

Damanhur: A Magical Community in Italy

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DAMANHUR IS, arguably, the largest communal group in the world today or, at least, the largest communal group in the ancient wisdom-magical tradition. Although the movement has been in existence for some twenty years, it has been the subject matter of very few scholarly studies. Apart from some unpublished papers read at sociological conferences, and from an entry in my own 1990 encyclopedic volume on "new magical movements," *Il cappello del mago*,¹ I am aware of only two relevant sociological papers, authored by Italian sociologists Luigi Berzano² and Maria Immacolata Macioti.³ Although non-Italian social scientists have occasionally visited Damanhur, the group has been mentioned outside of Italy only in papers by Isotta Poggi, an Italian-born assistant to J. Gordon Melton at the Institute for the Study of American Religion, Santa Barbara, California.⁴ On the other hand—in Italy and occasionally abroad⁵—Damanhur has been featured in countless magazine articles, TV programs and, occasionally, pieces of

1. See my *Il cappello del mago, I nuovi movimenti magici dallo spiritismo al satanismo* (Milan: SugarCo, 1990), 87-90.

2. Luigi Berzano, "Religione e autoperfezionamento," in Maria Immacolata Macioti, ed., *Maghi e magie nell'Italia di oggi* (Florence: Angelo Pontecorvoli Editore, 1991), 141-86; republished in an updated version as "Damanhur. Un monastero per famiglie nell'età dell'acquario," in L. Berzano, *Religiosità del nuovo areopago. Credenze e forme religiose nell'epoca postsecolare* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994), 143-70.

3. Maria Immacolata Macioti, "Il tempio sotterraneo di Damanhur," *Ars Regio* 4, no. 19 (July-August 1994): 4-9.

4. See, for example, Isotta Poggi, "Alternative Spirituality in Italy," in James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 271-86.

5. See for example the lengthy article by Javier Sierra, "El secreto de Damanhur," *Mas alla de la ciencia* 50 (April 1993): 38-51.

anti-cult literature.⁶ Damanhur itself has produced through its publishing branch, Edizioni Horus, more than 150 books and booklets, mostly authored by its founder Oberto Airaudi.⁷

Press and TV interest increased enormously after 1992, when the huge Underground Temple—successfully kept secret for fifteen years—was discovered (following the indications of a disgruntled ex-member) and seized by the Italian authorities for having been built in breach of a number of zoning and tax requirements. This paper will in brief place Damanhur within the alternative spirituality tradition of its Italian region, Piedmont (Piemonte), will detail its origins, history and worldview, will explore the meaning of the Underground Temple, and will raise some sociological questions on the structure and future of the community and on its relationship with the New Age in Italy.

1. Alternative Spirituality in Piedmont

Damanhur is situated in Piedmont, less than thirty miles north of the city of Turin. Before 1861—when the Kingdom of Italy was established—Italy was divided in a number of small states. Piedmont and the island of Sardinia, together with some districts presently part of France, constituted the Kingdom of Sardinia, ruled by the House of Savoy. Although early Savoy rulers were rather conservative—and, in the 18th and early 19th century, hostile to the Enlightenment—things changed in the 1840s. For a number of reasons, Turin, a University city, became the home of the most progressive and liberal intellectual renewal in Italy; the renewal in turn gained leading politicians and the kings themselves. Under the leadership of prime minister Count Camillo di Cavour (1810-1861), the Kingdom of Sardinia eventually became the Kingdom of Italy under what Cavour called the "artichoke policy." Little by little, through war, international alliances and negotiated settlements, the Kingdom of Sardinia added—one after the other—all the small Italian states to the crown of the Savoy family. By 1861 the Kingdom of Sardinia encompassed all of Italy, excluding Rome and the surrounding area, still ruled by the Pope.

6. See for examples of anti-cult treatments of Damanhur, Pier Angelo Gramaglia, *La reincarnazione* (Casale Monferrato/Allessandria: Piemme, 1989), 384-92, and Cecilia Gatto Trocchi, *Viaggio nella magia* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 1993), 59-72. For a criticism of the anti-cult book by Gatto Trocchi (an anthropologist) see my "A proposito di viaggi nella magia," *La Critica Sociologica* 106 (Summer 1993): 127-343.

