

Among the most interesting of the thousands of entomological and botanical micro-fossils from the Upper Oligocene of the German Rhineland in the Museum's Georg Statz Collection are those of the tiny Eurasian water spider, *Argyroneta aquatica*. Anthropologist Peter T. Furst, who has long been interested in the natural and cultural history of spiders and their role in the

cosmology and symbolic arts of non-western peoples, took these photographs of a living descendant of the 40,000,000-year-old fossil spider in the course of his research into the mythology of spiders. His pictorial documentation of some of the extraordinary life habits of *Argyroneta* indicates little, if any, anatomical differences between the fossil and the live spider,

despite the tens of millions of years which have elapsed since Oligocene times. In the accompanying article Dr. Furst, who also published the first description of the Statz Collection after its acquisition by the Museum in the early 1950's, describes nature's own aqualung diver in the context of some widely divergent human attitudes toward spiders in general.

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THE AQUALUNG SPIDER- BIRTH TO DEATH UNDER WATER

by Peter T. Furst

and Living Descendant of
the 40,000,000-year-old
Fossil Spider as well...

Spiders have been an endless source of fascination for man since long before written history. Contemporary western urban man often has an irrational horror of spiders, but non-western peoples, as well as those of classical antiquity, have endowed the spider with power and mystery, regarding it as friend and ally of man and gods, a creature at once useful, magical and precious.

Arachne, the Greek maiden who vied with Athene for the honor of being first among weavers and was changed into a spider for daring to challenge the gods; the sacred Spider Mother of the Hopi; Spider as the beneficent Bringer of Fire among the Cherokee; the West African Ashanti trickster-culture hero Anansi, the Spider, owner of folk tales, which he stole from the Sky God by trickery to give to the people and which, carried by slaves to the New World, came to enrich our folk literature as

"Aunt Nancy stories;" the spider oracles common to many parts of the world; spider motifs in the ritual and symbolic arts of native peoples, ancient and modern; the thread of spider silk on which the heroes of "the first times" effected their escape from peril or descended to earth from the upper-world in many American Indian origin stories—these are but a few of innumerable instances of man's preoccupation with the spider world in all its fantastic multiplicity of form and habit.

To people better attuned to nature than we, not all spiders are automatically bad, nor, for that matter, all good—it depends on their attributes, real or ascribed. A poisonous spider like the "black widow" (*Latrodectus*) may be justly respected and feared for its highly toxic nature. But the Indians of the Southwest have long known, better than we, that the so-called tarantulas of North America are essentially harm-

less to man, though some are capable of inflicting a painful bite. The Hopi Spider Mother in her animal manifestation is in fact the trapdoor or purse-web spider, a close relative of the tarantula.

The origin of the name "tarantula" itself is interesting. It derives from the region of Taranto in southern Italy, where pagan Bacchanalian and Dionysian harvest and fertility ecstasies survived into Christian times thinly disguised as spider bite mania to fool the blackrobed priests of the new religion. The wily peasants claimed that people bitten by a certain spider ("tarantula") at harvest time could throw the deadly poison off only by means of unrestrained erotic dances ("tarantella") and that they would surely fall dead if anyone dressed in black were to appear to stop them. The priests, of course, wore black. According to the tradition one had to be bitten only once for the mania and