



# Η ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ

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## Food's Central Role in our Religion

by Gitana

As reconstructionists we often face the problem of not knowing what was done at particular festivals. What seems like endless research often doesn't produce any results, simply because the information has been lost. This is one of the unfortunate facts of our religion. But there is one facet of our religion that remains ever a constant: food. Food is involved in almost every religious practice that we know of. In this short essay I will discuss a few of these instances.

Public festivals certainly involved a lot of food. The central act of the ritual was the sacrifice, in which certain portions were offered to the god or gods being worshipped by placing these parts in the altar fire. It was thought that the gods somehow "consumed" these parts, although exactly how this happened was not really an issue to most people. The priest and honored guests at the ritual were the ones who tasted the *splancha* before the ritual continued.<sup>1</sup> This was considered a great honor. The remaining meat was cut up and cooked, either roasted or frequently it was boiled. This meat was then served at the dinner which accompanied the ritual, and formed one of the important aspects of the larger festival.<sup>2</sup> Kerényi wrote that this sacrificial meal "is the fulfillment of the sacrifice."<sup>3</sup> The gods "eat" the sacrificial victim, and we imitate this action of the gods by also eating the meat, and thereby demonstrate the connection that exists between god and mortals.

Even in the cases where there is no sacrificial animal, there is still some form of food offered. We might look at the first fruits offerings. One is to dedicate a portion of the first harvest to the gods. Sometimes these practices are carefully controlled, as was the case with the temple of Demeter at Eleusis. A declaration was made as to the amount to be brought to the temple as a sort of tithe or tax.<sup>4</sup> However, these first fruit offerings were mostly spontaneous gifts made by pious people. They would bring a little from their harvest to a near-by shrine or sacred grove, or they might simply bury it near their fields. There are many variations of this practice, as it seems that *how* it was done was not really important. The important thing was that the gods were given the first portion, as a way of saying "thank you" for their blessings.

Libations also fall into this category, and there is much mention of them in the texts. Not only were libations part of the actions in the public rituals, but they also were performed as rituals in-and-of-themselves. If one wanted to pray to the gods in order to request something, a libation was always appropriate. Burkert says, "In order to supplicate the gods aright at all, a libation is therefore required."<sup>5</sup> I suspect that the libation was an especially popular form of home worship, as it was a simple but worthy offering to the gods.

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## Η ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ

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The Neokoroi are a group of Hellenic hard polytheists working to foster communities, festivals, and temples, to provide guidance and information on religious matters, and to ensure the strength and longevity of the worship of the Greek gods.

Ἡ Ἐπιστολή (a “message” or “letter”) is published four times a year. We offer articles, hymns, prayers, poetry, reviews, information, rituals, community notices, fiction, recipes, and anything else of interest to the Hellenic pagan community. We welcome feedback and submissions from guest writers.

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We have even more articles online, as well as information on the gods, photos, links and more!

Our next issue will be coming out in December '04. The deadline for submissions is November 15<sup>th</sup>. Advertising space is also available.

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## Food's Central Role (continued from page one)

Another example of home worship involving food is the act of giving the first bites of food to the hearth. This is quite similar in nature to the first fruits offerings, in that it is the first portions that are given. At the same time it is similar to the public sacrifice ritual, as the food is burned in the fire. In any case, the family meal is an appropriate time for offerings, as all are present to take part in these actions. Along with the meal, wine may be served, and it was also common practice to offer libations of wine it was drunk. Families might pour it directly on the floor, as most homes had only dirt floors.

It should come as no surprise that food would play such a prominent role in the religion, as the lives of the people mostly revolved around agriculture. Regular meals consisted of grains, olives, fruits such as figs, and wine. Meat was rarely eaten, and when it was, it was almost exclusively eaten after first being sacrificed to the gods.

Fortunately for us, we can also make food an important part of our worship. The act of cooking can be a religious one as well. There are a few ancient recipes published both in books and on the internet if you are interested in making an ancient meal. That, however, is not necessary. All that one really needs to do is choose a meal that is “special.” You will need to pay attention to the ingredients, however, as certain gods prefer or reject certain plants and herbs, as the case may be. For example, Demeter was offered piglets at the Thesmophoria, so a pork and grain meal would be quite appropriate for her.

