



**SHE**

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GODDESS STUDIES**

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**S/HE**



**AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF GODDESS STUDIES**

Mission Statement: *S/HE: An International Journal of Goddess Studies* is a web-based, peer-reviewed international scholarly journal committed to the academic exploration, analysis and interpretation, from a range of disciplinary perspectives, of Goddesses and the Female Divine in all religions, traditions, and cultures, to be ancient, historical, or contemporary. The journal is a multi-disciplinary forum for the publication of feminist scholarship in Goddess Studies and for discussion, comparison, and dialogue among scholars of differing feminist perspectives.

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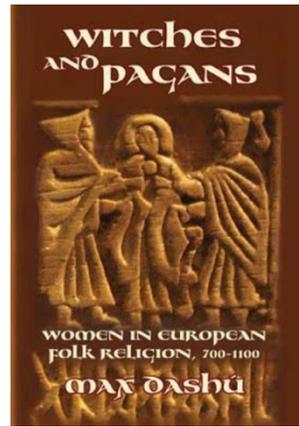
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## BOOK REVIEWS

Max Dashu, *Witches and Pagans:  
Women in European Folk Religion, 700-1100*  
(Richmond, CA: Valeda Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Carolyn Lee Boyd

Well into medieval times, women wielded spiritual power and authority across Europe as witches, diviners, healers, prophetesses, counselors, seeresses; and more. Everyday people prayed to and revered goddesses, while intertwining their lives with the faeries and other female spirits by propitiating them with gifts, asking for their blessings, and more. Over time, secular authorities aided by the church tried to destroy or assimilate the imagery, stories, beliefs, practices, and sacred places of holy women and goddesses, harshly punishing or killing women practitioners and their followers. Now, a millennium later, Max Dashu gathers up and reweaves the scattered and fragmented threads of women's spiritual culture found primarily in the beliefs and traditions of the "folk," past and present. These mostly rural people blended in their beliefs and practices the old religion and the new, reflecting, if sometimes imperfectly, the complexity and vibrancy of what had once been Europe's dominant faith.



In *Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion, 700 to 1100*, Dashu uses deep dives into the etymology of words associated with female spiritual power; myths, written history, literature, and court and church documents; archeological finds in graves, buildings, and elsewhere; and more to give back to us our lost history. The book is well-illustrated by the author's many drawings. As Dashu writes, "casting a wide net is the only way to get at the texture of culture, the weave of concepts people lived in,

and their social realities” (iii).

She offers us information previously available only to scholars and carefully explains not only what is known, but also what is unclear and debated among the experts, so readers can make up their own minds or at least know what is certain and what is still to be determined. All the voluminous information is carefully and comprehensively documented. Once readers have read through the book as a whole to gain an understanding of the breadth of women’s spiritual culture in Europe during this time, they will find the book an invaluable sourcebook to go back to time and time again for its detailed descriptions and analysis.

While this review can only touch on a fraction of the fascinating information contained in *Witches and Pagans*, a survey of the major themes can offer a taste of the book’s contents and importance. First, Dashu demonstrates both the ubiquity and interconnectedness of women’s spiritual authority in the Early Medieval period by exploring the web of words and meanings associated with the proto-Indo-European root “Wert.” “Wert” denotes a circular motion, which led to the idea of “being and becoming.” This, in turn, metamorphosed into a symphony of words in various Indo-European languages, like the English words “wyrd” or “weird,” “worthy,” and “worship.” Deeply connected to “Wert” and its descendants is the original concept of female divinity as a force of “being and becoming,” that often manifested in trinities of goddesses, such as the fate goddesses found throughout Europe, Central Asia, and Eurasia. The concept of fate eventually evolved into “fae” and similar words associated with enchantment, the supernatural, and “faery.” The exact Indo-European etymology of the words “wicce” and “witch” is unclear, but they may have come from and been related to words denoting “give rise to,” prophecy, divination, magic wands, movement and vitality, and spinning and weaving.

