

Ocean, Lake, River and Spring

Sacred waters, myth and transformation

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Hari Mandir, the Golden Temple of Sikhism, Amritsar, India

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Since prehistoric times sacred places have exerted a mysterious attraction on billions of people around the world. Ancient legends and modern day reports tell of extraordinary things that have happened to people while visiting these places. Different sacred sites have the power to heal the body, enlighten the mind, increase creativity, develop psychic abilities, and awaken the soul to a knowing of its true purpose in life.

Normally, when one thinks of such places, the mind imagines terrestrial locations, fixed and unmoving, such as mountains, lands and caves. But the planet is a water place too. In fact more than 70% of the surface of the earth is covered with water and great portions of the hidden interior are also of a fluid nature. The ocean, vast and elemental, is the ancestral source of all life. Its depths are an enduring symbol of the great feminine womb of the living earth and its sources have been worshipped as sacred since time immemorial. According to the origin myths of different cultures, the gods, spirits and first humans emerged into the world directly from the cosmic ocean or from the depths of the underworld via springs and lakes. At a large number and variety of locations around the planet may be found temples and ceremonial sites where ancient people propitiated and honored the water spirits of the wondrous earth.

For inland people, often unaware of the existence of oceans, rivers had a similar sanctity. The Tigris and Euphrates were revered by the ancient Hittites and rivers in pre-Christian Celtic lands bore the names of specific deities, indicating the particular energetic qualities of those fluid holy spaces. From the earliest epoch of pre-dynastic Egypt the Nile was worshipped as divine and many of the great pilgrimages of Hindu India were focused upon sacred rivers such as the Ganges, Indus, Yamuna, Krishna, Godavari, and Brahmaputra. The largest religious festival in the world today, held every 12 years near Allahabad, India and attracting upwards of twenty million pilgrims, takes place at the confluence of two rivers. The power of that blended water is said to grant a spiritual realization that does not die with the passing of the human form. Holy mountains were also known to be sources of sacred waters. Upon their lofty summits resided storm gods and weather deities, whose gifts of rain sustained all plant, animal and human life. Particular frozen waters were also favored and pilgrims still trek long distances in the high mountains to reach Qoyllur Rit'i in Peru, Amarnath cave in Kashmir and Lake Manasarovar in Tibet.

Natural water sources were believed to be vitalized with indwelling spirits and thus ritual bathing had a spiritual as well as physical function. Both the body and the soul were cleansed by immersion in the holy waters. In the Christian tradition, the Pool of Bethesda is mentioned as a healing well and Jesus once directed a blind man to visit the Pool of Siloe in order to have his sight restored. Cultures around the world, both ancient and contemporary, have initiation and rite of passage ceremonies using water as a symbol indicating death and rebirth, and consecrated water is used to represent and engender psychological and spiritual transformation. Throughout Europe, there were once many hundreds of pagan holy wells, many dedicated to oracular and fertility goddesses. As these springs were Christianized during early medieval times, some were turned into Marian shrines while others were lost to time. The locations of many of these forgotten springs have been found by various forms of map and ground dowsing.

Visitors to Hindu and Shinto temples will often sprinkle blessed water upon themselves before entering the sacred places, Sikhs immerse themselves in the holy waters of Hari Mandir, and prayer in an Islamic mosque is always preceded by the ritual act of washing called *wudu*. At sacred sites throughout the world, pilgrims will drink and bathe in the holy waters, seeking cures for a variety of ailments including mental illness, toothache, skin problems, sprains, wounds, rheumatism and epilepsy. In olden times, certain waters were known to be effective with barrenness in women, to ease the difficulties of childbirth, and to help aged persons recover their youthful powers.

Ocean, lake, river and spring. These four types of fluid holy spaces, insubstantial and substantial at the same time, are every bit as powerful and spirit filled as any rock or cave or mountain. Different cultures have responded to the spiritual magnetism of the water sites in myriad ways. Let us now go upon a global pilgrimage, visiting an example of each of these four types of holy waters. While doing so we will clearly see that the use of spirit-waters preceded and continues to invigorate the religions of the world.



