

# From Prehistoric Cave Art to Your Cookie Pan:

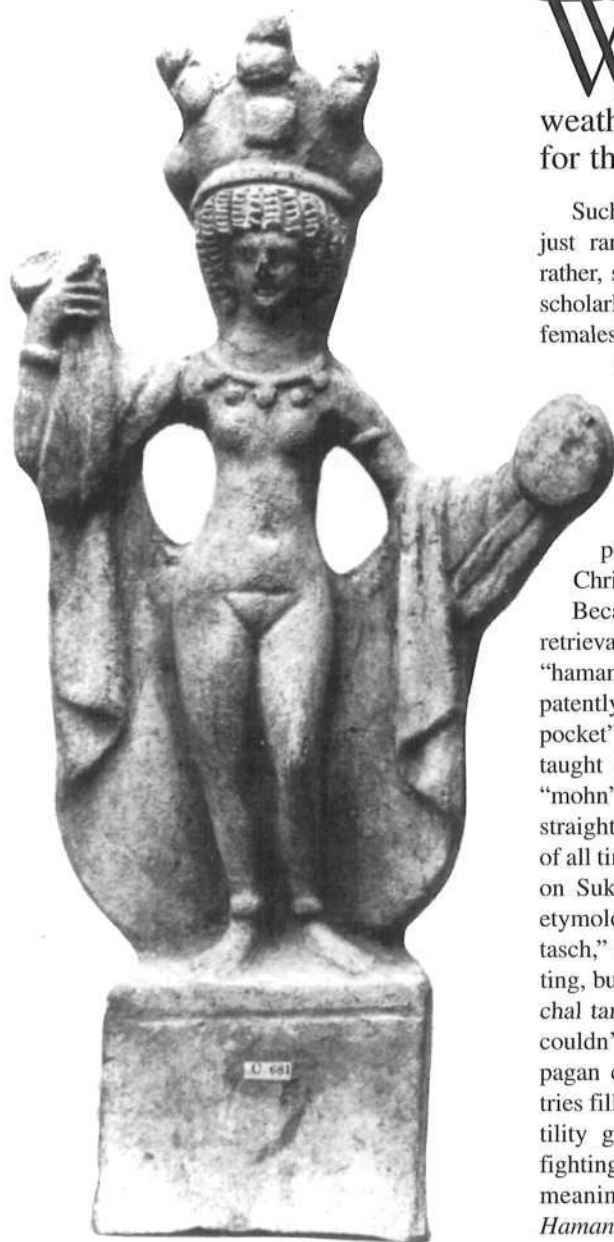
## TRACING THE HAMANTASCH HERSTORY

by Susan Schnur

Why do witches “cackle?” Why is there a folk belief that groundhogs foretell weather? Why was Jonah in the whale for three days?

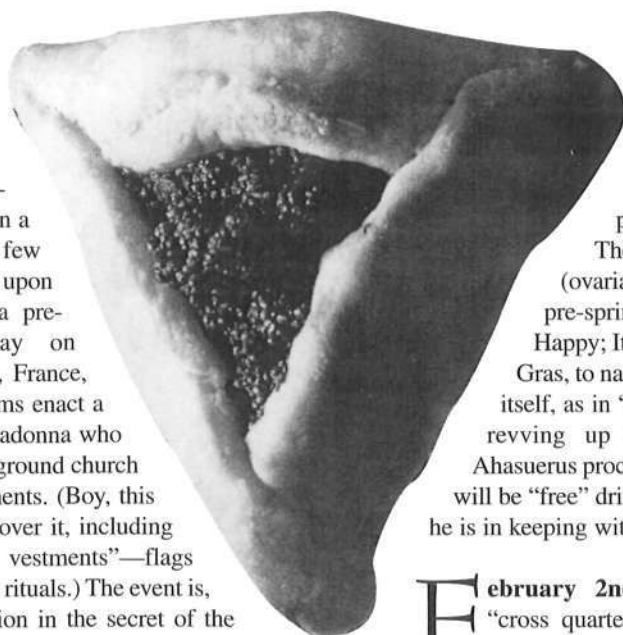
Such details of ancient story and folk belief are not just random whimsical embellishments. They are, rather, significant windows into *something*, clues for scholarly treasure hunts. Indeed, if we trace back females who “cackle” in October, “three days” spent in dark places, or the origins of February 2nd (Groundhog Day), for example, we find meaningful etiologies that give us a whole enlarged context for the desiccated leftovers that come down to us. Often these “clues” lead us to pre-patriarchal, woman-positive themes which lie buried beneath Judeo-Christian overlays.