7. For a comprehensive bibliography of Damanhur's own writings, see Berzano, "Damanhur," 166-70.

Rome was eventually invaded and made the capital of the Kingdom of Italy (established with this name in 1861) in the year 1870. Because the unification of Italy under the liberal House of Savoy was seen as a threat to the continuous existence of an independent state ruled by the Pope in Central Italy and also because of the frankly anti-clerical orientation of the Count of Cavour and other leading politicians in Piedmont, Savoy politics were actively opposed by the Vatican and by the Catholic Church, including that in Piedmont itself. This, in turn, only increased the anti-clerical measures of the Count of Cavour and his associates; many leading Catholic clergymen in Piedmont suffered imprisonment and exile. Within the frame of this policy, Piedmontese governments were extremely tolerant—for the standards of their time—towards alternative spirituality, seen as another way to harass the largely predominant Catholic Church. Not only were American new religious movements such as Mormonism and, later, Seventh-day Adventism allowed into Piedmont (while they were prevented from entering any other Italian State), but—although statutes against magic and witchcraft remained on the books—Turin also became a surprisingly tolerant city as far as the activities of occult and magical groups were concerned. As a result, not unexpectedly, occult leaders, spiritualist mediums and practitioners of magnetism and mesmerism settled in Turin, after fleeing the more hostile conditions prevailing in other Italian states (and, occasionally, France, Austria and Belgium). The capital of Piedmont became between 1850 and 1880 one of Europe's main centers for occultism and spiritualism. By 1890—twenty years after the Italian Army had conquered Rome—the political function of alternative spirituality in Turin had exhausted itself, and the prosecution of a number of spiritualist mediums and mesmerists in a celebrated trial marked the end of this occult spring.

The reason why Turin became the home of many occult and spiritualist groups, thus, has nothing to do with the alleged esoteric interests of the Savoy family (largely a legend), but should rather be explained by the political situation and the hostility between the governments of Piedmont and the Catholic Church during the process that eventually led to the unification of Italy. One of the results of the Savoy politics of tolerating a number of occult and spiritualist groups in Turin was the production of a propaganda literature, particularly in Rome and Naples, accusing the government of Piedmont of protecting "satanists." The label of "City of the Devil" for Turin was largely generated by this propaganda and has remained with the city ever since, although in the 20th century the number of occult and spiritualist

groups in Turin has not been exceptional, if compared with other large Italian and European towns.⁸

On the other hand, it is true that Turin's occult spring of 1850-1890 left a certain legacy. The Theosophical Society and the splinter United Lodge of Theosophists have been particularly active in Piedmont's capital. A succession of local independent groups in the Theosophical or "ancient wisdom" tradition have also been founded in Turin throughout the 20th century. Finally, it should be mentioned that the existence from the times of Napoleon in Turin of what is now the largest Egyptian Museum in the world is not without relation to the birth of a number of occult groups inspired by Egyptian rituals and religion.⁹

2. The Origins and History of Damanhur

Oberto Airaudi was born in Balangero in the Lanzo valleys, north of Turin, in 1950. A precocious young man, he published at age fifteen a book of poetry, and at age seventeen *Cronaca del Mio Suicidio* ("A Chronicle of my Suicide"), a rather morbid book where he announced in a literary form his "possible" suicide.¹⁰ At the same time, Airaudi was fascinated by Turin's occult milieu. He visited a number of healers and "pranotherapists" (healers claiming to use the force of "prana" by raising their hands, and, occasionally, by physical manipulations) and learned the secrets of their profession, quite popular in Italy in the 1970s. Soon, Airaudi became a successful "pranotherapist" himself, with offices in a number of different small towns of Piedmont. He practiced also as a spiritualist medium—and later co-authored a spiritualist manual¹¹—and became familiar with Turin's Theosophical subculture. In 1974 he had enough friends and clients to establish his own organization, the Horus Center, backed up by a School of Pranotherapy.

Almost immediately after the establishment of the Horus Center, Airaudi mentioned to the members that they should eventually

8. See, on this point, my "La città delle meraviglie. Spiritualità alternativa, nuove religioni e magia a Torino," *Ars Regia* 3, no. 12 (May-June 1993): 24-35, and *Indagine sul satanismo. Satanisti e anti-satanisti dal Seicento ai nostri giorni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1994).