We do not know of any special rituals involving the cooking of food. However, we do know that *miasma* could be passed from one person to another through contact, so we might presume that *miasma* can be passed through food as well.<sup>6</sup> Take care to purify yourself before you begin to cook by washing your hands at the very least.<sup>7</sup> I have no elaborate ritual to offer to readers as I think that such a ritual would fall beyond the scope of reconstructionism. However, I would suggest that one maintain a “religious” mindset while cooking. Make the entire process, and not just the end result, an offering to the gods.

Once you have completed your meal, offer it to the god you wish to honor. A simple way to do this is to just take the first few bites of your meal, and offer it by burning it, burying it, or just setting it outside. This idea can be adapted depending on the setting.

Often we reconstructionists tend to focus on the more striking features of Hellenic ritual, such as the animal sacrifice or the hymns. That is important as well, but food functioned as the cornerstone in worship, and thus we should make it more prominent in our modernized rituals as well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *splancha* is the heart, kidneys, liver, and other organs.

<sup>2</sup> In general public festivals had three parts, i.e. the ritual, the feast, and the competitions.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Kerényi. *The Religion of the Greeks and Romans*. E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1962, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> You may read an example of this in Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1985, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Miasma is often translated as “pollution” which can be both physical and non-physical pollution. Normal life can lead to pollution, and so one washed their hands before entering the sanctuary, which purifies the person of that pollution.

<sup>7</sup> It is a belief of mine that the washing of the hands in the *khernips* before entering the sanctuary actually began from the practice of washing before creating a meal. Unwashed hands can lead to sickness, and that, in the mind of the ancients, was a sign that the gods were displeased. Many religions have food and cleanliness taboos, so this certainly isn't unique to Greek religion.

## Autumn Festivals

by Oenochoe

**Epidauria** (October 2) - commemoration of Asklepios' arrival, celebrated with a procession, offerings, and a banquet for the god.

**Proerosia** (October 18) - agricultural festival of Demeter; the name means "preliminary to ploughing." Offerings of first fruits (mostly grain) are given to Demeter to ask for her blessing at the beginning of the sowing season.

**Puanepsia** (October 20) - a festival dedicated to Phoibos Apollon. A meal is held for him. There is a procession of boys carrying eiresiones, the traditional sign of a suppliant, from door to door, singing and begging for food. The ritual food that gave its name to this festival consists of a mixture of boiled legumes. According to myth, Theseus and his crew returned to Athens on this day, and offered Apollon this dish, made from the remains of their provisions.

**Oskhophoria** (October 20) - the celebration of the vine harvest, in honor of Dionysos. Men carry vine branches with the grapes still clinging to them through the town in a procession. Hymns about the harvest and wine-making are sung. A ritual meal is held, where legends are told and acted out.

**Theseia** (October 21) - a festival honoring Theseus, the son of Poseidon. A procession, sacrifices, athletic contests, and a feast including a porridge of wheat and milk.

**Stenia** (October 22) - a nocturnal women's festival for Demeter and Persephone in preparation for the Thesmophoria. The women insult each other light-heartedly to commemorate the way Iambe made the grieving Demeter laugh. Votive offerings are thrown into pits in the sanctuary of Demeter, including bread in the shape of snakes and phalluses, as well as sacrificed pigs, all of which are fertility symbols.

**Thesmophoria** (October 24-26) - all-female agricultural festival in honor of Demeter and Persephone. On the first day, the women make camp, sleeping on the ground in huts. On the second day, the women sit on the ground and fast from all solid food in sympathy for Demeter's mourning, and taunt each other in iambic verse. On the third day, there is a torch-lit ceremony, because Demeter sought Persephone by torch-light. Then the rest of the festival is spent in joyous celebration.

**Khalkeia** (November 12) - a festival of smiths, associated with Hephaistos and Athene. A day of rest from work; a procession of workers goes through the town carrying baskets of corn. Later, a feast is held.

**Pompaia** (undetermined, around mid-December) - a procession dedicated to Zeus Meilikhios (Kindly), a chthonic aspect of Zeus who appears as a snake.

