

# Jake Stratton-Kent's Pagan Legacy

By Kadmus



**J**ake Stratton-Kent died on January 17th, 2023. The world of the living has grown more desolate even as the ranks of the Mighty Dead have received a new member—a master magician, scholar, queer, working-class anti-fascist anarcho-punk rebel. I have been heartbroken. Jake was a hero and a personal inspiration.

For those who did not know of his work previously, Jake Stratton-Kent was a major figure in the world of the occult: especially when it comes to the practice of magic based on the grimoires. Memorials, obituaries, and dedications have been made to him and more will undoubtedly come. Many people knew him better than myself—I only met him in-person once, though we corresponded both publicly and privately frequently throughout the years.

No doubt there will be much discussion of his extensive and diverse contributions to occultism generally, from his years of innovative work within Thelema, to his reconstruction of the *True Grimoire* or *Grimorium Verum* and role in the grimoire revival, and well beyond.

His achievements are too numerous and diverse for me to discuss them all, or even most of them. And yet, the greatest honor one can show the memory of a thinker is to dwell with his thought. For this reason, I will content myself with stressing those aspects of his work which most inspired me, which are most important for the pagan or polytheist communities, and which are frequently at great risk of being overlooked amidst his monumental achievements. It strikes me that some of the challenges and enigmas that seemed to most interest Jake are least attended to by the occult world in general, and are most important for the pagan one. These topics represent a call to action, a project left unfinished through no fault of Jake's own, and a promise. They are an inheritance, valuable and demanding, that requires spotlighting.

In 2015 I was the first person to publish a review of Jake's full three volume, five book, opus *The Encyclopedia Goetica*. In that review I claimed that,

“Stratton-Kent's general argument is the following: The grimoires represent a survival of primarily ancient pagan occult and religious practices over which a thin veneer of Qabalah and Christianity has been added. This veneer, including its talk of demons and angels, can be stripped away to uncover the true pagan occult tradition beneath the surface of the texts. This reveals that the grimoire revival, at least as far as it appears in Stratton-Kent, is at the same time a great pagan revival which recognizes pagan religious practices at the very heart of all of Europe's occult tradition and history.”

I received some pushback for this characterization from other grimoire magicians, some of whom have suggested that if an individual has serious issues with Christianity or Catholicism, then they probably aren't suited for magical work derived from the grimoires: most of them take the Christian context as their assumed and default foundation and context. It was against this assumption, however, that Jake largely fought. Of course, I am frequently enough guilty of overstating those elements of a larger argument which most excite me, and under-stressing elements I find incorrect or uninteresting. But, when considering my claim that Jake provided the basis for making paganism the very heart of the recent occult and grimoire revivals, we need look no further than Jake's own description of his work in the 2016 article, “Grimoires for Pagans”:

“Unlike a lot of ceremonial magicians who employ the grimoires, ‘I don't do Angels’. I also don't employ conjurations rehearsing the exploits of Moses and the other leaders of Israel, be they Kings or Prophets, which they accomplished through this, that or the other name of their god. I also don't threaten spirits with knives, while hoping the names of the god of love will protect me, as I prefer to be a little more consistent, not to mention a good deal more sincere, in my combination of magic with religion. I am, for want of a better word, a pagan.”

We should be careful not to misread this. Jake was openly critical of unhistorical attempts at pagan reconstructionism, which can amount to little more than concealed

modern monotheism with different god-names plugged into a monotheistic metaphysics. Relatedly, he was also concerned that the gods and practices that have been best preserved, and which contemporary attempts at reconstruction frequently latch onto, were often those that had been divinities and practices of oppressive and imperialistic states.

It was important, Jake suggested, to attempt to uncover what the religion and practices that predate large state domination looked like—what the religion of small homes and communities, and the practices of free individuals, looked like. In magical grimoire practice, Jake understood himself to be engaging in the type of ceremony out of which relationships with personal household spirits and gods, as well as local cults, developed. In all this, he was far from uncritical of the pagan and polytheist community which can, at times, drift into the terrain of role-playing a past which never existed.

Jake's interest in reinvigorating local, even personal, household spirit cults connected his work with the spirits of grimoires such as the *Grimorium Verum* with a study of practices relating to the Lares, Manes, and Penates—various family and household spirits found in Roman traditions—as well as the snake-like *Agathos Daimon* of the Greek and Hellenistic cultures. When one develops a relationship with the various spirits found in the spirit catalogues of the grimoires, it can be understood as a parallel activity to developing a household cult and collection of local personal spirit allies. This, for Jake, was the living heart of paganism—the intimate and personal ritual practices of an ongoing social relationship with living and often quirky spirits. No two household cults would be the same, as no two households are the same.