Etymologies related to words for witches, goddesses, and female spirit beings show the many layers and shades of meaning describing the realm of Medieval female spiritual authority. Dashu lists over 200 words from 43 languages ranging from Norse to Croatian to Welsh, Irish, and Scottish to Latin to Anglo-Saxon to Catalan and many more. These words reflect spheres of influence that include knower, wisewoman, prophetess, diviner, enchantress,

healer, old woman, doer/maker, shapeshifter, fateful women, spirits or ancestors, and various others. Dashu has made the “Names of the Witch” chapter open access,<sup>1</sup> where anyone may read the chapter in its entirety.

Having spread her linguistic net over all of Europe, Dashu then turns to individual regions where traces of the deepest roots can still be found in historical documents, myths, archeology and other sources. First are the Norse *völur* (singular is *völva*), “the best-documented tradition of female spiritual leadership in medieval Europe” (99). These prestigious and powerful women traveled to homes with an entourage of singers prophesying in ecstatic ceremonies known as *seidr*, provided food in famines, practiced weather magic, and shape-shifted, among other practices. Other Norse women were priestesses who oversaw sacrifices.

Yet, even in these explorations of specific areas, we find themes that wind their way throughout Europe. The *völur* and Norse goddesses like the Norns illustrate the cross-cultural importance of spinning and weaving to women’s spiritual culture. “Weaving was associated with wisdom, prophecy, poetry, and blessing in Indo-European cultures” (36) from Ireland to India and elsewhere. It was especially connected with both foreseeing and shaping fate and destiny. Distaffs, staffs used in spinning, became the staffs of power that accompanied these goddesses and have been found in the graves of numerous *völur* and other women with spiritual prestige and power.

Closely associated with fate and destiny were the divination practices found throughout the continent accomplished through interpretation of movement, direction, synchronicity, crystal balls, amulets, and the like. Runes were an alphabet that both spelled out and shaped fate as well as being associated with ancestors and ceremonies for the dead. They were also largely in the realm of female spiritual power across northern Europe. The underworld domain of the dead was also the home of faeries, elves and witches, all of which were sometimes interchangeable.

Dashu then moves to primordial goddesses, ancestral deities associated with the Earth and nature as well as the spirit realms. We begin in the northwest rim of Europe — Ireland and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.suppressedhistories.net/secretrethistory/namesofthewitch.html>.

Scotland, especially — where the late arrival of romanization and christianization ensured that the traditions of the Cailleach and other divine old women were better preserved than elsewhere in Europe. The Cailleach was “a primordial being who is both transcendent and immanent” (175), a goddess, witch and shapeshifter connected with the landscape, especially in winter, as well as animals, birds, plants, fish, trees, and spinning. Her legacy is found in place names, wells, passage graves, and megaliths. She was closely associated with cows which were aligned with brilliance, wisdom, illumination, and abundance, offered proverbs for a long life, and gave guidance on growing crops and other essential matters.

The Norse had their own Ancestral Mothers called the *disir* who did charms, held back invading warriors, and were linked to the supernatural, fates, land spirits, and ancestral women. Norse sagas “show that people visited them at mounds and cairns to appeal for advice, protection, and blessings” (206). Norse *Valkyries* wove the outcome of battles and were associated with goddesses, *disir*, and witches. Later they were subordinated to the god Odin and punished by him, appearing in sagas as “losing themselves in their warrior lovers” (209). Giantesses like Jord, the Earth Goddess, and the Underworld goddess Hel, among others, were powerful goddesses in Scandinavia, “primeval powers of Nature” (212).

Finally, we come to the tradition of witches and goddesses who fly by night, like Hera, Holde, Berthe, Perchta, and others who practiced shape-shifting, divination, and the magical arts. Often they were visualized as spinning crones. Holde, in particular, was known as benevolent, “Mother of All Life” and “The Great Healer” (256-7), the “giver of plenty and of children” (257). The priests and secular authorities, familiar with classical culture, often referred to witches riding with Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon and night.

Finally, with the traditions of the flying witches, we come to the centuries when the tightly interlocked secular and church authorities began to repress the old traditions practiced by the mostly rural “heathens” and “pagans.” Punishments for either practicing or seeking divination and other magical acts more often included penances, fasts, and exile in this period. Women were especially suspect and questioned by priests, bishops, and others using guidebooks published by the church. At this time, the church’s

position was that women who believed they flew with the goddess and witches were delusional, though later it would become doctrine that such activities were real. There was also much fear of women causing impotence or eroding male authority. As priests began to write about these practices to condemn them, they misunderstood or distorted them and “the shape of popular culture was altered and overwritten. The names of goddesses changed and the stories began to drift” (265).

