

“MESSAGES FROM THE PAST: THE WORLD OF THE GODDESS”

Riane Eisler

What kind of people were our prehistoric ancestors who worshiped the Goddess? What was life like during the millennia of our cultural evolution before recorded or written history? And what can we learn from those times that is relevant to our own?

Because they left us no written accounts, we can only infer, like Sherlock Holmes turned scientist, how the people of the Paleolithic and of the later, more advanced Neolithic, thought, felt, and behaved. But almost everything we have been taught about antiquity is based on conjecture. Even the records we have from early historic cultures, such as Sumer, Babylon, and Crete, are at best scanty and fragmentary and largely concerned with inventories of goods and other mercantile matters. And the more detailed later written accounts about both prehistory and early history from classical Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and Christian times are also mainly based on inferences—made without even the aid of modern archaeological methods.

Indeed, most of what we have learned to think of as our cultural evolution has in fact been interpretation. Moreover, as we saw in the preceding chapter, this interpretation has more often than not been the projection of the still prevailing dominator worldview. It has consisted of conclusions drawn from fragmentary data interpreted to conform to the traditional model of our cultural evolution as a linear progression from “primitive man” to so-called “civilized man,” who, despite their many differences, shared a common preoccupation with conquering, killing, and dominating.

Through scientific excavations of ancient sites, archaeologists have in recent years obtained a great deal of primary information about pre-history, particularly about the Neolithic, when our ancestors first settled in communities sustained by farming and the breeding of stock. Analyzed from a fresh perspective, these excavations provide the data base for a re-evaluation, and reconstruction, of our past.

One important source of data is excavations of buildings and their contents—including clothing, jewelry, food, furniture, containers, tools, and other objects used in daily life. Another is the excavation of burial sites, which tell us not only about people’s attitudes

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about death but also about their lives. And overlapping both of these data sources is our richest source of information about prehistory: art.

Even when there is a written as well as an oral literary tradition, art is a form of symbolic communication. The extensive art of the Neolithic—be it wall paintings about daily life or about important myths, statuary of religious images, friezes depicting rituals, or simply vase decorations, pictures on seals, or engravings on jewelry—tells us a great deal about how these people lived and died. It also tells us a great deal about how they thought, for in a very real sense Neolithic art is a kind of language or shorthand symbolically expressing how people in that time experienced, and in turn shaped, what we call reality.¹ And if we let this language speak for itself, without projecting on it prevailing models of reality, it tells a fascinating—and in comparison to the stereotype, a far more hopeful—story of our cultural origins.

NEOLITHIC ART

One of the most striking things about Neolithic art is what it does *not* depict. For what a people do not depict in their art can tell us as much about them as what they do.

In sharp contrast to later art, a theme notable for its absence from Neolithic art is imagery idealizing armed might, cruelty, and violence-based power. There are here no images of “noble warriors” or scenes of battles. Nor are there any signs of “heroic conquerors” dragging captives around in chains or other evidences of slavery.

Also in sharp contrast to the remains of even their earliest and most primitive male-dominant invaders, what is notable in these Neolithic Goddess-worshipping societies is the absence of lavish “chieftain” burials. And in marked contrast to later male-dominant civilizations like that of Egypt, there is here no sign of mighty rulers who take with them into the afterlife less powerful humans sacrificed at their death.

Nor do we here find, again in contrast to later dominator societies, large caches of weapons or any other sign of the intensive application of material technology and natural resources to arms. The inference that this was a much more, and indeed characteristically, peaceful era is further reinforced by another absence: military fortifications. Only gradually do these begin to appear, apparently as a response to pressures from the warlike nomadic bands coming from the fringe areas of the globe, which we will examine later.

In Neolithic art, neither the Goddess nor her son-consort carry the emblems we have learned to associate with might—spears, swords, or thunderbolts, the symbols of an earthly sovereign and/or deity who exacts obedience by killing and maiming. Even beyond this, the art of this period is strikingly devoid of the ruler-ruled, master-subject imagery so characteristic of dominator societies.

What we do find everywhere—in shrines and houses, on wall paintings, in the decorative motifs on vases, in sculptures in the round, clay figurines, and bas reliefs—is a rich

array of symbols from nature. Associated with the worship of the Goddess, these attest to awe and wonder at the beauty and mystery of life.