9. See, on this point, Alessandro Bongioanni and Riccardo Grazzi, *Torino, l'Egitto e l'Oriente fra storia e leggenda* (Turin: L'Angolo Manzoni Editrice, 1994). It is interesting to note that what is known to the Mormons as the Book of Abraham in the *Pearl of Great Price* was "translated" by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith by interpreting papyri originally excavated in Egypt by the archeologist Antonio Lebolo, a native of Castellamonte (near Turin, and in fact not far from present-day Damanhur), an associate of Turin's Egyptian Museum.

10. Oberto Airaudi, *Cronaca del Mio Suicidio* (Turin: CEI, 1968).

11. Oberto Airaudi and U. Montefameglio, *Lo Spiritismo* (Turin: MEB, 1979).

organize to live communally. In 1975 steps were taken to rent (and subsequently to buy) a property in the valley called Valchiusella, between the villages of Baldissero Canavese and Vidracco. The valley is situated between Ivrea (one of Italy's "technocities" and the home of the computer company Olivetti) and Castellamonte (a town in Italy famous for the china industry). In 1976 a settlement was established under the name of an ancient Egyptian city, *Damanhur*, with two dozen pioneers.

Damanhur was officially inaugurated as a community in 1979. In 1981 the previous by-laws were modified into a "Constitution," a move emphasizing that the community regarded itself as a "separated people" and even as "an independent State." The Constitution was revised in 1984, 1986 and 1987, until—in 1989—it was re-issued as the *Constitution of the Nation of Damanhur*. In fact, the definition of Damanhur as a "State" had been actively opposed by anti-cultists and some local authorities, and the 1989 text opted finally for the word "Nation." At any rate, Damanhur has a "government" of its own and a currency, the credit ("credito"), the value of which, however, is based on the Italian lira and function of which is largely symbolic. From the very beginning, the "citizens" of Damanhur in part work in the community and in part have outside work but return to the community after their working day is finished. Although exceptions existed, a large majority of the original pioneers was composed of young adults who had finished high school. A few had college degrees, and a small group included skilled workers with no high school training.

Couples were admitted and children were raised in small units composed of a number of families. Very soon Damanhur had its own day-care center, pre-school and elementary school; an intermediate school, for children aged 11-14, was inaugurated in 1994. After a few conflicts, the autonomy of these schools was accepted by local authorities. Yearly examinations by school authorities of the nearby municipalities have confirmed that the educational standards of Damanhur schools are high, and the results scored by children are higher than average.

The growth of Damanhur has been continuous. There were 200 "citizens" in 1985 and 400 in 1994. Since, according to the Constitution, a community could not exceed 220 members, Damanhur is now a "federation" of a number of different communities, all located in the Valchiusella valley within a radius of twenty miles. The mother community has been renamed *Damyl* and the daughter communities are called *Rama Pan*, *Tentyris*, and *Vidracco Alta*. In fact, there is a continuum of homes in the valley, each inhabited by ten to fifteen people, including children. Some services are centralized in Damyl,

including the schools. Daml also houses the "open temple," an impressive open structure with statues of Greek and Egyptian divinities, and a larger open area with symbols of different religious traditions. A market is held there every Sunday, when the community opens its gates to welcome tourists and visitors.

The products of the community are also sold through normal commercial channels (including international duty free shops as far as Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi). Damanhur is reputed for its health food products, china and jewelry. Paintings by community artists (including the founder, Oberto Airaudi) are also sold to the general public. More surprisingly, Damanhur has a high percentage of computers (one to every six "citizens"), and one of the community's resources is the sale of software. Although self-sufficiency is a stated goal, even today a percentage of "citizens" have outside jobs.

In addition to the 400 "citizens" (all resident in the community homes), Damanhur is composed of some 300 "associated members" who live in their own homes (the vast majority in the province of Turin), contribute economically to the community, and visit on weekends and when special celebrations are held. At least another one thousand people are regularly in touch with Damanhur and attend the courses of the Free University of Damanhur in Turin and elsewhere, but do not contribute or tithe regularly and are not regarded as "members." The Constitution suggests that "citizens" deed all their properties to the community, but in fact areas of private property have always been kept and the economic arrangements of Damanhur have passed through various phases.¹²