While we are not yet in the period of the massive witch hunts, Dashu documents early witch burnings that occurred in Spain, France, north Italy, and Britain. Punishments for witchcraft in this period were usually flogging, enslavement, and fines, but also included execution by burning at the stake or drowning. Women were especially charged with witchcraft in times of natural disasters, crop failures, famine, popular revolt, and other catastrophes. Closely associated with persecution for witchcraft were charges of adultery, especially among aristocratic women, who underwent torturous ordeals and executions, and concerns about women’s sexual independence. Persecution of witches was also closely aligned with repression of peasants as feudalism became the dominant social and economic system.

But the persecutors do not get the last word in the book. That is given to the *Völuspá*, the “most venerable poem in the Icelandic Edda” (295), written at the end of the Early Medieval period. It is a “recitation of cosmogony, sacred history” (295), by an unnamed *völva* who speaks of “nine worlds and nine giantesses who are the essence of the Tree of Life” (295). The *völva* then describes the virtually all-male creation story of the cosmos, the Norns, the dwarves, and finally humans, and the battle between the warlike Aesir and the more peaceful Vanir, two groups of deities. The world’s first war began, according to the *völva*, when the Aesir attacked the Vanir goddess Gullveig, killing her three times. Each time she regenerated. She later became the witch Heidr who seduced the people away from the worship of the Aesir. The *Völuspá* ends with the *völva* challenging Odin who has come to her for prophecy, saying he does not understand this sacred act. The *Völuspá* “framework is of women’s prophecy sought by men and gods alike. Those ceremonies were spaces shaped by women, defined by women, who gave voice to the Divine. They influenced and guided

the communities to whom they chanted prophecies. Their oracular power shaped reality, even though they were not immune to the constraints of a patriarchal warrior society. Modern society vaunts the advances made by women, but has no comparable sphere of women's power" (327).

According to her website, [www.suppressedhistories.net](http://www.suppressedhistories.net), "Dashu is internationally known for her expertise on ancient female iconography in world archaeology; female spheres of power and matricultures; patriarchies and allied systems of domination; medicine women, female shamans, witches, and witch hunts. Her work is followed by almost 207,000 people on Facebook and remains in the top 1% on Academia.edu." She brings to her scholarship a passion for accuracy and comprehensiveness and an ability to bring the lives of women far in the past to life. Because of the comprehensiveness of her archives gathered over more than 50 years, she is able to describe the fuller context of symbols, practices, and beliefs that other authors may gloss over. Her archives include more than 50,000 images which Dashu has used to create over 150 visual presentations, "articles, photo essays, books, and videos fleshing out the cultural heritages that have been hidden from us." For \$25 a month, readers can subscribe to her annual ongoing course, including access to a monthly visual or audio presentation as well as scores of articles, photos, videos, audio files, and much more. Visit <https://suppressed-histories.teachable.com/courses> to sign up for the ongoing 2023 course, *Finding the Women*, which is scheduled to begin in March, 2023, or to view single lectures.

*Witches and Pagans* is the first to be published of a series of 16 volumes, some volumes including two books, titled "The Secret History of the Witches." The breadth of the series will allow Dashu to, in her own words on the back cover of the book, "reweave the ripped webs of women's culture" in a comprehensive way not possible with scholarship portioned out into individual books, articles, and lectures. When all books are available, the series will begin with the "Elder-Kindreds and Indo-Europeans" and end centuries later with "Legacies and Resurgences." She chose to publish Volume VII first as it is "the tipping point of the early Middle Ages, when the war on heathen culture was in full cry" (i).

