.

⁵⁰ Grahn. (1993). 6.

⁵¹ Carroll. 108. Her other name, Madonna del Carmine, suggests she may be portrayed as a Black Madonna.

⁵² Carroll. 108-109.

⁵³ Alberto Folgheraiter. *I Sentieri dell'Infinito*. (Trento: Curcu & Genovese, 1999). 296

In the following miracles, the sacred is violated and the Madonna then punishes the violators. Because these miracles are not often addressed and because the considerations are complex, I will spend relatively more time discussing them. Using the examples offered by Michael Carroll in his book *Madonnas that Maim* and others that I have translated from Italian sources, and to explore their possible links to menstruation, I have analyzed the details of particular miracles in which the Madonna punishes or threatens to punish with great force.

Table 1 - Punishing and Bleeding Madonnas (continued)

(shading indicates known or likely Black Madonna)

Number	Location	Church/Sanctuary/Basilica	Madonna's Name / Title	Source	ID# or Page	Detail of Miracle	Offense Against Madonna	Consequences to Offenders	Consequences to Madonna	Other Actions by Madonna	Repentance by Offender	Healing by Madonna
11	Monte rosso al Mare, Liguria	Santuario N.S. di Sovicore	Mad. di Sovicore	Cordier	81	Thief of jewels adorning Madonna struck blind by light then restored after apology	robbery attempt	blinded			re-pented, prayed publicly, confessed	sight returned
12	Eologna, Emilia Romagna	(not named in source)	Mad. dal Popolo	Carroll	p73	Soldier urinates on wall with image of Madonna	urination	blinded, suffered pain in offending parts			repented	healed
13	Tindari, Sicily	Santuario di Tindari	Mad. dal Tindari	local brochure		Woman came to thank Madonna for healing sick child, indignant when she saw Madonna was "Ethiopian"	cursed	child fell from cliff at that moment		soft beach appeared to soften fall	woman asked Mad. to save daughter	child saved
14	Eologna, Emilia Romagna	Santuario S. Maria del Baraccano	S. Maria del Baraccano	Cordier	196	1404, two soldiers struck mural of Madonna in rage with gun, image bled, cried and struck him dead, companion paralyzed	struck with gun	one killed, one paralyzed both hung on wall	bled, cried	left indelible sign of bodies on wall		
15	Palemo, Sicily	(not named in source)	Mad. della Villa	Carroll	p73	Game player wounds image, condemned, stone springs from wall for his hanging	hit	condemned, hanged	wounded	stone sprang from wall		
16	Sant' Anastasia (NA), Campania	Santuario Madonna dell'Arco	Mad. dell'Arco	Cordier	508 509	1450, game player hit lime tree that shaded the shrine. Bled, bled again spontaneously in 1639 for some days	cursed, struck with wood	hanged by judge	bled	lime tree on which man hung died		
17	Monte pulciano, Tuscany	Cattedrale di S. Maria Assunta	S. Maria Assunta	Cordier	268 269	1587, G. Battista, ball player hit mural after losing, image became bruised on right temple, still visible today. Struck by apoplexy, infirm for life	hit	struck with apoplexy, infirm for life	bruise on right temple			



Table 1, "Punishing and Bleeding Madonnas," summarizes the twenty cases I considered from regions across Italy. I have ordered them so that they could be grouped and analyzed according to similar events, which are:

- the Madonna's image is violated, the violator is harmed (#1-10)

- the Madonna's image is violated, the violator is harmed, the violator repents, the Madonna heals the violator (#11,12,13)
- the Madonna's image is violated, the violator is harmed, the image shows some sign of injury (bruising, bleeding, scarring) (#14,15,16,17)
- the Madonna appears, makes a request, is disobeyed, punishes or threatens to punish, is obeyed, gives protection (#18,19)
- the Madonna's image is violated, the image shows some sign of injury (bruising, bleeding, scarring) (#20)