There are the life-sustaining elements of sun and water, for instance, the geometric patterns of wavy forms called meanders (which symbolized flowing waters) incised on an Old European altar from about 5000 B.C.E. in Hungary. There are the giant stone heads of bulls with enormous curled horns painted on the walls of Catal Huyuk shrines, terra-cotta hedgehogs from southern Romania, ritual vases in the form of does from Bulgaria, egg-shaped stone sculptures with the faces of fish, and cult vases in the form of birds.²

There are serpents and butterflies (symbols of metamorphosis) which are in historic times still identified with the transformative powers of the Goddess, as in the seal impression from Zakro, in eastern Crete, portraying the Goddess with the wings of an eyed butterfly. Even the later Cretan double axe, reminiscent of the hoe axes used to clear farm lands, was a stylization of the butterfly.³ Like the serpent, which sheds its skin and is “reborn,” it was part of the Goddess’s epiphany, yet another symbol of her powers of regeneration.⁴

And everywhere—in murals, statues, and votive figurines—we find images of the Goddess. In the various incarnations of Maiden, Ancestress, or Creatrix, she is the Lady of the waters, the birds, and the underworld, or simply the divine Mother cradling her divine child in her arms.⁵

Some images are so realistic that they are almost lifelike, like the slithering snake on a dish found in an early fifth millennium B.C.E. cemetery in western Slovakia. Others are so stylized that they are more abstract than even our most “modern” art. Among these are the large stylized sacramental vase or chalice in the shape of an enthroned Goddess incised with ideograms from the Tisza culture of southeastern Hungary, the pillar-headed Goddess with folded arms from 5000 B.C.E. Romania, and the marble Goddess figurine from Tell Azmak, central Bulgaria, with schematized arms and an exaggerated pubic triangle, dating from 6000 B.C.E. Still other images are strangely beautiful, such as an 8000-year-old horned terra-cotta stand with female breasts, somehow reminiscent of the classical Greek statue called the Winged Victory, and the painted Cucuteni vases with their graceful shapes and rich geometric snake-spiral designs. And others, such as the crosses incised on the navel or near the breasts of the Goddess, raise interesting questions about the earlier meanings of some of our own most important symbols.⁶

There is a sense of fantasy about many of these images, a dreamlike and sometimes bizarre quality suggestive of arcane rituals and long-forgotten myths. For example, a bird-faced woman on a Vinca sculpture and a bird-faced baby she is holding would seem to be masked protagonists of ancient rites, probably enacting a mythological story about a bird Goddess and her divine child. Similarly, a terra-cotta head of a bull with human eyes from 4000 B.C.E. Macedonia suggests a masked protagonist of some other Neolithic ritual and myth. Some of these masked figures seem to represent cosmic powers, either benevolent or threatening. Others have a humorous effect, such as the masked man with padded

knickers and exposed belly from fifth millennium B.C.E. Fafkos, described by Gimbutas as probably a comic actor. There are also what Gimbutas calls cosmic eggs. These too are symbols of the Goddess, whose body is the divine Chalice containing the miracle of birth and the power to transform death into life through the mysterious cyclical regeneration of nature.⁷

Indeed, this theme of the unity of all things in nature, as personified by the Goddess, seems to permeate Neolithic art. For here the supreme power governing the universe is a divine Mother who gives her people life, provides them with material and spiritual nurturance, and who even in death can be counted on to take her children back into her cosmic womb.

For instance, in the shrines of Catal Huyuk we find representations of the Goddess both pregnant and giving birth. Often she is accompanied by powerful animals such as leopards and particularly bulls.⁸ As a symbol of the unity of all life in nature, in some of her representations she is herself part human and part animal.⁹ Even in her darker aspects, in what scholars call the chthonic, or earthy, she is still portrayed as part of the natural order. Just as all life is born from her, it also returns to her at death to be once again reborn.

It could be said that what scholars term the chthonic aspect of the Goddess—her portrayal in surrealistic and sometimes grotesque form—represented our forebears' attempt to deal with the darker aspects of reality by giving our human fears of the shadowy unknown a name and shape. These chthonic images—masks, wall paintings, and statuettes symbolizing death in fantastic and sometimes also humorous forms—would also be designed to impart to the religious initiate a sense of mystical unity with both the dangerous as well as the benign forces governing the world.

Thus, in the same way that life was celebrated in religious imagery and ritual, the destructive processes of nature were also recognized and respected. At the same time that religious rites and ceremonies were designed to give the individual and the community a sense of participation in and control over the life-giving and preserving processes of nature, other rites and ceremonies attempted to keep the more fearful processes at bay.

