



A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus: A History of Phallic Worship

Richard Payne Knight

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"A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus" contains an area of human experience that has long remained forbidden territory: sexual symbolism.

Of all the rites which belonged to ancient polytheism, none were more furiously inveighed against by the zealous propagators of the Christian faith than the obscene ceremonies performed in the worship of Priapus, the god of procreation. Even the form itself, under which the god was represented, appeared to them a mockery of all piety and devotion. Richard Knight hoped to discover the meaning of the widespread practice of phallic worship in the ancient world, and what relationship this might have to the theology of the ancients.

He commenced with no theories, but was content to follow the facts wherever they might lead. Knight discovered that the forms and ceremonies of a religion are not always to be understood in their direct and obvious sense, but are to be considered as symbolic representations of some hidden meaning, which may be extremely wise and just. Such is the case with the rites and symbolic representation now under consideration, nothing of which could be more monstrous and indecent if considered in their plain and obvious meaning, but which will be found to be a very natural symbol of a very natural and philosophical system of religion if considered according to their original use and intention.

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