I was unable to establish whether all twenty miracles are specifically attributed to Black Madonnas. However, in the following discussions I will focus on the miracles involving known or likely Black Madonnas, continuing to highlight elements that have menstrual content. There were several miracles in which there was an offense to the image and the punishment was given, without reconciliation:

(#1) *Santa Maria dell'Isola, Tropea*: On a spectacular cliff overlooking white sand beaches and turquoise blue waters is the small sanctuary of Santa Maria dell'Isola. The Marian statue supposedly arrived by ship during the time of the Iconoclast. The religious and civil authorities agreed to place it in a grotto in the rock, but the statue was too tall. They decided to have the feet sawed off to make it fit. At the first cut, the arm of the carpenter was paralyzed and the two authorities were struck dead.⁵⁴

(#2) *Madonna dell'Arco: Sant'Anastasia* (near Naples). A famous miracle took place in 1589. On Easter Monday, Aurelia del Prete accompanied her husband who was bringing an *ex-voto* to the Madonna dell'Arco for a cure he had received earlier. She had a pig along that she was going to sell. Angry when it got away, she grew even angrier when she later found it near her husband. She threw his *ex-voto* on the ground and continued to curse the image of the Madonna he had painted, in spite of those around her imploring her to stop. Exactly one year later, on the night before the *fiesta*, her feet detached from her legs. Colleagues and family attributed it to her earlier sacrilege. The feet were later displayed in the sanctuary.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Cordier. 362. (Miracle #567) I am assuming the statue was dark since it was carved of wood. When I visited there in July 2000, the central figure of worship was the Holy Family, Mary, Jesus and Joseph.

⁵⁵ Carroll. 72. Cordier. 321. (Miracle #510.) Also Birnbaum (1993) has an extensive discussion of this Madonna. 126-131. The feet were still on display when I visited in October 2003.

(#3) *Santa Maria delle Neve, Rome*: In the 9th century, a man came into the church in Santa Maria Maggiore with the intention to kill the pope during Mass. He was struck blind before he could commit the act.⁵⁶

(#4) *Madonna del Carmine, Sardegna*: In this story, some peasants decided to do threshing on the feast day (or holy day), which was considered taboo. The threshing floor collapsed, killing both the men and their horses.⁵⁷

According to Judy Grahn, certain taboos are menstrual-related,⁵⁸ the word taboo itself comes from the Polynesian *tapua*, meaning both menstruation and sacred.⁵⁹ In the first three examples of punishing miracles, the Madonna's image was violated in some way by "touch" or "word," each of which was also a strong taboo for the menstruant in worldwide practices; and therefore may indicate menstrual content in the Madonna's miracles. This theme continues in the next examples.

(#13) *Madonna del Tindari, Sicily*: The sanctuary of Tindari sits on a high bluff on the northern shore of Sicily. A woman from a far-away country had come to fulfill a vow to the Madonna of Tindari for saving her little girl's life. When the woman reached the sanctuary, after a long journey, she openly expressed her disillusionment upon seeing that the Madonna's face was black. The moment she expressed her irreverence, her little girl, who had wandered away from her mother, fell from a cliff. The woman called upon the Madonna to again save her child's life. But the miracle had already happened – the sea had withdrawn so the girl could fall on soft sand. The woman now believed in the divine powers of the Madonna she had mocked and the sea stayed at a distance permanently as a reminder of what had happened.⁶⁰

(#16) *Madonna dell'Arco: Sant'Anastasia* (near Naples) Some men were playing a game of *palla e maglio* (ball and stick, something like baseball) on April 6, 1450, the Monday after Easter. The ball of one of the players strikes the lime tree that shaded the *edicola*, or shrine, instead of where he wanted it to go. Angry, he throws his ball against the image. In one version of the story, the ball hits the cheek of the image, which begins to turn red and begins to bleed copiously. He tries

⁵⁶ Cordier. 266. (Miracle #415) The church, dedicated to Mary, houses one of the oldest Roman Black Madonnas, *Salus Populi Romani*, Salvation of the Roman People, also known as *S. Maria delle Neve*, Holy Mary of the Snows.