But with all of this, the many images of the Goddess in her dual aspect of life and death seem to express a view of the world in which the primary purpose of art, and of life, was not to conquer, pillage, and loot but to cultivate the earth and provide the material and spiritual wherewithal for a satisfying life. And on the whole, Neolithic art, and even more so the more developed Minoan art, seems to express a view in which the primary function of the mysterious powers governing the universe is not to exact obedience, punish, and destroy but rather to give.

We know that art, particularly religious or mythical art, reflects not only peoples' attitudes but also their particular form of culture and social organization. The Goddess-centered art we have been examining, with its striking absence of images of male domination or warfare, seems to have reflected a social order in which women, first as heads of clans

and priestesses and later on in other important roles, played a central part, and in which both men and women worked together in equal partnership for the common good. If there was here no glorification of wrathful male deities or rulers carrying thunderbolts or arms, or of great conquerors dragging abject slaves about in chains, it is not unreasonable to infer it was because there were no counterparts for those images in real life.¹⁰ And if the central religious image was a woman giving birth and not, as in our time, a man dying on a cross, it would not be unreasonable to infer that life and the love of life—rather than death and the fear of death—were dominant in society as well as art.

THE WORSHIP OF THE GODDESS

One of the most interesting aspects of the prehistoric worship of the Goddess is what the mythologist and religious historian Joseph Campbell calls its “syncretism.”¹¹ Essentially, what this means is that the worship of the Goddess was both polytheistic and monotheistic. It was polytheistic in the sense that she was worshiped under different names and in different forms. But it was also monotheistic—in the sense that we can properly speak of faith in the Goddess in the same way we speak of faith in God as a transcending entity. In other words, there are striking similarities between the symbols and images associated in various places with the worship of the Goddess in her various aspects of mother, ancestress or creatrix, and virgin or maid.

One possible explanation for this remarkable religious unity could be that the Goddess appears to have been originally worshiped in all ancient agricultural societies. We find evidence of the deification of the female—who in her biological character gives birth and nourishment just as the earth does—in the three main centers for the origins of agriculture: Asia Minor and southeastern Europe, Thailand in Southeast Asia, and later on also Middle America.¹²

In many of the earliest known creation stories from very different parts of the world, we find the Goddess-Mother as the source of all being. In the Americas, she is the Lady of the Serpent Skirt—of interest also because, as in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the serpent is one of her primary manifestations. In ancient Mesopotamia this same concept of the universe is found in the idea of the world mountain as the body of the Goddess-Mother of the universe, an idea that survived into historic times. And as Nammu, the Sumerian Goddess who gives birth to heaven and earth, her name is expressed in a cuneiform text of circa 2000 B.C.E. (now in the Louvre) by an ideogram signifying sea.¹³

The association of the feminine principle with the primal waters is also a ubiquitous theme. For example, in the decorated pottery of Old Europe, the symbolism of water—often in association with the primal egg—is a frequent motif. Here the Great Goddess, sometimes in the form of the bird or snake Goddess, rules over the life-giving force of

water. In both Europe and Anatolia, rain-bearing and milk-giving motifs are interwoven, and ritual containers and vases are standard equipment in her shrines. Her image is also associated with water containers, which are sometimes in her anthropomorphic shape. As the Egyptian Goddess Nut, she is the flowing unity of celestial primordial waters. Later on, as the Cretan Goddess Ariadne (the Very Holy One), and the Greek Goddess Aphrodite, she rises from the sea.¹⁴ In fact, this image was still so powerful in Christian Europe that it inspired Botticelli's famous Venus rising from the sea.

Although this too is rarely included in what we are taught about our cultural evolution, much of what evolved in the millennia of Neolithic history is still with us today. As Mellaart writes, "it formed the basis on which all later cultures and civilizations have built."¹⁵ Or as Gimbutas put it, even after the world they represented was destroyed, the mythic images of our Goddess-worshipping Neolithic forebears "lingered in the substratum which nourished further European cultural developments," enormously enriching the European psyche.¹⁶

Indeed, if we look closely at the art of the Neolithic, it is truly astonishing how much of its Goddess imagery has survived—and that most standard works on the history of religion fail to bring out this fascinating fact. Just as the Neolithic pregnant Goddess was a direct descendant of the full-bellied Paleolithic "Venuses," this same image survives in the pregnant Mary of medieval Christian iconography. The Neolithic image of the young Goddess or Maiden is also still venerated in the aspect of Mary as the Holy Virgin. And of course the Neolithic figure of the Mother-Goddess holding her divine child is still everywhere dramatically in evidence as the Christian Madonna and Child.