The organization of the family in Damanhur has attracted considerable hostile interest. Couples may join the community and continue as such, although they should live communally with other families in one of the valley homes. On the other hand many "citizens," who were unmarried when they joined Damanhur, have entered into one of the community marriages, stipulated as a contract which provides for a "provisional" marriage for one, two and three years. When the contract expires, the marriage can be renewed or dissolved. Sensationalist press reports have always equated the Damanhur system of marriage to free love. Damanhur's "citizens" counter that a significant percentage of the marriages are regularly renewed, and that against the hypocrisy of the larger society—where marriages are theoretically "forever" but in many cases end in divorces—the possibility of checking periodically whether a real marriage still exists results in better couples and in fact contributes to the stability of the families. Children, at any rate, spend a

12. See Berzano, "Damanhur," 146,150.

significant portion of their time in the community schools and other communal activities.

As might be expected, conflicts and lurid, but often inaccurate reports on the family arrangements of Damanhur, have arisen in child custody cases when only one of the parents has left the community. Disgruntled ex-members have also informed the press of Damanhur's practice of "programming" the birth of each new child according both to the economical possibilities of each unit and to astrologically defined times. In many tabloid articles this has simply been reported as the couples of Damanhur "having sex only when Airaudi gives his permission," actually a caricature of Damanhur's "programmed births" project.

3. Damanhur's Worldview

According to sociologist Luigi Berzano, Oberto Airaudi's worldview shows elements of four different religious traditions: Egyptian, Celtic (including Christian Celtic), occult-theosophical, and New Age. Although when asked, any "citizen" of Damanhur would insist that the community's worldview is absolutely new and original, in fact the influence of a larger theosophical and occult tradition is at times evident. Many ideas popular in the New Age movement have been incorporated within the community's literature, although—contrary to other New Age Meccas in Europe—Damanhur is not vegetarian, and in fact its restaurant (open to the public) excels in the preparation of meat specialties. The list of wines is also rich in the tradition of Piedmont, but unlike the case in many New Age vegetarian restaurants. Vegetarian meals are available, but Airaudi himself is not vegetarian and does not abstain from wine. All "citizens", according to the Constitution, must abstain from tobacco and drugs, and this provision is strictly enforced. Although no worldview may be entirely new, it should also be recognized that elements of different origin have been integrated by Airaudi in a rather original synthesis.

Damanhur does not allow itself to be called polytheistic. "Only one God exists," members state, but it is impossible to contact him directly. God remains largely unknown and can be accessed only through *the gods*, the "Intermediate Deities."¹³ Only nine "Primeval Deities" are self-generated; all the others have been created by humans, but, not unlike the Jungian archetypes, now have an existence of their own. Not

13. See "Gabbiano" (Mauro Gagliardi), ed., *La Via Horusiana. Il Libro. Principli e concetti fondamentali della scuola di pensiero di Damanhur*, 2nd ed. (Turin: Horus, 1988), 104-10. Further information has been supplied in personal interviews by "citizens" and leaders of Damanhur, including Oberto Airudi.

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to be confused with the "Intermediate Deities"—or "the gods"—are "Entities," which include angels, nature spirits and demons. While today the entities are "subtler" than humans, the first human was a "Primeval Deity" who—according to a gnostic myth with a long history in the hermetic and esoteric tradition—was the victim of a fall and lapsed into the present union with the body.

Many deities and entities voluntarily followed humans into their exile and may now help us when we try to return to our original "subtler" state (according to a scheme the theosophical origin of which is apparent). Our return to the original condition may be made easier by different sciences, including modern physical science but also by magic, alchemy and "selfic," the science studying the particular properties of spiral-like forms (called "self" in Damanhur). Through these techniques the "citizens" of Damanhur also learn to recognize the "synchronic lines" which constitute the Earth's nerves, for the Earth—as in many occult and New Age traditions—is considered as a living being. The very site of Damanhur was selected because of the "synchronic lines" converging in the valley; knowing the "lines" is essential in order to communicate with distant places and even to program our future reincarnations.