Because I have a particular interest in such retrievals, I’ve always been piqued by the word “hamantasch”—on account of its etymology being so patently phony. A hamantasch is *not* a “Haman’s pocket” (or “Haman’s ear”) as most of us were once taught in Hebrew School, but a German-derived “mohn” (poppyseed) “tasch” (pocket). Okay, that’s straightforward—but why do we eat them on Purim, of all times, a pre-spring full-moon festival? Why not on Sukkos or Tu b’Shvat? Genetically engineered etymologies, like the corrupted “Haman” in “hamantasch,” sometimes bespeak ordinary cultural forgetting, but at other times they signify intrusive patriarchal tampering—that is, the Judeo-Christian fathers couldn’t get folks (generally women) to give up old pagan customs (perhaps like eating triangular pastries filled with poppyseeds; or baking loaves for fertility goddesses), so they joined ’em rather than fighting ’em—tacking on a more Jewishly syntonic meaning: not poppyseed pockets at all; rather *Haman’s* pockets!



FROM WHEN GOD WAS A WOMAN, BY MERLIN STONE. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A hamantasch is *not* a Haman's pocket.  
That's phony. It's a cosmic womb—a triangle with dots (seeds) inside.  
It represents something sacred *and* female.



**F**or me, the hamantasch question took on a new urgency a few months ago when I happened upon a travel article describing a pre-spring “Christian” holiday on February 2nd, in Marseilles, France, in which thousands of pilgrims enact a processional with a Black Madonna who is brought out from an underground church crypt dressed in green vestments. (Boy, this one has “pagan” written all over it, including “underground” and “green vestments”—flags for vernal gestation-and-birth rituals.) The event is, of course, a ritual participation in the secret of the earth’s abundance. (Hang on — this is, as unlikely as it may seem, connected to hamantaschen.)

February 2nd is Groundhog Day, a goofy little American holiday that I, for some reason, have always gotten a big kick out of. Imbolc to pagans, Candlemas to Christians, February 2nd is a midway point (six weeks in either direction) between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. (These four yearly mid-point days between solstices and equinoxes are called “hinges” or “cross-quarter” days.)

One of the ancient tales that was invented to explain the mystery of why vegetation dies in the winter and is miraculously reborn in the spring is that Demeter (the goddess of all that grows) would not stop crying for her daughter Persephone, who had been abducted into the Underworld (death). But on February 2nd, halfway between winter’s beginning and spring’s beginning, Demeter’s loving old nursemaid, Baubo, decided to make Demeter laugh to insure that spring would return. She lifted her skirt, exposing her genitals and making lewd gestures. (You can actually find Baubo, in this position, as an apotropaic gargoyle above some European church doorways.) Laughter, as we know, restores balance, *and can be transformative*; thus the Earth is transformed, and spring (and Persephone) returns.

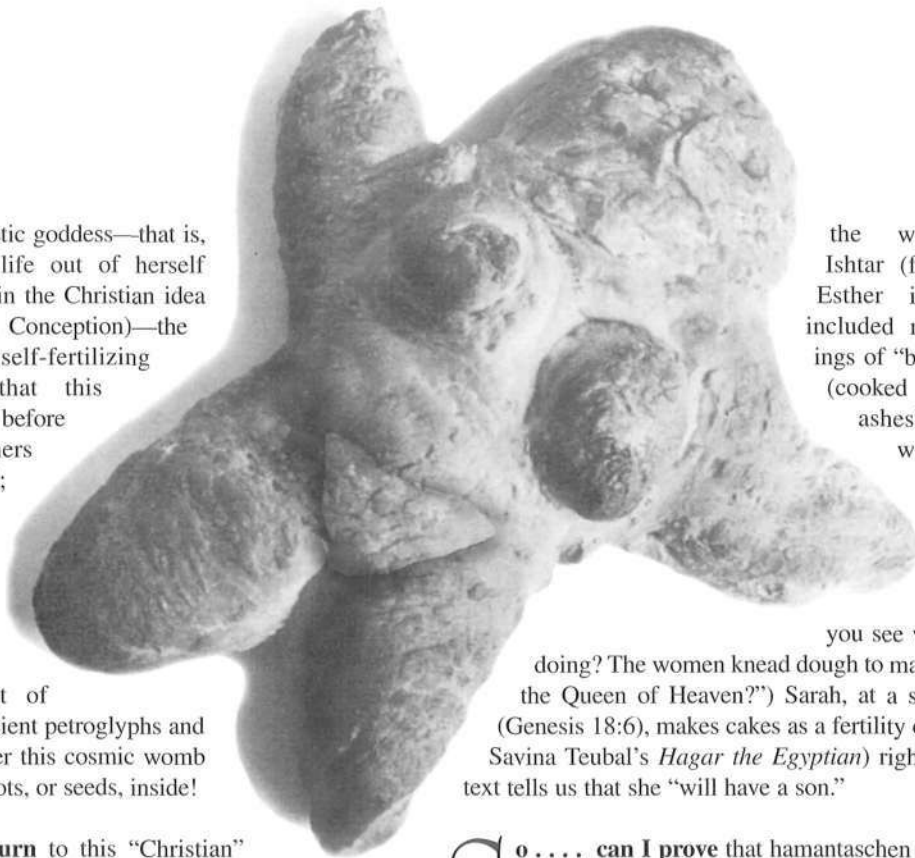
The nursemaid Baubo (meaning “belly,” as in belly laughter) is a forerunner of our own Bubbes, old easygoing

grandmas who leaven life’s problems for us and reassure us. The myth of Baubo is the seminal (ovarian) one behind many “laughing” pre-spring holidays: Purim (as in “Be Happy; It’s Adar!”), Carnevale and Mardi Gras, to name a few. (The word “February” itself, as in “febrile,” refers to sexual heat, a revving up for spring’s fertility. When Ahasuerus proclaims, in the *Megillah*, that there will be “free” drinking followed by a girlie show, he is in keeping with the seasonal theme.)