Images traditionally associated with the Goddess, such as the bull and the bucranium, or horns of the bull, as symbols of the power of nature, also survived well into classical, and later Christian, times. The bull was appropriated as a central symbol of later "pagan" patriarchal mythology. Still later, the horned bull god was in Christian iconography converted from a symbol of male power to a symbol of Satan or evil. But in Neolithic times, the bull horns we now routinely associate with the devil had a very different meaning. Images of bull horns have been excavated in both houses and shrines at Catal Huyuk, where horns of consecration sometimes form rows or altars under representations of the Goddess.¹⁷ And the bull itself is here also still a manifestation of the ultimate power of the Goddess. It is a symbol of the male principle, but it is one that, like all else, issues from an all-giving divine womb—as graphically depicted in a Catal Huyuk shrine where the Goddess is shown giving birth to a young bull.

Even the Neolithic imagery of the Goddess in two simultaneous forms—such as the twin Goddesses excavated in Catal Huyuk—survived into historic times, as in the classical Greek images of Demeter and Kore as the two aspects of the Goddess: Mother and Maid as symbols of the cyclical regeneration of nature.¹⁸ Indeed, the children of the Goddess are all

integrally connected with the themes of birth, death, and resurrection. Her daughter survived into classical Greek times as Persephone, or Kore. And her son-lover/husband likewise survived well into historic times under such diverse names as Adonis, Tammutz, Attis—and finally, Jesus Christ.¹⁹

This seemingly remarkable continuity of religious symbolism becomes more understandable if we consider that in both the Neolithic-Chalcolithic of Old Europe and the later Minoan-Mycenaean Bronze Age civilization the religion of the Great Goddess appears to have been the single most prominent and important feature of life. In the Anatolian site of Catal Huyuk the worship of the Goddess appears to permeate all aspects of life. For example, out of 139 rooms excavated between 1961 and 1963, more than 40 appear to have served as shrines.²⁰

This same pattern prevails in Neolithic and Chalcolithic Europe. In addition to all the shrines dedicated to various aspects of the Goddess, the houses had sacred corners with ovens, altars (benches), and offering places. And the same holds true for the later civilization of Crete, where, as Gimbutas writes, “shrines of one kind or another are so numerous that there is reason to believe that not only every palace but every private house was put to some such use. . . . To judge by the frequency of shrines, horns of consecration, and the symbol of the double-axe, the whole palace of Knossos must have resembled a sanctuary. Wherever you turn, pillars and symbols remind one of the presence of the Great Goddess.”²¹

To say the people who worshiped the Goddess were deeply religious would be to understate, and largely miss, the point. For here there was no separation between the secular and the sacred. As religious historians point out, in prehistoric and, to a large extent, well into historic times, religion was life, and life was religion.

One reason this point is obscured is that scholars have in the past routinely referred to the worship of the Goddess, not as a religion, but as a “fertility cult,” and to the Goddess as an “earth mother.” But though the fecundity of women and of the earth was, and still is, a requisite for species survival, this characterization is far too simplistic. It would be comparable, for example, to characterizing Christianity as just a death cult because the central image in its art is the Crucifixion.

Neolithic religion—like present-day religious and secular ideologies—expressed the worldview of its time. How different this worldview was from ours is dramatically illustrated if we contrast the Neolithic religious pantheon with the Christian one. In the Neolithic, the head of the holy family was a woman: the Great Mother, the Queen of Heaven, or the Goddess in her various aspects and forms. The male members of this pantheon—her consort, brother, and/or son—were also divine. By contrast, the head of the Christian holy family is an all-powerful Father. The second male in the pantheon—Jesus Christ—is another aspect of the godhead. But though father and son are immortal and divine, Mary,

the only woman in this religious facsimile of patriarchal family organization, is merely mortal—clearly, like her earthly counterparts, of an inferior order.