Damanhur's cosmology includes the early generation of three "Mother worlds"—the world of human beings, the world of plants, and the world of nature spirits; they are not capable of communication between themselves but instead generate "Echo worlds" through which the "Mother worlds" become able to communicate. Each race has an "astral tank" (a concept similar to the "akashic memory" of the theosophical tradition). Human beings may get in touch, through particular techniques, with the human "race mind" (the "astral tank" of the human race), but they may also find very useful information in the "race minds" of animals. To this effect, each human being may enter into a special magical relation with an animal by assuming its name. In fact all the "citizens" of Damanhur are identified not by their original family names but by the names of animals. The founder is Hawk—an allusion to Horus—but one finds as well names such as Elephant, Kangaroo and so on.

Because the number of "citizens" is now in excess of the animal names available—and also for magical reasons—each "citizen" is now identified by two names, the first of an animal and the second of a plant. Animal names also serve the obvious sociological purpose of marking the community's "otherness," a purpose also served by the custom of the "citizens" greeting each other (but not outsiders) with the words "With you" (*Con te*) rather than with the more usual "Good morning" or "Good evening."

Spiritualism, parapsychological experiments and other classical techniques of the occult-esoteric milieu are still used in Damanhur, but increasingly important are the use of a distinctive esoteric language ("citizens" regard this as an ancient secret language rediscovered by Damanhur)—written both in Latin characters and in ideograms—and of musical themes and dance movements corresponding to this language. Rituals, including ritual dresses, have been devised by Oberto Airaudi in order to facilitate the reintegration of humans into their original exalted condition, and at the same time the reintegration of Mother Earth (threatened by an ecological disaster). Although observers may note that Egyptian symbols are somewhat predominant, Airaudi insists that the Egyptian religion is not more important than other traditions in building Damanhur's new synthesis. Egypt, he mentioned in a recent interview with the author, has also been used as a convenient *external* symbolism, in order to hide more esoteric truths that Damanhur is not prepared to share with the outside world.

4. The Underground Temple

Only in 1992—due to unpredictable external circumstances—did it became clear to outside observers that the main task for the "citizens" of Damanhur was not the building of a self-sufficient community, nor the performance of certain rituals and dances in the Open Temple. The most important work was the building of the Underground Temple. The completion of this building is magically linked, in Damanhur's inner worldview, to the salvation of the whole Planet Earth.

Damanhur has been a remarkably stable community, with the number of defections actually lower than in non-communal new religious movements. Accordingly, lawsuits by former members, although not unknown, have not been a significant problem and have normally been settled. In 1991, however, Filippo Maria Cerutti—a former member of the "government" of Damanhur—left the community and sued Airaudi, asking for compensation for his former services and financial contributions; Cerutti, a rich man, had in fact never contributed all of his fortune to the community. In this case the counter evaluations by Cerutti and by Damanhur of what would be a fair settlement were so distant that an amicable solution proved impossible, and the case went to Court (where it still is). Cerutti—who had been part of Damanhur's inner circle—threatened to expose the existence of the Underground Temple. When it became clear that no settlement was possible, Cerutti visited a district attorney, Mr. Bruno Tinti, telling him the amazing story of a huge temple located under a small mountain, with miles of galleries and rooms. Although initially skeptical, the

judge ordered a raid. Following Cerutti's directions, agents of the tax police were able to uncover a large number of secret passages and technologically advanced devices hidden one after the other in the very heart of a small mountain that led, one after the other, to hidden rooms of almost incredible magnificence.

Building a temple, of course, is not a criminal offense in Italy, but Airaudi and Damanhur's "government" were accused of the breach of zoning regulations, statutes requiring building permissions, and tax laws. In 1993 the City of Vidracco, having jurisdiction over the Underground Temple, ordered its destruction. Due to the opposition of a considerable part of public opinion—including social scientists and the artistic community—the order has never been enforced, and it appears now very unlikely that it will be enforced in the future. An inspection by state engineers has ascertained that the underground works have not damaged the mountain but rather consolidated it. On the other hand, authorities in charge of the preservation of the cultural patrimony of Piedmont have decided that the Temple is a significant work of art and should be preserved. Without entering into the legal technicalities, the Temple does not at present seriously face the threat of destruction. There is, however, a possibility that it will be confiscated by the state and assigned to the City of Vidracco. It could subsequently rent it back to Damanhur for a fee, or, alternatively, impose its own policy of admitting tourists. At present tourists are not admitted, although they can visit an exhibit with facsimiles and models. Even this latter possibility is probably unlikely. What really hangs in the balance is whether Damanhur will be permitted to continue work on the Temple, which is not finished. According to Airaudi, only ten per cent of the work, as originally planned, has been completed during the last sixteen years. Cerutti was sued before a criminal court by Damanhur for libel and slander, but was found not guilty. The civil suit is still going on, although the latest news is that the evaluation of the amount due to Cerutti by a technical expert designated by the Turin court is not far from the offer made by Damanhur.