**Poseidea** (probably December 19) - a festival in honor of Poseidon, most likely on the eighth day of the lunar month, since that day was sacred to him. Nothing else is known.



## Whom do I Serve?

by Samantha J. Frye

When one becomes a polytheist, you find yourself in action of finding what gods you serve. After a while you are presented with the question: well, how did you choose that god? And that, for me, turns out to be an interesting question indeed. At the age of 23, I only dimly remember becoming a polytheist at the age of 14, and of the initial process of finding my gods. Do we choose to serve gods that parallel our own thinking, habits, and beliefs? Would a woman choose to worship a specific goddess because she feels she is like that goddess, or rather perhaps that the goddess in question had a relationship early on that shaped her character? Do the gods choose us from early on, or do we choose them?

I was twelve years old when I first attained a child's copy of the Greek myths. And how I adored those myths even though I was being raised in a Christian household. Of course the myths in

that particular volume were not all that flattering, if memory serves. I do not recall any specific preference, though I greatly admired the goddesses in the book, which were so different from the female figures of the religion I was familiar with. A goddess was so foreign and yet so wonderful. Of course it would be another two years before I would become polytheistic. However, that single book started me down a journey I certainly would not regret.

At the age of fourteen, I made the transition to polytheism. My first deity was the goddess Artemis. Now I could say that at the time I felt like I was choosing her, for her strength, independence, and wild nature. But I am not certain if that would tell the whole of the story. In fact I don't remember consciously choosing her, but rather that it was made apparent that she is my goddess and that I desired to serve her.

*(continued on page four)*

**Whom do I serve?** (continued from page three)

A god of mine, Pan, I simply dreamt of one night a few months later, and I adopted him as another one of my gods. Did I choose them or did they choose me? I really don't particularly know anymore, and as time has passed the matter has concerned me less and less. I only think on it when people ask, "why did you choose that god(dess)?"

I now have many deities I serve. Some are conscious choices, such as Athena. I am an artist, I love my needlework, sculpting, painting, etc. I also am very competitive and value what strategy she may offer and lend. So I give her offerings. Apollo was a conscious choice as well, I believe, for it seemed but natural to worship him when I was bestowing such worship upon his sister Artemis. Of course in retrospect I can say that there was a lot more than that, for even though the moon always was by far more fair to me, I still had a great love for the sun, and it was as the sun god that I first recognized him, and yet adore him all the more over time from learning of his many skills. I never really consciously chose Poseidon, but I would have to say that he was probably, in the depths of my memory, my earliest interaction with gods. I was an island child and would spend hours swimming in the ocean or at the very least on the docks feeling the water lap at my legs. I knew that there was something within the ocean, though I gave it no name, but would talk to it and sometimes place flowers or bits of food into it (the latter of

which was hastily devoured by wildlife). Later it was only putting a name on what I already recognized as the god of the ocean. I can go on and on with other examples of my other gods that I pay worship to, but I think that these examples I have set forth serve my purpose well enough.

From my personal experiences I would have to say that there are several factors that go into which gods we serve, and they vary greatly from god to god and from circumstance to circumstance. We can choose a god(dess) because we find something in common with them that they champion. We can come to worship a deity through feeling as if we were already chosen by them and approached through dreams and/or physical experiences. We can make conscious decisions of what gods we wish to choose in what they have to offer; or how they relate to other gods that we worship whether it be parent, spouse, sibling or cousin. Perhaps serving for good favor returned for the offerings. Really there is no concrete answer, no one way to approach the gods or to begin serving the gods with sweet offerings. I do, however, believe that one should take care when actively deciding to worship that god. To know what pleases that god and if it is something you can provide. To know the nature of the god through the works of the time. To know that the gods will not simply conform around what we think they should be. However you find your gods, it is certainly not something to take lightly when you make the decision to serve them.

.....

**Hail Apollo**

by Daniel Adler

*H*ail Apollo, Protector and Patron.

Beloved and Pure, Blessed and Holy.

**Hail Apollo, Agreus Hail!**

You are the hunter, the archer.

With your golden bow you protect the wild and keep it safe, and sacred.