Religions in which the most powerful or only deity is male tend to reflect a social order in which descent is patrilinear (traced through the father) and domicile is patrilocal (the wife goes to live with the family or clan of her husband). Conversely, religions in which the most powerful or sole deity is female tend to reflect a social order in which descent is matrilinear (traced through the mother) and domicile is likewise matrilocal (a husband goes to live with his wife's family or clan).²² Moreover, a male-dominated and generally hierarchic social structure has historically been reflected and maintained by a male-dominated religious pantheon and by religious doctrines in which the subordination of women is said to be divinely ordained.

IF IT ISN'T PATRIARCHY IT MUST BE MATRIARCHY

Applying these principles to the mounting evidence that for millennia of human history the supreme deity had been female, a number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars came to a seemingly earthshaking conclusion. If prehistory was not patriarchal, it must have been matriarchal. In other words, if men did not dominate women, women must have dominated men.

Then, when the evidence did not seem to support this conclusion of female dominance, many scholars returned to the more conventionally accepted view. If there never was a matriarchate, they reasoned, male dominance must, after all, always have been the human norm.

The evidence, however, supports neither one of these conclusions. To begin with, the archaeological data we now have indicate that in its general structure prepatriarchal society was, by any contemporary standard, remarkably equalitarian. In the second place, although in these societies descent appears to have been traced through the mother, and women as priestesses and heads of clans seem to have played leading roles in all aspects of life, there is little indication that the position of men in this social system was in any sense comparable to the subordination and suppression of women characteristic of the male-dominant system that replaced it.

From his excavations of Catal Huyuk, where the systematic reconstruction of the life of the city's inhabitants was the primary archaeological goal, Mellaart concluded that though some social inequality is suggested by sizes of buildings, equipment, and burial gifts, this was "never a glaring one."²³ For example, there are in Catal Huyuk no major differences between houses, most of which show a standardized rectangular plan covering about twenty-five square meters of floor space. Even shrines are not structurally different from houses, nor are they necessarily larger in size. Moreover, they are intermingled with the houses in considerable numbers, once again indicating a communally based rather than a centralized, hierarchic social and religious structure.²⁴

The same general picture emerges from an analysis of Catal Huyuk burial customs. Unlike the later graves of Indo-European chieftains, which clearly bespeak a pyramidal social structure ruled by a feared and fearful strongman on the top, those of Catal Huyuk indicate no glaring social inequalities.²⁵

As for the relationship between men and women, it is true, as Mellaart points out, that the divine family of Catal Huyuk is represented “in order of importance as mother, daughter, son, and father,”²⁶ and that this probably mirrored the human families of the city’s inhabitants, which were evidently matrilineal and matrilocal. It is also true that in Catal Huyuk and other Neolithic societies the anthropomorphic representations of the Goddess—the young Maid, the mature Mother, and the old Grandmother or Ancestress, all the way back to the original Creatrix—are, as the Greek philosopher Pythagoras later noted, projections of the various stages of the life of woman.²⁷ Also suggesting a matrilineal and matrilocal social organization is that in Catal Huyuk the sleeping platform where the woman’s personal possessions and her bed or divan were located is always found in the same place, on the east side of the living quarters. That of the man shifts, and is also somewhat smaller.²⁸

But despite such evidence of the preeminence of women in both religion and life, there are no indications of glaring inequality between women and men. Nor are there any signs that women subjugated or oppressed men.

In sharp contrast to the male-dominated religions of our time, in which in almost all cases until quite recently only men could become members of the religious hierarchy, there is here evidence of both priestesses and priests. For instance, Mellaart points out that although it seems likely that it was primarily priestesses who officiated at the worship of the Goddess in Catal Huyuk, there is also evidence pointing to the participation of priests. He reports that two groups of objects found only in burials in shrines were mirrors of obsidian and fine bone belt fasteners. The former were found only with the bodies of women, the latter only with men. This led Mellaart to conclude that these were “attributes of certain priestesses and priests, which would explain both their rarity and their discovery in shrines.”²⁹

It is also revealing that sculptures of elderly men, sometimes fashioned in a position reminiscent of Rodin’s famous *The Thinker*, suggest that old men as well as old women had important and respected roles.³⁰ Equally revealing is that the bull and the bucranium, or horns of consecration, which have a central place in the shrines of Neolithic Anatolia, Asia Minor, and Old Europe and later in Minoan and Mycenaean imagery, are symbols of the male principle, as are the images of phalluses and boars, which make their appearance in the later Neolithic, particularly in Europe. Moreover, some of the earlier Goddess figurines are not only hybrids of human and animal features, but often also have features, such as exaggerated long necks, that can be interpreted as androgynous.³¹ And of course the young god, the son-consort of the Goddess, plays a recurring part in the central miracle of pre-patriarchal religion, the mystery of regeneration and rebirth.