The Italian authorities in charge of the preservation of the works of art seem to have correctly assessed the artistic value of the Underground Temple. For the outside visitor it is a breath-taking experience, offering—room after room—amazing and unexpected discoveries. The artworks (mainly stained-glass windows, frescoes and mosaics) are reminiscent of Byzantine, Egyptian and Greek models but also of Liberty and Art Deco, all of these styles merged into a unique Damanhur perspective/The main rooms are the Water Room (dedicated to the Mother and the female principle, with a spectacular dolphin mosaic); the Earth Room, with eight huge columns and a bull

mosaic, dedicated to the male principle; the Glass Room, with the largest underground dome in the world, made of 60,000 small glass pieces, the site of Damanhur's most important rituals.

In addition to the three main rooms, there are apparently never-ending corridors, with stained-glass windows, Egyptian style frescoes, many secret passages (often unsuspected and astonishing), and smaller rooms for parapsychological and magical experiments. Particularly significant is the Room of the Spheres, where big glass spheres are each connected to the always present "self" (i.e. a metal spiral). Through these spheres the "citizens" of Damanhur may get in touch with the continents and direct their magical energy where it is most needed. All in all, it is impossible to describe the Underground Temple, called the Temple of Man (*Tempio dell'Uomo*), a term using gender-exclusive language, although women are prominent in the leadership of Damanhur. There are literally miles of corridors, and thousands of statues, windows and paintings. In fact, each member of the community makes with his or her own hands a statue symbolically representing his or her connection with the animal whose name each "citizen" has selected.

Entering the Underground Temple—an experience for the time being reserved to a small number of non-"citizens", including state and local officers, social scientists and some journalists—is, as sociologist Maria Immacolata Macioti has written, "entering into a fairy tale."¹⁴ Although rituals are performed in the Temple, it is thought that the most important ritual has been—for the last sixteen years—the construction of the Temple itself.

Most of the construction has been performed at night, and the need of preserving secrecy has not allowed the use of noisy modern technological devices. Probably the secret was doomed from the beginning: it was very unlikely that it could be kept forever, even if the number of "apostates" who defect from Damanhur is small. However, the very fact that a secret about so huge a project was effectively kept for a fifteen years by some five hundred people, with no hint reaching the anti-cultist activists or the press, is the real "miracle" of Damanhur. On the other hand, all the experience of Damanhur should be re-evaluated taking into account the Temple. Like the early Mormons in Nauvoo, Illinois, the "citizens" of Damanhur regard building the Temple as their most sacred duty, and all the other experiences—including the economic structure of the community—have the main aim of allowing them time enough for their building enterprise. For this reason, Airaudi regards it as extremely important that Damanhur be allowed to continue the construction. In his vision, construction should

14. Macioti, "Il tempio sotterraneo di Damanhur," 5.

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still go on for some decades as the most important spiritual activity of the "citizens." Although he admits that secret portions of the Temple still exist, undisclosed to all outsiders, any visit will show that there are large rooms and corridors where work has been left unfinished awaiting the developments of the legal case.

5. The Future of Damanhur

It is not impossible that the unwanted disclosure of the Underground Temple in 1992 will start a new phase for Damanhur. It has already compelled the community to engage in a closer dialogue with local and national authorities and with the public at large. Cerutti's "revelations" have in fact made Damanhur a more important target for anti-cultists than it used to be. Even the Roman Catholic bishop of Ivrea, in whose diocesan territory Damanhur is located, Monsignor Luigi Bettazzi—who is controversial in Italy for his extremely liberal political views—has released a document emphasizing that no one could at the same time become a "citizen" of Damanhur and remain a Roman Catholic in good standing (a statement regarded as reasonable even by some Damanhur leaders). The bishop has also accused Damanhur of "immoral practices" and "brainwashing," without further specifications and apparently following the anti-cult literature on the subject.¹⁵

The birth of Damanhur could be described according to the well-known Stark-Bainbridge typology of audience cults, client cults, and cult movements.¹⁶ Damanhur's experience shows that a leader and his or her followers can pass subsequently through the three stages. Damanhur started as an audience cult including the readers of Airaudi's popular books. When Airaudi started a professional career as a "pranotherapist" and healer, his regular clients moved from the audience cult to the client cult stage. Finally, Airaudi was capable of organizing his clients into a movement, which eventually became communal.