**Hail Apollo, Ageuieus Hail!**

The secrets of the cosmos are known to you.

You share your wisdom with us through prophecy and divination  
that we might better understand your will.

**Hail Apollo, Aigletes Hail!**

Oh Radiant one, your light shines throughout the universe,  
and lights our lives. Let us shine forever in the brilliance of your glory.

**Hail Apollo, Apotropaeus Hail!**

Protect us with your might.

Shield us from the evil which is loose in the world.

Guard us as a father protects his children.

**Hail Apollo, Archigetes Hail!**

You who guided us to new shores

and aided us in our beginnings, lead us to new shores in the future.

**Hail Apollo, Delios Hail!**

You, born on new made lands, pure, and clean,  
help us to remake our world into one equal to the land of your beginning.

**Hail Apollo**, Epikourios Hail!  
Throughout the ages, mankind's ally, mankind's friend.  
Stand with us as we make the long walk into the future.

**Hail Apollo**, Delphinus Hail!  
From the Pythia, your wisdom was released to the people.  
Continue to share with us the knowledge you hold,  
that we might grow in skill and be worthy of your friendship.

**Hail Apollo**, Genetor Hail!  
Son of Zeus, father of multitudes.  
Look on us, your children, with a kindly eye, and keep us safe.

**Hail Apollo**, Hekatos Hail!  
Warrior lord. May your fiery shafts keep our enemies at bay.

**Hail Apollo**, Hersos Hail!  
Divine child of the King of Heaven.  
Look with favour upon those who love you, and follow you.

**Hail Apollo**, Iatros Hail!  
You art the physician of heaven.  
The healer of illness.  
May you stand ever vigilant as a shield to protect us from all manner of ailment.

**Hail Apollo**, Kathirodos Hail!  
Leader of the choirs of Olympus.  
You take up your lyre, and bring peace to the heavens with your music.  
Let your glorious voice bring peace to the world.

**Hail Apollo**, Korotrophos Hail!  
Protector of youth, you the ever youthful.  
May your blessings be upon the young people of the world,  
that they might grow to be strong, and wise leaders of the future.

**Hail Apollo**, Musegetes Hail!  
You lead the Muses as you sing to the Gods.  
Send them to us to share in your wisdom, that they might encourage us to sing your praises.

**Hail Apollo**, Nymphegetes Hail!  
You lend your protection to the nymphs.  
To the Oreads of the mountain, the Dryads of the wood, the Naiads of the stream.  
Keep them safe, that they might keep our world peaceful and clean.

**Hail Apollo**, Paian Hail!  
Healer of heaven.  
Lend your skills to us that we might work to your glory and heal the world.

**Hail Apollo**, Phoebus Hail!  
Oh brilliant one, may your light forever shine upon us, and shield us from the darkness.

---For I will always sing for Dionysos the hymns that have  
been established. O, Blessed is the one who, truly happy,  
knows the initiations of the Gods, performs the sacred rites  
throughout life, and joins his soul to the  
thiasos...---

(Euripides Bacchae 71-75)

translation by Karen McCollam

## The Ancestors and Heroes

by Oenochoe

Like most polytheistic cultures, the ancient Greeks had rituals for honoring their ancestors. A family member who had died was still important, and deserved attention. These practices are beginning to grow again in modern polytheism, so it seems fitting to explore how the ancients paid cult to their ancestors, and how we might do so today. Since many things have changed (funeral customs, the religions of our relatives), we must adapt without simply forgetting those who have come before us.

In ancient Greece, after the funerary rites (complex and often expensive ceremonies that took many days) were over, the deceased relative began to be treated in much the same way as other chthonic beings. Food offerings and libations were left at the gravesite, not only at the time of interment, but on certain prescribed days afterwards: the third, ninth and sometimes thirtieth days after the funeral, the deceased's birthday, the anniversary of the person's death, and certain state festivals. The oldest son of the family was the most obligated to pay respect to the ancestor, but everyone could be involved. In addition to food and drink left on the ground, ribbons and flowers might be left by the tomb. Tending to the cult of one's ancestors was primarily a domestic affair, but on the fifth of Boedromion (this year falling on September 19th), Athens celebrated the *Genesia*, a state holiday paying tribute to everyone's ancestors, and especially to those who had died in wars.