Later this year Dashu will publish Volume II which will be two books. The first book will be *Pythias, Melissa and Titanides*:

*Women in Hellenic Mythography* and include chapters on Titanides (female Titans, pre-Olympian goddesses), Arkhaika (Mycenaean [Trojan War] to Archaic era), Goddesses Revised (changes wrought on original forms), Mythic Conquests (rape culture in Western Civ 1.0), and Pythias /Oracular Women (seeresses in their sanctuaries). The second, titled *Priestesses, Amazons, and Witches: Women's Power in Greek Patriarchy*, features chapters on Patriarkhia, Priestesses, Barbarai: Foreign Others, Amazones Antianeirai, Maenads, Dionysiacs, and Orphics, Philosophers, Poets, Bold Women, and Pharmakides: Healers and Witches. You can find more information on the series as well as excerpts at <https://www.suppressedhistories.net/secretrethistory/secretrethistory.html>.

I have known Max Dashu for about 20 years, have attended many presentations and read numerous articles, and am a subscriber to her ongoing course. I am always amazed at both the new data she is able to uncover as well as her ability to see universalities and trends in women's culture worldwide and across historical eras that others miss. Through the totality of her five decades of work, she reminds us that "only by regathering those broken strands together can we envision what the cultural web might have looked like and bring women back into focus. In revindicating the reviled and forbidden heritages, we begin to grasp what Europe had in common with other world cultures, whether that was ancestor reverence or sacral sweat-houses, sacred staffs or chanting over herbs" (329). As she writes, "In spite of everything we've been taught about the profoundly secondary status of the female, what women did in the spiritual realm mattered" (330). *Witches and Pagans* is an essential guidebook for contemporary women to re-enter that cultural web with its wellsprings of wisdom, insight, dignity, and justice both we and our world so need now.

## CONTRIBUTORS

### **Mary Ann Beavis**

Dr. Beavis is Professor Emerita of Religion and Culture, St. Thomas More College, the University of Saskatchewan. She is the author of several books and many articles in the areas of feminist biblical interpretation, parable studies, goddess studies, and religion and popular culture. Her most recent publications attempt to reconstruct the experience of enslaved persons in early Christianity. She is the co-author of the Wisdom Commentaries on Hebrews and 2 Thessalonians.

### **Helen Benigni**

Helen Benigni (Ph.D. Indiana University of Pennsylvania) is a published author and a Full Professor in English at Davis and Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia. For several decades, Helen has been teaching classes in Comparative Mythology with an emphasis on Goddess studies. Her books, *The Myth of the Year* (University Press of America, 2003), *The Goddess and the Bull* (University Press of America, 2007), and *The Mythology of Venus* (University Press of America, 2013) incorporate the research findings of archeoastronomers to determine the myths associated with the cycles found on the ancient calendars of the Greeks and the Celts. Identifying the goddesses of the matri-local cultures of the ancients with the seasons represented by the lunar, solar and stellar bodies has been a major endeavor in the study of archetypes, with an emphasis on the feminine archetypes of the celestial realms. Helen's research with the Hellenic Studies Center in Washington D.C., her many trips to ancient sites, and her collaborative efforts with scholars in mythology, astronomy, archeology, and art have led to her discovery of the presence of the Goddess in the night sky and the continued renewal of the Goddess in contemporary times.

### **Carolyn Lee Boyd**

Carolyn Lee Boyd's essays, short stories, memoirs, reviews, and poetry have been published in a variety of print magazines, internet

sites, and book anthologies. Her writing explores goddess-centered spirituality in everyday life and how we can all better live in local and global community. In fact, she is currently writing a book on what ancient and contemporary cultures have to tell us about living in community in the 21st century. She would love for you to visit her at her website, [www.goddessinateapot.com](http://www.goddessinateapot.com), where you can find her writings and music and some of her free e-books to download.

### **Lilian Broca**

Lilian Broca, BFA, Concordia U., Montreal, MFA Pratt Institute, NY, taught studio art at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Her work was featured in over 70 exhibitions worldwide. Among many distinctions, Broca was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle in 2001, collaborated on the book *A Song of Lilith* with esteemed Canadian author Joy Kogawa in 2000, and was the recipient of the Lorenzo il Magnifico Gold Medal at the 2003 Florence Biennale. Broca's art works were awarded First Prize in International Mosaic Exhibitions in San Francisco, Chicago and San Diego. The book *The Hidden and the Revealed: The Queen Esther Mosaics of Lilian Broca*, (Gefen Publishing House, NY, Jerusalem), was launched in 2011. The book *Heroine of a Thousand Pieces: the Judith Mosaics of Lilian Broca* was published in 2015. Two award winning documentaries on the artist are: *Return to Byzantium: The Art and Life of Lilian Broca*, 2012 and *Mary Magdalene in Conversation with Lilian Broca*, 2022.