Clearly, then, while the feminine principle as the primary symbol of the miracle of life permeated Neolithic art and ideology, the male principle also played an important role. The fusion of these two principles through the myths and rituals of the Sacred Marriage was in fact still celebrated in the ancient world well into patriarchal times. For example, in Hittite Anatolia, the great shrine of Yazilikaya was dedicated to this purpose. And even later, in Greece and Rome, the ceremony survived as the *hieros gamos*.³²

It is interesting in this connection that there is Neolithic imagery indicating an understanding of the joint roles of women and men in procreation. For example, a small stone plaque from Catal Huyuk shows a woman and man in a tender embrace; immediately next to them is the relief of a mother holding a child, the offspring of their union.³³

All this imagery reflects the markedly different attitudes prevailing in the Neolithic about the relationship between women and men—attitudes in which linking rather than ranking appears to have been predominant. As Gimbutas writes, here “the world of myth was not polarized into female and male as it was among the Indo-Europeans and many other nomadic and pastoral peoples of the steppes. Both principles were manifest side by side. The male divinity in the shape of a young man or male animal appears to affirm and strengthen the forces of the creative and active female. Neither is subordinate to the other: by complementing one another, their power is doubled.”³⁴

Again and again we find that the debate about whether there once was or was not a matriarchate, which still periodically erupts in academic and popular works, seems to be more a function of our prevailing paradigm than of any archaeological evidence.³⁵ That is, in our culture built on the ideas of hierarchy and ranking and in-group versus out-group thinking, rigid differences or polarities are emphasized. Ours is characteristically the kind of if-it-isn't-this-it-has-to-be-that, dichotomized, either/or thinking that philosophers from earliest times have cautioned can lead to a simplistic misreading of reality. And, indeed, psychologists today have discovered it is the mark of a *lower* or less psychologically evolved state of cognitive and emotional development.³⁶

Mellaart apparently tried to overcome this either/or, if-it-isn't-patriarchy-it-has-to-be-matriarchy tangle when he wrote the following passage. “If the Goddess presided over all the various activities of the life and death of the Neolithic population of Catal Huyuk, so in a way did her son. Even if his role is strictly subordinate to hers, the males’ role in life seems to have been fully realized.”³⁷ But in the contradiction between a “fully realized” and a “strictly subordinate” role we again find ourselves tangled up in the cultural and linguistic assumptions inherent in a dominator paradigm: that human relations must fit into some kind of superior-inferior pecking order.

However, looked at from a strictly analytical or logical viewpoint, the primacy of the Goddess—and with this the centrality of the values symbolized by the nurturing and regenerating powers incarnated in the female body—does not justify the inference that

women here dominated men. This becomes more apparent if we begin by analogizing from the one human relationship that even in male-dominant societies is not generally conceptualized in superiority-inferiority terms. This is the relationship between mother and child—and the way we perceive it may actually be a remnant of the prepatriarchal conception of the world. The larger, stronger adult mother is clearly, in hierarchic terms, superior to the smaller, weaker child. But this does not mean we normally think of the child as inferior or less valued.

Analogizing from this different conceptual framework, we can see that the fact that women played a central and vigorous role in prehistoric religion and life does not have to mean that men were perceived and treated as subservient. For here both men and women were the children of the Goddess, as they were the children of the women who headed the families and clans. And while this certainly gave women a great deal of power, analogizing from our present-day mother-child relationship, it seems to have been a power that was more equated with responsibility and love than with oppression, privilege, and fear.

In sum, in contrast to the still prevailing view of power as the power symbolized by the Blade—the power to take away or to dominate—a very different view of power seems to have been the norm in these Neolithic Goddess-worshipping societies. This view of power as the “feminine” power to nurture and give was undoubtedly not always adhered to, for these were societies of real flesh-and-blood people, not make-believe utopias. But it was still the normative ideal, the model to be emulated by both women and men.

The view of power symbolized by the Chalice—for which I propose the term *actualization power* as distinguished from *domination power*—obviously reflects a very different type of social organization from the one we are accustomed to.³⁸ We may conclude from the evidence of the past examined so far that it cannot be called matriarchal. As it cannot be called patriarchal either, it does not fit into the conventional dominator paradigm of social organization. However, using the perspective of Cultural Transformation theory we have been developing, it does fit the other alternative for human organization: a partnership society in which neither half of humanity is ranked over the other and diversity is not equated with inferiority or superiority.