Ancestors were believed to give fertility of all kinds, and were often sacrificed to and prayed to for good crops and fertile wombs. However, the dead were also feared, and people would pass by graves silently, so as to avoid attracting the attention of the soul within. This custom, as well as the prevalence of rites performed at the graves themselves, shows that many people believed at least some aspect of the psyche remained in the grave site. When a person died away from home, their soul had to be called back somehow to an empty grave called a cenotaph, where the person was represented by a stone. Cenotaphs were tended by relatives in the same manner as real graves.

If you have deceased relatives who are buried nearby, of course the easiest way to continue these traditions would be to visit their graves at certain times and leave offerings. However, for those of us living further away, it seems appropriate to erect a small shrine in their honor, similar to the idea of a cenotaph, which can be the focus of our rituals. My shrine for my ancestors is simple, and centers around a collection of photographs on display – my grandfather, my aunt, and group pictures from very long ago of some of my more distant relatives who have all passed on. I have an offering dish, and an object that reminds me very much of my grandfather. There I can leave offerings on formal holidays such as the *Genesia*, as well as personal days like their birthdays.

I also sometimes go to the local cemetery and leave some libations to all the dead buried there. While I do not know of a precedent for this in ancient Greek custom (except for the *Genesia*, at which all the city's dead were honored), it seems appropriate to me to establish ties with the area I live in by honoring those who have lived here before, whose spirits (in some people's opinions) would at least partially be linked to this part of the earth. Similar to the way I honor the nymphs of this particular land around me, instead of only the Greek nymphs or the nymphs of my birthplace.

Which brings me to the topic of the heroes. In ancient times, the heroes were men (and sometimes women too) who had been (or were believed to have been) actual living people, worshipped after death as semi-divine. The cult of heroes was directly tied to their tombs (although sometimes many places would boast the tomb of the same hero), and their worship was closer to that of the dead than of the gods. They were offered the same types of foods and libations, and their shrines were passed in silence. A hero did not have to be of divine parentage, but was often honored for some exceptional quality or feat. However, there were few "pan-Hellenic" heroes; mostly this was a local phenomenon, each area having its own heroes. Therefore, when attempting to revive the worship of heroes in modern times, it seems less authentic to turn immediately to ancient Greek heroes, instead of identifying the heroes of our own culture and specific area.

For instance, here in Montana, the most important, most often talked about local heroes are Lewis and Clark. Things are named after them, plays written about them, children are taught their histories. They are definitely the heroes of this place, much more relevant to me than, say, Theseus. Such modern heroes are often the subjects of folk songs and ballads (think: the *Iliad*), and are to some degree mythologized even when they began as real people – much in the way, I think, that some ancient heroes were. There are sometimes even local variants of these new hero legends, as there were in ancient times.

So how do we now pay cult to our local heroes? We can leave offerings at their graves (when possible) or at places associated with them. We can, as in ancient times, hold feasts in their honor. We can set aside a special day each year for them, or modify an existing civic holiday in their honor. We are not even committing much of an innovation in this, since as Walter Burkert states, "Great gods are no longer born, but new heroes can always be raised up from the army of the dead whenever a family, cult association, or city passes an appropriate resolution to accord heroic honours." (Greek Religion, p. 206) Thus, recognizing new heroes and paying them cult is actually entirely within the structure of ancient Greek religion. And it is yet another way to bring the religion of the past fully into the present.

**Book Review:** *Pure Pagan: Seven Centuries of Greek Poems and Fragments*, selected and translated by Burton Raffel. Modern Library, New York, 2004. ISBN 0-679-64297-8

by Gitana

*I* had been waiting for this book to be published, and it finally appeared on the shelves just over a month ago. With a title like *Pure Pagan* I was sure this was going to be fantastic. I ordered it online, and when it arrived in the mail, my first thought upon opening the package was “wow this is a really small book!” (It’s around 100 pages.)