### **Susan Hawthorne**

Susan Hawthorne, Ph.D. has been researching and writing about prehistory and ancient history since the 1970s. She is a radical lesbian feminist poet, novelist, theorist and co-founder, with Renate Klein, of Spinifex Press. She is the author/editor of 29 books of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. They include her novels *The Falling Woman* (1992) and *Dark Matters* (2017). Her poetry books include *The Sacking of the Muses* (2019), *Lupa and Lamb* (2014), *Cow* (2011) and *The Butterfly Effect* (2005). *Cow* (2011) was a finalist for the Audre Lorde Lesbian Poetry Prize (USA) and the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary

Awards. In 2017 she was winner of the Penguin Random House Best Achievement in Writing in the Inspire Awards for her work increasing people's awareness of disability. She is Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities at James Cook University Townsville.

### **Helen Hye-Sook Hwang**

Dr. Hwang is the researcher, writer, publisher, and advocate of Magoist Cetaceanism, the matriversal consciousness of cetacean veneration embodied in the socio-historical-cultural expressions of traditional Korea and beyond. After earning her MA and Ph.D. in Religion with emphasis on Feminist Studies from Claremont Graduate University, CA., she pursued M.A. degree at UCLA, CA. She, with Mary Ann Beavis, co-founded *S/HE: An International Journal of Goddess Studies*. Hwang's authored and co-edited books include *Goddesses in Myth, History and Culture*, *Mago Almanac*, *The Mago Way*, *She Rises* trilogy, *Celebrating Seasons of the Goddess*, *She Summons Volume 1*, *The Budoji Workbook*, and *Return to Mago E-Magazine*.

### **Louis Lagana**

Prof. Louis Laganà is an Associate Professor of Art and currently, he lectures part-time on *The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* at Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta. He also lectured extensively on *Psychology and the Arts*, *Psychoanalysis and Art* at the Psychology Department and on the *History of Image Making* at the Digital Arts Department, University of Malta. Prof. Laganà is also an art historian, art critic, curator and practicing artist. He specializes in Modern and Contemporary Art History, Primitivism, Prehistoric Art and Jungian Aesthetics. He contributed many articles in learned journals and newspapers.

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**LaChelle Schilling** received her Ph.D. in the Women's Studies and Religion program from Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California and currently is a professor of English at Pikes Peak Community College in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Her publications include co-authored journal articles and book chapters, including “Finding our Agency and Awareness in the Seeds of Life” in *She Rises* (2019) and “The Cosmic Dance of Kali and the Black Hole” in *South Asian Studies: Bridging Cultures* (2020).

**Deepak Shimkhada** received his Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California and currently teaches at Chaffey College as an adjunct professor of Asian art after having retired from Claremont McKenna College in 2011. He is the author of many journal articles and several book chapters. His edited volumes include *Nepal, a Shangri-La? Narratives of Culture, Contact and Memory* (2022); *Nepal: Historical Study of Hindu Kingdom* (2022); *South Asian Studies: Bridging Cultures* (2020); *Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity* (2012); *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess: Goddess Traditions of Asia* (2008); and *Himalayas at the Crossroad: Portrait of a Changing World* (1987). He is president of Indic Foundation. For his full bio please visit [www.deepakshimkhada.com](http://www.deepakshimkhada.com) or [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deepak\\_Shimkhada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deepak_Shimkhada)

### **Lisa R. Skura**

Dr. Lisa R. Skura is an artist and mythologist who earned her Doctor of Philosophy in Mythology with emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute, in Carpinteria, California. Lisa also has a Bachelor of Science in Design from Buffalo State University, in Buffalo, New York. Dr. Skura is a spinner and weaver of both textile and text as well as a tarot scholar and creator, an empathic energy healer with a deep connection to crystals, and a voracious reader and collector of books. Dr. Skura believes bridges of love are essential to the healing of humanity and the world.