. . . [T]hese two alternatives have profoundly affected our cultural evolution. Technological and social evolution tend to become more complex regardless of which model prevails. But the *direction* of cultural evolution—including whether a social system is warlike or peaceful—depends on whether we have a partnership or a dominator social structure.

NOTES

1. Marija Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 7000–3500 B.C.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 37–38.

have allowed for his continued popularity. Whitman's willingness to break out of hegemonic culture and its mores in order to celebrate the mundane and unconventional has ensured his relevance today. His belief in the organic connection of all things, coupled with his organic development of a poetic style that breaks with many formal conventions have caused many scholars and critics to celebrate him for his innovation. His idea of universal connection and belief in the spirituality present in a blade of grass succeeded in transmitting a popularized version of Eastern theology and Whitman's own brand of environmentalism for generations of readers.

Kathryn Miles

Further Reading

- Greenspan, Ezra, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Whitman*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Maslan, Mark. *Whitman Possessed*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Reynolds, David. *Walt Whitman's America*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- See also: Bhagavadgita; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Friends – Religious Society of (Quakers); Nature Religion in the United States; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Romanticism – American; Romanticism – Western toward Asian Religions; Transcendentalism.

Wicca

Wicca emerged in 1940s' England as a highly ritualistic, nature-venerating, polytheistic, magical and religious system, which made use of Asian religious techniques, but operated within a predominantly Western framework. It arose from cultural impulses of the nineteenth century, in particular from the occult revival of the 1880s onwards and Romantic literary rediscovery of Classical ideas of nature and deity. Various threads were gathered together and woven into Wicca by Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964), a British civil servant who retired in 1936 and lived in Highcliffe and London, England before moving to the Isle of Man in 1954. He visited archeological sites in the Near East, and joined esoteric groups like the Folklore Society, the Co-Masons, the Rosicrucian Fellowship of Crotona, and the Druid Order. Gardner claimed that the Fellowship of Crotona contained a hidden inner group of hereditary witches who initiated him in 1939 and whose rituals he wrote about in fictional form in the novel *High Magic's Aid* (1949) under the pseudonym Scire. Gardner's writing borrowed from many sources, including the work of magician Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), writer D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930), a ritual magic group called The Golden Dawn, Freemasonry, spiritualism, and archeology, to name a few.

According to Gardner, witchcraft had survived the persecutions of early modern Europe and persisted in secret, following the thesis of British folklorist and Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1862–1963). Murray argued in her book, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921), that an old religion involving a horned god who represented the fertility of nature had survived the persecutions and existed throughout Western Europe. Murray wrote that the religion was divided into covens that held regular meetings based on the phases of the moon and the changes of the seasons. Their rituals included feasting, dancing, sacrifices, ritualized sexual intercourse, and worship of the horned god. In *The God of the Witches* (1933) Murray traced the development of this god and connected the witch cult to fairy tales and Robin Hood legends. She used images from art and architecture to support her view that an ancient vegetation god and a fertility goddess formed the basis of worship for the witch cult.

From the 1940s on many Wiccans believed, based on Murray's work, that they were continuing this ancient tradition of witchcraft. However, since the first appearance of Murray's thesis, historians and other scholars have refuted her evidence and, over time, dismissed most of it. Most, though not all, Wiccans today acknowledge that there is little evidence for a continuous witchcraft tradition, but claim that their religion is a revitalization and re-invention of ancient folk practices that existed in pre-Christian Britain, even if they were not part of any organized tradition. Some Wiccans today continue to identify "The Burning Times," as they call the witch persecutions, as their "holocaust," even though historians have shown that the so-called witches of early modern Europe existed in the imaginations of their persecutors, though many may have participated in folk practices such as herbal healing that were prevalent at the time in the general population.

After the repeal of the 1736 Witchcraft Act in England (an act that made the practice of witchcraft a crime) in 1951, Gardner was able openly to publish accounts of Wicca under his real name in *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). *Witchcraft Today* brought public attention to Gardner and he made numerous media appearances promoting Wicca. Both books contained information on Wicca as it existed at the time and in the following years Gardner initiated many new witches. Covens also sprang up and operated according to the outlines provided by Gardner's books. By the mid-1950s, Wicca had become relatively popular, at least in part because of Gardner's love of publicity, which drew public attention to it. In the early 1960s it was exported to the United States by Raymond Buckland. Gardner died in 1964, but by that time his tradition of Gardnerian Wicca was firmly established.