It’s often not a good idea to have expectations about things, but I sure did have them about this book. I expected to find a treasure-trove of beautiful poetry to be able to use in my worship. Second to that I hoped to find some pieces of trivia that would help us as reconstructionists, possibly giving clues to some practices that we just can’t quite figure out. Unfortunately, I was disappointed in regards to my expectations. I wasn’t especially impressed with any of the poetry in the book. There are some nice poems, yes, but in general they aren’t to my liking. Please understand, I know basically nothing about poetry, and therefore I am not critiquing it with respect to its genre; I’m not saying it is good or bad *as poetry*, just that it wasn’t to my taste. This is partially due to my mistaken assumption that most of the poems would be about the gods; in fact, very few are.

The translator says in the preface that the goal of his work was to translate less popular poems. He felt that there are several excellent volumes of ancient poetry already available, and so in order to make a meaningful contribution he would focus on other poems, most of which are only fragments. That to me is of great importance, as I am often frustrated at the thought of the resources we would have if only they were to be translated and made available. So much is just sitting in museums, untranslated and not accessible to the general public.

The organization of the book is a little awkward, but very “fair.” No attempt has been made to put them in a chronological order, although they are grouped by author. The individual poems themselves are given titles inspired by the translator, and then the poems are arranged alphabetically by those titles. Again, for me I didn’t like that approach, although I can see why he did it this way. It places the focus on the poems themselves. However, for me, the historical context is important, and so I would have liked them to be in chronological order, or at least the best attempt at that, as some I’m sure are rather difficult to date.

Another issue I had with the book is the fact that the original Greek is not included. I really would have liked to see that, especially since the translator did not translate word-for-word. He acknowledges this in the preface to the book, by saying that he did not want to “mangle” the poems with a literal translation. It is unfortunate that translations cannot convey the whole beauty of the poems, as they also had a melody and rhythm to them, which cannot come through in a translation. It seems rather like reading the lyrics of a song, and discussing its merits based solely on that, without ever having heard the accompanying music. Well, this frustration is not limited to this book, as it can be said of any ancient Greek poetry.

On a positive note, I will say that this is an invaluable contribution to our knowledge about ancient Greece in general, and I would encourage everyone to read this book. It does give one a sense of what was important to the culture, in the sense that poetry is a reflection of its society. I would, however, suggest that you try to find it in the library, as it is overpriced in my opinion.

“My dear father and mother as well gave me the name Thesmophane before I met my sad death. For me the fates spun seven complete years with their threads and then cut them off. And indeed my renowned father lavished on me all the good things that belong to the noblest children. He did not omit libations or anything owed to the gods of the dead for my life. The priests of Eumolpus made a sacred branch for me and gave me great honour. The thiasotai of Dionysus wove me a crown, and I was initiated into the mysteries of torch-bearing Demeter. I won a good honour, since the saying is true that children the gods love die. Therefore, good father, do not distress your dear heart longer in sorrow.”

- Epitaph, 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. AD



## Pomegranate

by Jennifer Lawrence

Three months of winter

--oxblood and lunacy's radiance,  
red harvest moonlight on snow--  
Do you think his desire tempted her?  
Do you think the price troubled her?  
(Down into the darkness, he bore her in his arms;  
Sheltered in the shadows, he lured her with his charms.)  
Those ruby seeds  
--glistenglimmershine with the liquid lure of vital fluids--  
(his? hers? whose?)  
First time, and all...  
Was she really stolen from mothergoddess  
(goddessmother),  
Torn from green bright world  
Down to night?  
Or perchance  
(perhaps)  
It was like so many other  
Loveatfirstsights:  
A stranger  
--gypsy-cliched--  
Tall, dark, handsome,  
Mysterious.  
Hell is no party, no swinging club, no hip crib, no cool  
crashpad.  
Maybe she got bored after awhile:  
He probably wasn't much of a talker,  
No matter how great the sex was.  
So she made up a story,  
Looked for a way out.  
But kidnapped? Raped?  
Ceres' daughter, pretty pampered Persephone,  
She who was called Hades' queen?  
No, she went willingly.  
And she must have wanted the chance  
To come back (eventually)...  
Those seeds, that poppy-heart sweetness,  
That reddest of reds,  
Very blackest of blacks.  
No accidental swallow there--  
Baby, she *gulped* them down.