⁵⁷ Carroll. 74. Carroll cites this example but does not specify the city or region of Sardegna where it takes place. The statue of the Madonna del Carmine that I viewed in May 2004 in S. Agostino's church in Cagliari in Sardegna is portrayed as black.

⁵⁸ Course notes from Metaformic Theory, Summer Semester 1999, New College of California, Instructor: Dr. Judy Grahn

⁵⁹ Grahn. (1993) 5.

⁶⁰ Tornatore. 24.

to flee but can only go around and around the *edicola* without being able to leave. The Count happens to be passing by and after a proceeding, the man is hanged.⁶¹ In another version of the story, the Count frees the man thus saving him from the justice they were ready to impart.⁶² In another version the lime tree from which he is hung withers and dies that same day.⁶³ A little temple was built to protect the image.

In addition to blood, a strong menstrual indicator, other menstrual-related elements in the miracle of the *Madonna dell'Arco* include: the Madonna's image was kept in the shade of a lime tree, which was struck by a ball, and which later withered. The miracle specifically occurred on Monday, named after the moon, which is thoroughly associated with menstruation. Grahn has found that all of these elements have metaformic content, because the menstruant was required to stay in the shade and especially to keep her eyes shaded from the light during her seclusion; she was so filled with numinous power that her look could wither trees if she should accidentally gaze upon them when she was bleeding; and her blood itself was considered powerful. These details suggest the menstrual roots of the Madonna's miraculous power.

In the next miracle, there is only the threat of punishment (although Carroll perceives the touch by the Madonna as harmful.)⁶⁴ The seer, who complies with the Madonna's wishes, is touched and marked with the red imprint of the Madonna's fingers:

(#19) *Madonna del Monte Berico, Vicenza*: On March 7, 1426, the Virgin Mary appeared to a woman named Vicenza Pasini. Mary told her she would stop the plague currently raging in the area if a sanctuary was built to honor her. An exact location of the church and the altar location were marked by the Madonna. Eventually the church got built and the plague ceased. The Madonna touched the shoulder of the seer as she lifted off the ground, leaving five "bright" scarlet-red marks "in the shape of roses" on the shoulder of the woman.⁶⁵

The threatening message of the Madonna of Monte Berico of "do this or else" also has the tone of taboo suggesting menstrual content. All the punishing miracles seem to be

⁶¹ Carroll. 72.

⁶² See www.santuariarco.it

⁶³ Cordier. 321. (Miracles # 508, 509)

⁶⁴ Carroll. 75.

⁶⁵ Carroll. 75. Cordier. 186. Piercarlo Jorio, and Laura Borello. *Santuari Mariani dell'arco alpino italiano*. (Ivrea: Collana, 1993). 46. In a table of Black or Brown Madonnas.

sending the strongest of messages that the Madonna demands respect. She would levy justice even to those with official power (e.g. soldiers) who did not show respect. That justice was being called for is a message that supports Lucia Birnbaum's findings that justice and equality were pervasive values being conveyed by the Black Madonnas in Italy.⁶⁶ Birnbaum found that justice is still strongly reflected in the current politics of the areas of dark Madonna sanctuaries.⁶⁷ The stories also indicate that the people felt that the offenders deserved the punishment. They associated the violator's serious misfortune, even death, with the violation of the sacred.

Sometimes the versions of a story of a punishing miracle varied, with important details missing. Only one of several sources mentioned the punishment by the Madonna of Tindari, for example. Carroll also cites a case in which a modern account of a miracle leaves out the harmful details included in older accounts.⁶⁸ This leads me to wonder whether elements of other stories have been dropped over time. Considering the patterns in the body of above miracles, at one time there may have been a full cycle of the Madonna's anger, punishment, forgiveness and healing in more of them. Perhaps, like the alteration of the dark color of the images that other scholars and I have found,⁶⁹ elimination of the details of the stories is a kind of "emotional whitening," a gradual removal of the Madonna's "full" range of power, including those we might consider to be negative.