Jake Stratton-Kent

Part of the reason that key elements of Jake's work have been, in my opinion, under-appreciated is because Jake had serious philosophical and theological concerns in his work which often went overlooked by more practical-minded occult practitioners. These concerns, however, are important ones for the pagan and polytheist communities. Indeed, Jake and myself were working on similar arguments against the dominance of Platonic metaphysical views at similar times: he tended to aim his attacks on the often unthinking adoption of Platonism in magical practice, while I largely focused on it within polytheistic religious revival.

# The Problem of Transcendence

One way to approach this topic is to state that the problem with the dominance of an unthinking Platonism in occultism and religion is its assumption of transcendence. Transcendence is the idea that something—God, Truth, the Good, the Otherworld, Reality etc.—transcends this world, and that our goal here is to achieve similar transcendence. Whatever transcends in this way is understood to be other than everything we commonly know, setting up a nasty tangle of problematic dualisms: finite vs. infinite, material vs. immaterial, changing vs. unchanging, imperfect vs. perfect, visible vs. invisible and so on. In the tradition of negative theology (which, in a certain sense, Plato can be said to have invented or at least systematically developed), what transcends this world cannot be positively described: it is only able to be captured through the negation of what we know. It isn't material, isn't temporal, isn't like us, and so on.

One of the first concerns here is that this is a rather world- and life-denying approach, one that only draws near to the divine to the extent that it negates everything we know as real and living. This is one reason why Plato had Socrates describe the body as a prison and life as an illness in the *Phaedo*. It also finds some of its many expressions in the common Christian identification of the body, nature, and life as fallen and sinful, or the Gnostic assertion that the material universe is a vast mistake, prison, trap, or illusion. It can be a grim perspective, devoid of a true love of life and the world, and deprived of the sheer joy to be derived from existence and the beauty of existence itself. Amongst the many concerns one might have with this type of metaphysics, not least of them might be that it is socially disempowering and politically pacifying: the world, we are led to believe, is by nature and necessity a slaughterhouse and horror-show, and we should seek to reject it and escape rather than rebel against the forces of injustice and improve it.

The moment Platonism, in the ancient world, began to become popular enough to take the place of some traditional pagan religious views, it ran into serious tensions and demands that began to find expression in inconsistencies. A perfect transcendent thing (call it God if you like) cannot change, cannot listen to or answer prayers, cannot care about or love its worshipers, indeed cannot desire worship or command certain behaviors versus others and so on. To “want” or “command” implies lack, desire, incompleteness and thus imperfection. As I often put it to my students, a transcendent God doesn't do any of the things that most people want their god or gods to do. Transcendence also tends to default to a monotheistic metaphysical position, the True and Good are One, while the fallen or changing or material are many. To be many is always, from this view, to be in some sense false or fallen.

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When Platonism began to pick up followers beyond the limits of exalted philosophical thought, it ran into the problem that people wanted and needed something human-like with which they could have a relationship. People wanted something they could worship, talk to, offer gifts to, and feel like they might actually be noticed by or which might care for them. This led to an absolute explosion of “middle terms” or in-between spirits and gods. Platonism became more and more about “lower” gods and daimons, spirits between the most transcendent realities and our own “lower” material world.

One major gatekeeper and ruler of these semi-divine entities was the goddess Hekate, who became identified with the moon as the waystation, the portal, between the immaterial, pure, and perfect transcendent realms and the lower, imperfect, material realm. Thus, we get a growing focus on “sublunary” spirits—those spirits (including various gods) who might be useful for day to day practical concerns within the material world, such as healing the sick or helping the harvest and so on. But the truly divine things, and the true goal of religious or magical/mystical practice, remained beyond this “lower” “sublunary” world that people were told to seek to transcend. There is always something of the tone of appeasement, then, in the admission that there are these intermediary entities—as if the more high-minded were allowing the general public to have their superstition while still trying to direct them to something “greater.”