The communal form of Damanhur, on the other hand, is not really typical of the Italian New Age movement. The New Age is—particularly in Italy—a network of independent and loosely structured groups.¹⁷ Damanhur is anything but loosely structured. It claims to be a

15. Mons. Luigi Bettazzi, "Parliamo di Damanhur," // *risveglio popolare* (22 October 1992): 3.

16. See Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The future of Religion. Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1985), 26-30.

17. See my *Storia del New Age 1962-1992* (Piacenza: Cristianita, 1994).

"nation" with a "government," a "constitution," and a well-established hierarchy. It was developed before New Age became a household name in Italy, although it subsequently incorporated some (but not all) of New Age's most popular ideas. It will probably survive what J. Gordon Melton has called "the demise of the New Age."¹⁸ Structured and hierarchically organized movements such as Damanhur were not really part of the New Age network, although they found many of their followers within the New Age milieu.

In this respect it would be interesting to compare Damanhur to another community in Piedmont, the Green Village (*Villaggio Verde*) of Cavallirio (Novara).¹⁹ Although Damanhur and the Green Village have in common a theosophical reference, the Green Village is an "open" community where only a dozen of people live but members of many different groups of the theosophical and New Age milieu gather, particularly on Sunday, to perform a variety of different activities. Damanhur, on the other hand, is not an "open" community. Although it welcomes visitors of different persuasions, in order to become a "citizen" one must share the rather precise worldview of Oberto Airaudi (although he insists that the worldview is evolving and would not use the word "religion").

Even the notion of "movement," or "new religious movement," fails to capture exactly what Damanhur is. Damanhur is, in fact, a community, and Oberto Airaudi insists that he has decided that it should *not* become a "movement." in discussing the matter with Airaudi, it becomes clear that what he does not like in the idea of "movement" is the geographical dispersion of the members in a large territory. He claims that all attempts to organize settlements too far from the original location of Damanhur have not been successful. Damanhur could still grow in the future, but Airaudi would prefer that all the settlements—part of what the Constitution calls a "federation"—remain in the Valchiussella valley, or at least in the province of Turin. It is true that Damanhur emphasizes computing, and that computer links could be easily established at larger distances. On the other hand it is crucial for Airaudi that all "citizens" could meet regularly to share the life of the one and the same community (and—as we now know—attend the Underground Temple rituals and participate in its never-ending construction). This has made Damanhur a selective community with little interest in proselytism; all new "citizens" must pass through a probationary period before joining. The number of people who meet

18. See J. Gordon Melton, "The Future of the New Age," unpublished paper presented at the RENNORD 1994 conference, Greve, Denmark, August 1994.

19. See Isotta Poggi, "An Experimental Theosophical Community in Italy: The Green Village," *Theosophical History* 4, nos. 4-5 (October 1992-January 1993): 149-54.

Damanhur through the lectures of Oberto Airaudi, his books, and visitation on Sunday as tourists results already in more applications to join than the community is prepared to accept. Groups of people who have visited Damanhur (coming as far as from Los Angeles, California) have been counselled to "do their own thing" and keep some sort of loose association without joining as "citizens" or "associates." In other words, building the community has been more important for Oberto Airaudi and his friends than taking a message to the outside world; this second aspect has not been completely neglected, thanks to the publishing house, the magazines, and the lectures. Building the Underground Temple and performing the rituals are more important than attracting new converts. This is probably also due to an esoteric and not-yet-fully-disclosed apocalyptic vision of the fate of Planet Earth.

Oberto Airaudi will not turn fifty years of age before the year AD 2,000, and the group—despite being itself more than twenty years old—is still in an early and charismatic phase. Incidents such as the one involving the forced disclosure of the Underground Temple may accelerate the Weberian processes of routinization of the charisma and lead to new directions. It would become increasingly difficult for the community—particularly if it will continue to be successful—to avoid or prevent its own institutionalization as a movement.