I must state that I never got a sense at any of the dozens of Black Madonna sanctuaries I visited that these most powerful Madonnas were feared. On the contrary they appeared to be greatly beloved. The fervor and devotion was palpable. I observed the utter closeness of the people to the Madonna. The Black Madonnas of Montevergine, Somma Vesuviana, and Napoli are all addressed as *Mamma*, a clearly familiar form of address. Songs and prayers use familiar (rather than formal) pronouns and indicate an endearing and close relationship. Chiseled in marble above the area where the painting of

⁶⁶ Birnbaum, (1993). 23, 30

⁶⁷ Birnbaum (1993). 126, 33.

⁶⁸ Carroll. 74-75.

⁶⁹ Mary Beth Moser. *Honoring Darkness: Exploring the Power of Black Madonnas in Italy*. (Vashon Island: Dea Madre Publishing, 2005). 47-48, 53.

the Black Madonna of Montevergine once hung are the words which translate “You Are Black And Beautiful, My Friend.”

The Black Madonna's devotees may feel reassurance from her ferocity, like the women in southern India who believe the fierce goddess Kali's power is there to protect them.⁷⁰ Perhaps the severe punishment that was attributed to the Madonna's power was a way for the women to ensure the rules were respected, that the sacred was preserved, and to emphasize that the great honor due the Madonna must never be violated. The Madonna's power in its nature seems to be like *shakti*, the active, intentional feminine principle of the goddess in India, which a girl at menarche is thought to embody.⁷¹

Images That Bleed, Bruise, Scar: menstrual marking, blood as primary life force

In this final category of miracles I considered, the images bleed if struck, and sometimes spontaneously bleed at later times. The *Madonna dell'Arco* (#15), discussed earlier, is an example of this. Another example, with no element of punishment, follows:

(#20) *Madonna del Sanguine, Re*: On April 29, 1494, Giovanni Zuccone was playing a game in the piazza. He lost and struck the image in anger. The wound on the image began to bleed and continued to shed blood until May 18th. Some drops of the prodigious blood were gathered and preserved as relics.⁷²

That Mary sheds blood is itself a clear indicator of a menstrual association, in the sense that “All blood is menstrual blood,” as Grahn wrote in the preface to her book *Blood, Bread, and Roses*; she means of course that menstrual rituals are the source of all ritual bloodshed.⁷³ Of primary importance is that this blood is prodigious, not slight, and another way for the Madonna to bestow her special healing and protective power. It sends the strong message that blood has healing power; that the blood from a woman's body is holy; and that blood was considered the source and symbol of life. It cannot be

⁷⁰ Grahn. (1999). 82.

⁷¹ Grahn. (1999) 83.

⁷² Cordier. 95. None of my sources name this as a Black Madonna. Of note is that the “Litany to the Black Madonna of Loreto” appears in the prayer book to her I purchased, a prayer that is commonly said to Black Madonnas in Italy.

⁷³ Grahn (1993). xvii.

emphasized enough that menstrual blood was widely considered to be the primary life force and the generative principle.⁷⁴

Much like the scars, tattoos and paint that menstruants used on their bodies to warn and teach men about their menstrual blood, perhaps the bleeding images could have served as an outward sign to warn that the sacred must not be violated.⁷⁵ If immediate punishment wasn't given or didn't suffice, a long-term reminder of the Madonna's potentially dangerous power could be given with her permanently marked image, or periodic bleeding. For example, images of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, miraculous and powerful protector of Poland, are always shown with cut marks on her right cheek, a reminder of an attack to the painting in 1430.⁷⁶ Bleeding, bruising and scarring seem to serve as a visual reminder that the Black Madonna retains ancient menstrual power. The bleeding, crying (either blood or tears) and "sweating" of images is a broad subject for further exploration, since it appears to be a verified, widespread, and ongoing phenomenon.