Abode of three sea goddesses, Itsukushima Shinto temple, Miyajima Island, Japan

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OCEAN. Located near Hiroshima in southern Japan, the sacred island of Miyajima is a holy place for both Shinto and Buddhist pilgrims. To come by early morning boat across a mist-enshrouded sea, slowly approaching the small island and its holy mountain of Misen San, is to enter a fairy tale realm. There are few places so sublimely beautiful in all the world. Miyajima's mother temple, Itsukushima, is perched on wooden stilts anchored deep in tidal shallows, thereby giving the appearance of a mystic shrine floating on the ceaselessly moving waters of the primeval sea. The magnificent temple, dating from 1168 and built entirely from wood, is dedicated to three Shinto goddesses of the sea, each of whom is believed to frequently visit the inner sanctum. Long before Buddhism came to Japan in the 5th century AD, Shinto sages lived as hermits along Miyajima's forested shores, sensing place-energies that gave rise to tales of three sea goddesses. If we conceive of sacred site myths as having metaphorical meaning, then the three goddesses indicate that Miyajima Island is a power place of yin or female qualities and, furthermore, that there are three different 'frequencies' of that gender-specific energy. Associated with the Itsukushima temple, and actually a part of its sacred geography, are seven other waterside shrines positioned at specific geomantic intervals around the 19-mile circumference of the island. There are no roads to most of these shrines. In order to visit them, pilgrims must use small boats to approach the rocky shores where the temples are located. In esoteric Shingon and Shugendo Buddhism, pilgrimages to the holy island of Miyajima with its sacred mountain and oceanside shrines were conceived as metaphorical journeys through the world of enlightenment, with each stage in the pilgrimage representing a stage in the process through the realms of existence conceived of by Buddhism. Pilgrimage is exterior mysticism, while mysticism is interior pilgrimage.



The island of the Sun, Lake Titicaca, sacred Mt. Illampu, Bolivia

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LAKE. Situated high in the Bolivian Andes (at 3,856 meters and covering 8000 square kilometers), Lake Titicaca is the preeminent holy place of all ancient Andean cultures and the source of a hundred cosmogenic myths. Legends say that long ago in a forgotten time the world experienced a terrible storm with tremendous floods. The lands were plunged into a period of absolute darkness and frigid cold, and humankind was nearly eradicated. Some time after the deluge, the creator god Viracocha arose from the depths of Lake Titicaca. Journeying first to the island of Titicaca (now called Isla del Sol or the Island of the Sun), Viracocha stood by a waterfall jutting from a black cliff and commanded the sun, moon and stars to rise. Next going to Tiahuanaco, he fashioned new men and women out of stones and, sending them to the four quarters, began the repopulation of the world. With various helpers, Viracocha then traveled from Tiahuanaco, bringing civilization and peace wherever he journeyed. As with many other deeply ancient origin myths around the world, we find evidence in Andean legends of the two great catastrophes of early Neolithic times; the geological cataclysms of the 9600 BC crustal displacement and the seven cometary impacts of 7460 BC. What is also fascinating to note is that the sacred city of Tiahuanaco is on a planetary grid system aligned to the Yukon pole. This prehistoric grid system was operative two pole positions back in time, before the pole was at either its present location or its Hudson Bay position during the Atlantean epoch. Around 96,000 BC and also at 52,000 BC there were other crustal displacement cataclysms and the myths of Lemuria point to these Pre-Atlantean times.