**F**ebruary 2nd—the six-week “hinge” or “cross quarter” day—is an ancient weather divination day which comes down to us, via Pennsylvania Dutch immigrants, in the form of Groundhog Day: the kismet day on which Punxsutawney Phil either sees or doesn’t see his shadow, thus predicting *six more weeks* (that is, a “hinge”) of either winter or spring. Imbolc/Candlemas is an age-old time of taking omens for the coming season (particularly in relation to weather—the determinant of feasts or famines): reading dice, tea leaves, fires, all sorts of things. (The word “Purim,” of course, shares these origins. Meaning “lotteries or “chances,” it refers to Haman’s fortunetelling, “casting lots” in order to know which day and which month were augured for killing Jews.)

**S**o how are groundhogs connected to hamantaschen? Seen in pre-historic art (often on the walls of caves—that is, Earth wombs), groundhogs are ancient symbols of the deities of regeneration. Groundhogs come up, post-hibernation, from the underground (like, say, Persephone), prefiguring the Earth’s fertility. Found in European iconography as long ago as the 5th millennium B.C.E., they are symbols of fecundity: hedgehogs, lozenges, dots in the center of triangular enclosures, toads, bull heads—these are familiar pictograms for regeneration, for that which (or She who) controls the life cycles of the entire natural world.

Baking "bread goddesses" was yet another ancient fertility rite. Some modern Purim traditions include baking small breads filled with hard-boiled eggs (Morocco); filling deep-fried pastries with nuts and oozing honey (Egypt), and eating figs and pomegranates.



A parthenogenetic goddess—that is, one who creates life out of herself (she later surfaces in the Christian idea of the Immaculate Conception)—the Regeneratrix is self-fertilizing (some suggest that this goddess held sway before the role of fathers was understood; women's ability to give birth and nourish children from our own bodies being the ultimate sacred mystery, like that of Earth herself!). Ancient petroglyphs and amulets often render this cosmic womb as a triangle with dots, or seeds, inside!

the worship of Ishtar (from whom Esther is derived) included ritual offerings of "baked cakes" (cooked "under the ashes"), against which Jeremiah, 7:17-18, famously rails. ("Don't

you see what they're doing? The women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven?") Sarah, at a sacred grove (Genesis 18:6), makes cakes as a fertility offering (see Savina Teubal's *Hagar the Egyptian*) right before the text tells us that she "will have a son."

**T**hus to return to this "Christian" holiday in southern France . . . the Black Madonna is feted (the color black is an Old European symbol of fertility and Mother Earth; poppy seeds, I do believe, also happen to be black), after which people eat cookies baked especially for that day, called "navettes," or boats. A *navette* (traceable to the pre-spring Barge of Isis and/or Mary Magdalene's little boat) is shaped like a *petit pain* roll with a slit in the middle (like barley, also a fertility symbol) so that it looks (hold on!) like labia majora.

Reading about these *navettes*, I had, yes, a eureka experience in relation to the true herstory of the hamantasch. I realized that lots of religious rites once involved "vulva cakes" in various suggestive shapes and sizes: round with pricked dots, or replicas of great pudenda placed on altars, or barley-shaped (or filled with barley, or figs and honey), or generative triangles, or "bread goddesses," or, in ancient Greece (according to scholar Ross Kraemer), baked "phal-li" and "cunni" (genitals fashioned out of pastry) that may have been eaten as part of fertility rites. Of course,

**S**o . . . can I prove that hamantaschen are contemporary sacred vulva cakes? No. But it certainly makes academic and gut sense to me: that parthenogenetic (self-fertilizing) hamantaschen—pubic triangles traditionally filled with black seeds—are pre-spring, full-moon fertility cookies, suggesting the potency of female generative power, and heralding women's and the Earth's seasonally awakening creativity.

Therefore . . . roll 'em, fill 'em, bake 'em, eat 'em, send 'em to friends, eat your friends', let them eat yours, feed 'em to your husband. On the full moon of Adar, the hamantasch, God willing, should not be mistaken for a mere cookie or for Haman's tricorn hat. Hamantaschen are our, and Earth's, bodies, revered as an ultimate metaphor for the divine Creator. They were (and, given the right ritual, could once again be) sacred, representing women's capacity to birth and to nourish, from our own holy bodies.

So, from my Baker's Secret cookie sheet to yours . . . hey, on some level, this is all stuff that we all already knew. Be happy! It's Adar!