A summary of the correlation between the miraculous powers and attributes of Black Madonnas, and the worldwide menstrual powers and attributes identified by Grahn, is shown in Table 2, Comparison of Black Madonna Powers/Attributes and Menstrual Powers/Attributes.

Table 2 Comparison of Black Madonna Powers/Attributes and Menstrual Powers/Attributes

Black Madonna Powers/Attributes	Menstrual Powers/Attributes
Affects weather (makes it snow in August, makes seas swell or calm, makes rains start or stop)	Affects weather
Makes healing waters appear; bestows existing waters with healing properties	Affects streams, lakes, bodies of water
Sanctuary locations of the most powerful (non-urban) Madonnas are remote	Menstruant kept secluded due to her power

⁷⁴ Grahn *Blood Bread and Roses* 6

⁷⁵ See Grahn *Blood Bread and Roses* 75-78 for discussion of marking of skin.

⁷⁶ Pack, Robak, Tomzinski 9-10

Images carried in procession for protection and on feast days with wide-spread participation	Maiden carried in procession during menarche rituals attended by hundreds or thousands of people
Origins of some images say they are untouched by human hands	Taboos against touching self, others
Protects against or ends famine, drought	Affects crops
Protects against earthquake, natural disasters	Affects natural disasters (floods)
Affects disease (protecting and not protecting)	Affects disease in animals; affects sickness in self, humans
Protects (or threatens to not protect) entire community	Affects entire community with adherence to/ violation of taboo
Helps women become fertile; helps women in childbirth; restores life to babies	Affects fertility in self, others; menstrual blood considered the generative principle
Violation of sacred results in strong punishment of violator (paralysis, blindness, death)	Violation of taboos results in sickness or death to self, family and community
Withers fruit tree	Withers trees and plants by not staying in seclusion
Leaves red mark on human skin with her touch	Marks own skin with red substance to indicate menstruation
Images become scarred, bruised if struck	Scars, tattoos own skin for menstrual display, adornment or protection
Images bleed prodigious blood	Menstrual blood considered primary life force

While all of these powers are not exclusive to Black Madonnas – “white” Madonnas perform miracles as well and are attributed with some of these same powers - the most powerful and ancient Madonnas are often Black Madonnas.

Grahn established a correlation between menarche rituals and goddess rituals,⁷⁷ and between goddess attributes and phases of the moon.⁷⁸ This, in conjunction with my research that correlates menstrual rituals and Black Madonna miracles, suggests that the European Madonna is carrying (along with female saints) the enormous range of goddess characteristics collectively derived from no longer existent menarche rituals, which creates a tension between her full moon, light appearance and her dark moon, black appearance.

⁷⁷ Grahn. (1999). 275-276.

⁷⁸ Grahn. (1993). 7, 13-14.

Final Observations of Miraculous and Menstrual Power

I found a correlation between the miraculous powers and attributes of Black Madonnas of Italy, and the worldwide menstrual powers and attributes identified by Judy Grahn. The miraculous events attributed to Black Madonnas, as well as the remote locations of their sanctuaries, indicate an immense female power that must be respected. Not only do they call out for the sacred to be honored, but also in their menstrual content, they link back to the earliest sacred time of humanity.

The details of the miracles also indicate the Black Madonna's autonomy. She is not merely an intercessor to a higher power – she appears to be the source of miraculous power. She is the agent of her worship. Her willingness to challenge orthodoxy indicates a power that is older than that of the established church. The Black Madonna's power comes through nature – water, rocks, blood, and oil. She is immanent in physical matter. By shedding prodigious blood, she symbolically restores the sanctity of women's menstrual blood.

Taken as a whole, the patterns of the miracles I analyzed suggest a full range of power: one that includes the Madonna's anger and punishment of the violator, and her forgiveness and healing upon restitution - a full lunar cycle of "dread" dark moon power and "healing" full moon power, not unlike the powerful blood-related cycles in women's bodies.

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