Pilgrims viewing temples along the Ganges as sunrise, Banaras, India

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RIVER. Sprawling miles along the holy river Ganges, the city of Banaras (also called Varanasi or Kashi) is the most visited pilgrimage destination in all of India. Myths and hymns speak of the waters of the Ganges as the fluid medium of Shiva's divine essence and a bath in the river is believed to wash away all of one's sins. The Hindu scripture *Tristhalisetu* explains that,

There whatever is sacrificed, chanted, given in charity, or suffered in penance, even in the smallest amount, yields endless fruit because of the power of that place. Whatever fruit is said to accrue from many thousands of lifetimes of asceticism, even more than that is obtainable from but three nights of fasting in this place.

One of seven Holy Cities of India, one of twelve Jyotir Linga Shiva sites and a Shakti Pitha goddess site as well, riverside Banaras is also the most favored place for Hindus to die. Cremation at the holy city insures *moksha*, or final liberation of the soul from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Dying persons and dead bodies from far-off places are brought to Banaras for cremation at the five principal and eighty-eight minor holy sites along the river Ganges. But the water borne holiness of the ancient city is not limited to the river alone. Adjacent to Visvanatha temple, the city's primary Shiva Linga, flows the Jnana Vapi well, the ritual center and *axis mundi* of Banaras. The Jnana Vapi, or Well of Wisdom, is said to have been dug by Shiva himself, and its waters carry the liquid form of *jhana*, the light of wisdom.

Encircling the holy city at a radius of five miles is the sacred way known as the Panchakroshi Parikrama. Pilgrims take five days to circumambulate Kashi on this fifty-mile path, visiting 108 geomantically situated shrines along the way. If one is unable to walk the entire grid of the sacred geography, then a visit to the Panchakroshi Temple will suffice. By walking round the sanctuary of this shrine, with its 108 wall reliefs of the temples along the sacred way, the pilgrim makes a symbolic journey around the sacred city. Another important Banaras pilgrimage route is the Nagara Pradakshina, which takes two days to complete and has seventy-two shrines. The sacred architecture of the temples on both these sacred geographies was designed with the mathematical and magical formulas of Vastu Purusa, an Indic geomantic system similar to but older than Chinese Feng Shui.

Hindus call the sacred places to which they travel *tirthas*, and the action of going on a pilgrimage *tirtha-yatra*. The Vedic word *tirtha* means river ford, steps to a river, or place of pilgrimage. *Tirthas* are more than physical locations, however. Devout Hindus believe them to be spiritual fords, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the locations where one crosses over the river of *samsara* (life and death in the illusion of the material world) to reach the distant shore of liberation. As thresholds between heaven and earth, *tirthas* are bridges for psychic sojourns and the passage of prayers, they are portals into our physical realm for spirits and deities, angels and elementals.