The key, however, is that the transcendent god and otherworld were late-comers, were additions or replacements of other older views. And the very reliance of transcendental religion on more worldly intermediaries reveals the deep dissatisfaction purely



transcendent truths tend to provoke. We see this same thing repeated in the saints and angels of monotheism. The One, the True, the Perfect is just too inhuman a monster to be truly meaningful for us. It is a phantom created through the sheer negation of the world, and it can't help but leave us hungry for something real. So, transcendent conceptions of the divine are left needing some basis for intimate personal relationships with the divine while, at the same time, necessarily denigrating or rejecting them—if not honestly and directly, then through metaphysical or theological implication. Sure, you can't picture or understand God, so direct your worship, instead, to the Virgin Mary or Saint Anthony, etc.

But there are older models, other cosmologies, which map the nature of the afterlife and destiny of the soul in very different ways. It was these which Jake was consistently pushing people to consider and explore. There are nontranscendent Otherworlds and Underworlds. Jake was a frequent defender of Instrumentalism, a methodological commitment drawn from philosophy of science. In Instrumentalism, things are not assessed as true or false in general, but rather only to the extent that they are understood as tools which accomplish various things. Our beliefs about the afterlife, for example, and our models of the world which spirits inhabit, are such tools to be assessed for how well they serve our worldly and theological needs. The very need of transcendental religion for intermediaries points to its inadequacy from an instrumental perspective.

When we allow ourselves to be unthinkingly trapped in a given theoretical model, our thinking is necessarily restrained and limited, all the more so to the extent that we are unaware of the assumptions which structure and guide our thinking. Intellectually entertaining multiple models of reality is useful, not least of all because it is a necessary precursor of healthy and productive thinking in general. Arguably, one of Jake's consistent goals was to push people—and even teach people how—to think. Not *what to think*, but how to think about anything at all in a critical and innovative manner unrestrained by orthodoxy or hidden assumptions. The question of how *else* we might think about reality, of what we are taking for granted, is central to this process. Platonism has so utterly dominated so-called “western” thinking for the last two thousand years, under one guise or another, that many people are unaware any other manner of thinking is even possible.

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## The Spirits and The Dead

The prominence of the dead, a central element of most traditions throughout the world, risks being lost in a view that understands the destiny of the soul to be a transcendence of anything resembling life or existence as we know it. This point is stressed in “The Role of the Dead in a Living Tradition,” arguably one of the most important chapters

in Jake's full *Encyclopedia Goetica*. The dead, whether some version of the Mighty Dead captured for example in hero cults and saint worship, or alternative versions of ancestor worship, are key components of most vital spiritual and religious practices outside the limited framework of transcendental monotheism. Once the appropriate destiny of the dead is understood to be a transcendental heaven, then ongoing communion with them becomes impossible and meaningless (if one is being theologically consistent). Within the Catholic context we are left, instead, with access only to those dead who fail to achieve transcendence, whether that is the damned, those in limbo, those left to wander the world restlessly, and so on. Where Protestantism dominated, limbo was dismissed and any encounters with the dead became illusions created by demons alone. Saint worship, likewise, became heretical idolatry.

Ultimately all versions of Christianity sought to completely control the relationship of people to their dead, including not least of all an insistence on burying the dead in sacred church governed ground while home burials used to be more common. In other words, alienating people from their own dead was a key element of how transcendental religions came to dominate the person, local, private spirituality of those they governed. Of course, like in the earlier case of Platonism and the multiplication of mediating spirits, people still demanded intimate personal relationships that transcendence couldn't provide—thus the cults of the saints provided a middle ground that strictly speaking consistent transcendent theology should dismiss as impossible.

The importance of the dead rests in several key facts. First, the dead are those from whence we come—our ancestors—and they represent the destination towards which we are moving, for better or worse. Because of this, because where we are *they have been*, and where *they are* we shall be, they represent the most human and humanizing element of the spiritual world. They are also, for similar reasons, invested in our own success, well-being, and development. As descendants, inheritors, we are the representatives of the dead in the land of the living, and their success and the achievement of their goals depends upon us. Aristotle recognized this when he pointed out that we can never call anyone living entirely-happy, and indeed even the state of the dead might be uncertain, because the destiny of the families and projects of those who have died has a role to play in the happiness of the deceased. Could I truly be counted as happy if everything I worked for in life fell to ruin following my death?