### **Francesca Tronetti**

Dr. Francesca Tronetti is the Refugee School Impact Grant Coordinator at the Erie Multicultural Community Resource Center, where she runs an ESL program for refugee children in middle and high school. She is also an adjunct at Cherry Hill Seminary. She writes articles on ancient Goddess cultures and contemporary

American Paganism for Return to Mago online magazine. She is interested in American Folk Magic Traditions of Appalachia and the Pennsylvania Dutch and developed a course on the subject. A published poet, author, and fiber artist, she hosts a weekly community radio program on green living and self-care. She lives in Northwestern Pennsylvania and studies American mythological creatures and legends.

**Anna Tzanova**

For over 30 years, Anna has been a dedicated student of world spiritual traditions, as well as ancient and contemporary healing modalities. She has worked with individuals and groups teaching yoga, meditation and Art in Healing classes; leading support groups, as well as facilitating variety of wellness workshops in hospitals, studios, private and corporate settings. Anna practices and embodies what she continues to learn. She is an artist, researcher, nutritional consultant, activity therapist, intuitive energy healer and a mother. After 33 years living in North America, she has returned to her roots, residing now in Bulgaria.

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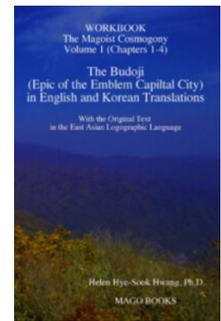
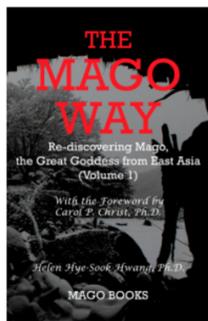
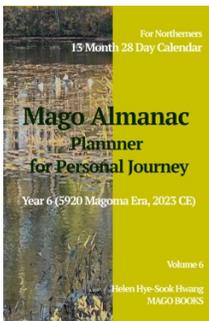
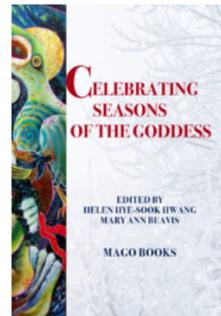
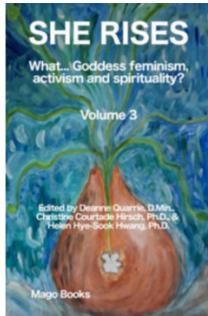
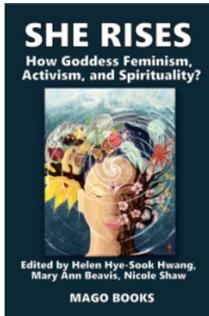
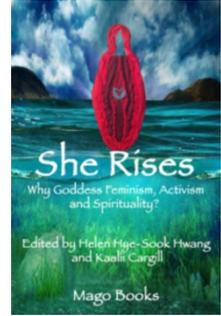
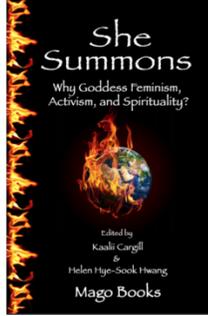
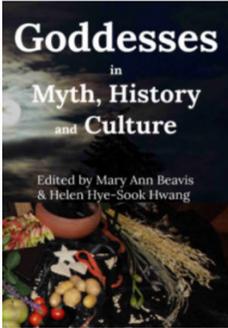
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*S/HE: An International Journal of Goddess Studies* is a web-based open-access double blind peer reviewed international scholarly journal published by Mago Books. The journal is committed to the academic exploration, analysis, and interpretation of Goddesses and the Female Divine from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Papers are welcomed on Goddesses and the Female Divine from all religions, traditions, and cultures, ancient, historical, or contemporary. *S/HE* is accepting reviews of scholarly books in the field of Goddess Studies (click here: “Submissions“ for submission details). The journal is a forum for the publication of feminist scholarship in Goddess Studies and for discussion, comparison and dialogue among scholars of differing feminist perspectives.

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