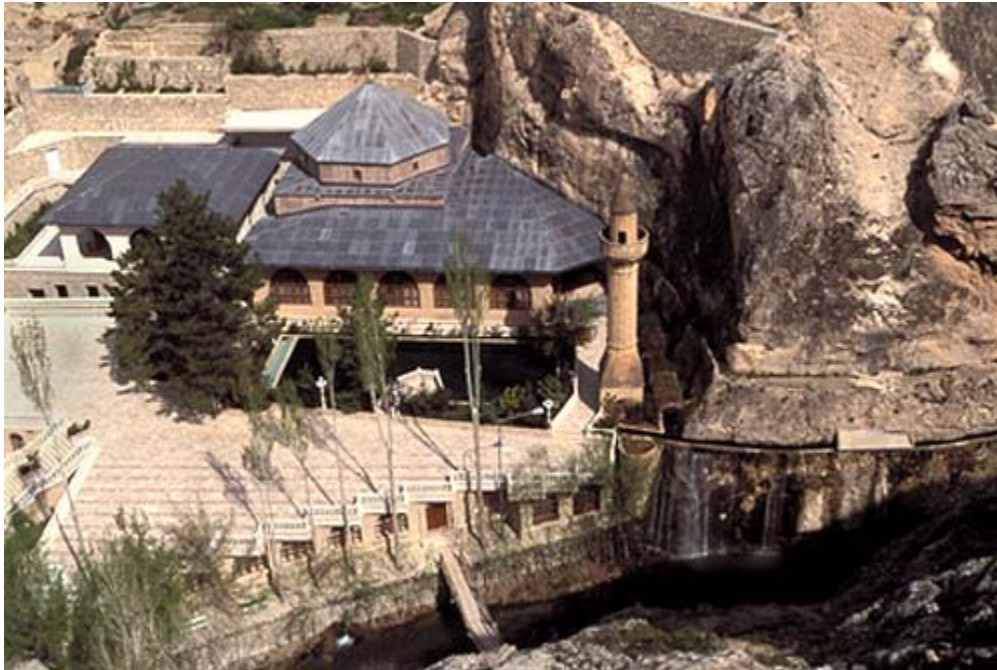


**The hot springs of the Roman temple of Aquae Sulis
and the Cathedral of Bath, England.**

Photograph courtesy of SacredSites.com © 2006 Martin Gray

SPRING. Archaeological excavations have revealed the human use of the hot mineral springs at Bath, England to have begun at least 10,000 years ago and continued to the present times. First frequented by Neolithic hunter-gatherer tribes, the springs were later venerated as sacred by an unbroken lineage of Celtic, Roman, and Christian cultures. The Celts, who arrived in England around 700 BC, erected what are believed to be the first shrine structures at the springs. Dedicated to Sulis, a goddess of water, the shrine was a religious center for much of southwestern England. Soon after the arrival of the Romans in England in 43 AD, the Celtic shrine was taken over and the goddess Sulis was identified with the Roman goddess Minerva as a healing deity. Beginning sometime around 65 AD, and continuing for nearly four centuries, the Romans constructed increasingly elaborate bathing and temple complexes at the springs. The spring was, however, more than just a source of hot water to the Romans. It was a sacred place where mortals could commune with the spirits of the underworld and seek the healing assistance of the goddess Sulis-Minerva.

This great healing shrine of Aquae Sulis was not destined to endure. Following the departure of the Roman legions from Britain early in the fifth century AD, the city and its splendid temples and baths swiftly fell into decline. Over time the baths were covered by the relentless silting of the spring and only the fallen temple of Sulis-Minerva marked the ancient sacred site. Yet the town was not abandoned. Rather it continued to grow and by the seventh century the first Christian structure had been established directly upon the ruins of the Roman temple. For the next twelve hundred years a succession of churches rose and fell upon the hallowed ground. The hot springs, while never again receiving architectural development equal to that of the Roman era, were continuously used throughout the medieval period. By the beginning of the 1600's the springs had begun to attract royal and aristocratic families intent on 'taking the cure', and by the 1720's Bath was on the way to becoming England's most highly fashionable spa.



Water Shrine of the Islamic Sufi saint Somunca Baba, Darende, Turkey

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Following in the footsteps of our ancestors, we may explore and benefit from the holy waters of the world. My own relationship with these magical places has been a blending of the mental, physical and spiritual. With a foundation in the scholarly study of the holy places, I journeyed upon traditional pilgrimages and, residing at the sacred sites, used various shamanic and meditation techniques to attune with the spirits and elemental forces. During the past twenty years, I have visited and photographed 1000 of these holy and magical places in 80 countries. Dowsing, too, has played an integral part in my exploration of the sacred sites. Using different methods of this ancient art, I have been able to determine the energetic focal points of the power places, those particular centers where the spirit forces are most radiant. The sacred sites have

profound transformational powers and thereby may contribute to the psychological and physiological integration of human beings. For readers interested in learning more about the holy places of the world, I suggest a visit to my web site, www.sacredsites.com where you will find an enormous resource of textual information, lovely photographs, maps, extensive bibliographies and links to related web sites.



**Door to the Spring Sanctuary of Ahura Mazda,
Zoroastrian Fire Temple of Chak Chak, Iran**
Photograph courtesy of SacredSites.com © 2006 Martin Gray