Jake recognized that there is a gap between the ways in which most magical and theological practices conceive of our world and that of the spirits. We can isolate this gap if we ask why living humans should have any authority or connection with the spirit world at all? What do we have to offer them? Why should they care about us in any way? Jake's argument, running parallel with that of spiritism and the (inconsistent) role of limbo in Catholicism, is that the spirits need us in order to evolve and progress. The entirety of the spiritual world seeks to develop, grow, and improve in the same way that the living world

around us does. However, the spiritual world requires the assistance of the embodied and, for the dead, of the living in order to continue and complete their spiritual growth. Similarly, the growth and development of the world of the spirits is predicated and intimately interwoven with the growth and evolution of the world of the living. The spirits are bettered when we improve and we, in turn, can be improved and guided in our development by those spirits which are most likely to benefit from our own progress.

## “Small Gods” and “Others”

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that the dominance of monotheism and Platonism in the “west” has resulted in a vast loss of theological and metaphysical perspectives. The task, in turn, becomes one of rediscovering, reclaiming, and reconstructing what might have existed before the blight of the near complete social-political hegemony of Platonically informed monotheism. What Jake recognized, and what has been powerfully illuminated and presented by other scholars such as Michael Ostling, is that the longest lived elements of pre-monotheistic traditions tend to be the “small gods:” the small local spirits we find later as demons, or elves, or fairies, or hauntings and so on. Small gods, and the traditions of seeking their support or avoiding their ill-will, survive long after the grander and larger-scale social traditions of paganism have been abolished. You and all your neighbors may be good Catholics, but that doesn’t mean you are willing to just cut down the old hawthorn tree or neglect leaving out milk for the “good neighbors” on particularly important nights. When one uses the grimoires to form relationships with these “small gods,” one is building back to what was lost through the living spirit relationships that have survived.

There is one perhaps slightly niche and obscure thread from Jake’s works I would like to highlight. Jake was passionate about researching, and pushing others to research, the origins of Ancient Greek religious, magical, and mystical practices beyond the boundaries of Greece itself and, in the Bronze Age and Archaic periods, towards Scythian, Thracian, Phrygian and generally non-Greek Balkan civilizations. Connected here are several interwoven threads of insight that we find, largely, in hints and passing observations in much of Jake’s work. The central thread here is the hypothesis that certain major Bronze Age, and later Archaic, magical and religious technologies were tightly connected to the practice of blacksmithing—specifically the forging of bronze. Traveling ritual experts such as the practitioners of *goetia*, who had the ability to calm or dismiss hauntings, alleviate curses and divine punishments, and initiate individuals in ways which could improve their fates both in this life and the next—were seen to have developed much of their skills and practices from similarly traveling metal-workers. These metal-workers, in turn, originated in civilizations largely from the non-Greek Balkans territories at the time.



One of the most extensive presentations of this argument shows up in the second volume of the *Encyclopedia Goetica*, specifically the first part of *Geosophia*, in the section titled “The Founders of the Mysteries.” In that chapter, Jake connects legends about the ancient magician metal-working Dactyls, to the similar Corybantes (the ancient author Strabo directly identifies these mythological groups), and generally to the introduction of various rites and the worship of the Great Goddess or Cybele. As Jake summarizes some of these points in the chapter from *Geosophia*:

“The chief points to be kept in mind are the connection of the Dactyls with metal working and fire; their relation, and that of the other mythical figures associated with them, with the cult of the mother of the gods; their association with the god of fire, whose assistants they were; and their involvement with magic and Mystery cults throughout the region.”

The ancient author Euphoros, for example, describes the Dactyls as “*goeten* (i.e. practitioners of *goetia* or magic) who practiced charms and initiatory rites and Mysteries, and in the course of a sojourn in Samothrace they amazed the natives of that island not a little by their skill in such matters. And it was at this time that Orpheus, who was endowed with an exceptional gift of poetry and song, also became a pupil of theirs, and he was subsequently the first to introduce initiatory rites and Mysteries to the Greeks.” Following Euphoros, then, Jake identifies the Dactyls with the *goetes*, practitioners of *goetia*, and locates both at the foundation of the religious mysteries and rites of Ancient Greece,

“...the *goetes* were both the founders and the original celebrants of the most important and prestigious religious festivals and celebrations in the ancient Greek world. This places the *goetes* at the very center of archaic Greek culture; long prior to the devaluation of the term with the rise of the *polis* and Homeric Olympianism beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century.”

