

## The Agnone Tablets: Translation and Interpretation

The Agnone Tablets are perhaps the greatest artifact of Samnite religion, and careful study is essential to advancing our understanding of beliefs and practices in Pre-Roman Samnium, which otherwise are buried beneath Roman conquest or destroyed by the passage of time. Despite their crucial nature, there has not been a serious effort to translate or understand them in nearly six decades (Salmon 1967). Given the advances in linguistics and religious studies since the 1960s, I see it as time to create a new translation and understanding of the gods listed on these tablets. My work reveals much about both the Samnites themselves, but also more broadly about early Italic religion, indeed the whole of Indo-European beliefs. Firstly, the strong presence of Ceres, or *Kerreís* in Oscan, throughout the document and its associated altars makes it more likely than not that she is as autochthonous to Italy as any other Italic god, and not just an imitation of Demeter. This would suggest the decline of Tellus, originally a far more important grain goddess in Rome, was a result of more Roman Citizens having family or customs originating among the Samnites and other Italics, rather than an influx of Hellenic customs. Further, the way the altars are set up, and the deities written for each one, inform us of two important parts of Samnite religion: how they viewed divine pairings, and how they saw sacred spaces. Seen most famously in the Linear B gods such as Poseidon and Poseidona, or Zeus and Dione, Divine couples are very common to Indo-European religions (West 2007). However, Agnone shows us mother-daughter pairings, such as Ceres and Proserpina, as well as unclear male relationships. I would argue there was initially an idea of duality, in various relationships, reduced to the primarily romantic relationships we are familiar with, but the Samnites held onto an earlier practice. Celtic triple goddesses, who could have a male mate or another woman with

them at their sacred sites, offer another example, as well as Egeria accompanying Diana in her woods at Aricia (Green 1986, Green 2018). Finally, the place they are found, in conjunction with the gods, shows how space and divinity interact for the Samnites. The grove was a common place for a fertility *numen* in the Roman tradition, with Feronia, Diana, Silvanus, and Dea Dia occupying these spaces in and around Rome. The mountain or hilltop are more common for storm gods, such as Capitoline Jupiter or Summanus at Mt. Summano (Dumézil 1996). The use of both suggests this could be seen as a meeting point, perhaps an ersatz marriage bed, between Cthonic fertility deities such as Ceres and Ouranic virility deities such as Jove. This is mirrored in later Roman *devotio* invoking both Tellus and Jupiter (Fowler 1911).

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