There are many implications of the general observation that Bronze Age religious, magical and mystical practices may have been developed and largely spread through nomadic metal-working groups, and these implications go beyond the boundaries of Greek, Mediterranean, or Middle-Eastern cultures. These implications have yet to be fully fleshed out or explored, and it remains a legacy of Jake Stratton-Kent’s that must surely be taken up by anyone with an interest in ancient pagan cultures. If someone has an interest in such culture and religion, and also in questions of politics and class, it seems rather important that what would eventually become large state religions developed from what we might call “blue collar” migrant origins outside any firm boundaries of state, culture, or ethnicity.

To give a more concrete example, Jake was particularly fond of stressing that many of the woods that traditional wands were supposed to be made out of, as listed for example in many of the medieval and early modern grimoires, are woods that would normally be hollow. There seems to be a penchant in magical practice for nut woods, which specifically tend to be hollow in the center. Such long hollow wooden cylinders, or pipes, were important for the practice of Bronze Age metal smelting where they were used to blow through like a bellows in order to keep a small furnace hot enough to melt the prerequisite ingredients for bronze. I encourage the reader to look up videos of contemporary

recreations of Bronze Age smelting practices to get a rather different view of why the ancient “wand” might have been seen as holding such special power. It could indeed have derived from a nomadic metal-worker’s standard toolkit, developing along the way central religious and magical meanings as the metal-workers also filled the role of itinerate initiators and religious teachers.



I will end these reflections with one last, and perhaps the most controversial, claim Jake made with the overt goal of motivating both magical practitioners towards paganism and pagans towards magical practice. In his paper “The Other Magicians and the Grimoires,” which was also published as an appendix to his book *Pandemonium: A Discordant Concordance of Diverse Spirit Catalogues*, Jake points out that Renaissance and Early Modern sources on magical practice habitually identify two types of practitioners. The “good” ones and the “bad” or “other” ones. The good are frequently connected with the clergy or aristocracy, while the bad are frequently identified with folk practitioners, witches, and the lower classes more generally. The “good” practitioners usually use names of monotheistic gods, threaten and command the spirits, engage in extensive protective measures, and so on, while the “bad” practitioners develop relationships with the spirits and have more a companionship with them. The punchline here is, of course, that the “bad” practitioners are the ones who are closest to the ancient pagan wisdom from which magic was developed, and can most easily be identified with the type of practices Jake was interested in. The ideal magician, then, from Jake’s view was most easily identified with paganism and the best forms of paganism—indeed the most authentic and promising forms for future living relationships with the spirit world—were closely tied to magical practice. There seems to be a consistent thread in Jake’s thought which is the attempt to bring “occultist” and “pagan” closer

together. This can best be done not least of all through an embrace of otherness and difference, of a burgeoning blooming plurality.

To allow Jake to make the point in his own words, he states,

“As beliefs, this is a natural progression from the *Testament of Solomon* and early Christianity, in which figures of pagan belief were identified with demons. In the grimoire conception, the witch and the demon are companions at the Sabbat... Plainly it was to these ‘others’ that the spirits more truly ‘belonged’ and vice versa... While their otherness as mythological figures does not involve paganism as a sociological identity, it is nevertheless wholly characteristic. The other magicians occupy the same outside space as the spirits: pagan, heretical, and diabolical... The grimoires are monuments of what may be called magic’s ‘interim period.’ They are disfigured by a dualism which was not originally native to goetic tradition, but entered via a backdoor of changes in religion. Recognising Otherness as a characteristic magicians share with spirits enables us to surmount this abiding difficulty in Western magic.”

And, we might add, recognizing Otherness as a necessary characteristic of paganism enables us, in turn, to resist any number of dangers we ourselves face.

May we all strive to be as brave, undogmatic, and tirelessly curious as Jake Stratton-Kent—fierce in the attack of the powerful and comfortable, and equally fierce in the defense of those in need. May the shade of this mighty magician aid us all; mocking us when we deserve it, inspiring and encouraging us as we need it. May his legacy live on, a challenge to us all!

## Kadmus

Kadmus is a practicing ceremonial magician. He published the book [True to the Earth: Pagan Political Theology](#) through Gods and Radicals Press and has taught classes every year for Salem Summer Symposium as well as for The Cauldron Black. He has also presented at the *AstroMagia* astrological magic conference the last two years including two keynote address, “Towards a High Pagan Astrology” and “Orpheus and Art as a Model of Magic”. Most recently he published the paper “Every Nekuomanteia is a Katabasis: Ancient Insights for Contemporary Necromancy” in Hadean Press’ *Conjure Codex: Black* anthology.