The religion described in Gardner's books and spread by his students takes nature as a central aspect of devotional life. Gardner's ideas about god and goddess drew

from British literature and occult circles that promoted Romanticism's fascination with the gods and goddesses of the ancient world. Over time specific deities such as Demeter and Pan were transformed into an archetypal mother goddess and an archetypal fertility god. According to historian Ronald Hutton this process was complete by the 1940s and represented post-war Britain's desire for and fear of wildness: "the domains that civilized humans had traditionally found most alien and frightening; they were those of the two deities to whom the modern imagination, frightened, jaded, and constricted by aspects of civilized living, had turned" (Hutton 1999: 50). The attraction of urban dwellers to deities that embody nature and rituals associated with seasonal changes that many modern people have lost touch with continues to be an important aspect of Wicca and among the reasons for its growth throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Gardner's rituals also offered an alternative to the modern world in that participants were nude and sexuality and the body were seen as sacred.

Four main rituals were celebrated on the four seasonal festivals described by Murray as the witches' sabbats (Candlemas, May Day, Lammass, and All-Hallows Eve). Most Wiccans today also celebrate four other festivals: winter solstice, summer solstice, spring equinox and autumn equinox. These eight festivals make up the Wiccan "Wheel of the Year." At each of these seasonal rituals the god and goddess are addressed in their aspects appropriate to the season, and they are embodied by the priest and priestess leading the rituals. For instance, on May Day the goddess/priestess as embodiment of giver of life and nurturer of new seeds is most prominent. Many contemporary Wiccans call this festival Beltain, an Irish name for "Bright Fire," and weddings or "handfastings" are often performed at this time. A midwinter ceremony or Yule ritual might celebrate the return of the sun during the longest night and the rebirth of the sun god. Wiccan festivals are intended to remind participants of the cycle of life, of human death and rebirth, and the changes evident around them in the natural world.

Gardner's Wicca was initially described as a fertility cult rather than a "nature religion," although Wiccan perceptions of both male and female deities are linked to nature and regarded as empowering forces for both men and women. One of Wicca's most well-known ritual texts – *The Great Charge*, written by Gardner's one-time High Priestess and collaborator Doreen Valiente (1922–1999) from earlier versions – concentrates specifically on the Wiccan perception of the goddess as the world of nature. The "Charge" describes her as "the beauty of the green Earth," "the white moon among the stars," "the mystery of the waters," and "the soul of nature who gives life to the universe." The goddess' male counterpart is also connected to nature and moves through The Wheel of the Year. He is The Lord of the Greenwood, Sun King, Corn

King, Lord of Life and Death, and Leader of the Wild Hunt.

Wicca is a religion in which the divine is immanent; its goddess and god live in the Earth, the moon, the stars, the bodies of men and women. Humans, nature and gods are all interconnected and sacred. The basic ritual form of Wicca – the circle casting – illustrates another way in which the divine is in the world, not outside it. While different variations on circle casting exist, most circles are oriented with the four cardinal directions and these directions are typically associated with forces of nature: fire, air, water and Earth. Some Wiccans address the "powers" of a particular direction while others address the "winds" while casting their circles. In preparation for ritual work Wiccans shed their clothes or don special robes, then someone marks the perimeter of the circle with a knife or wand and the four directions are greeted and invoked, as a way of asking for the powers that they represent to be present. For Wiccans ritual space is thus oriented in relation to the natural forces identified with each direction, in order to remind participants of their relationship to the world around them.

Since Gardner's first covens, Wicca has spread across North America, northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, evolving, and at times mutating quite dramatically. Wiccans have only a few beliefs that most of them adhere to, and these include "The Witches Rede: An it harm none, do what you will," and "The Law of Threefold Effect," the belief that any action a person commits will return to that person threefold. As Wicca has spread to different parts of the world, debates about belief and practice have surfaced. For instance, in the Southern Hemisphere Wiccans disagree as to how the seasonal rituals of the Wheel of the Year should be celebrated, given that winter solstice/Yule in the Northern Hemisphere is mid-summer in the Southern. In the United States and Canada, practices borrowed from North American Indians have been adopted by Wiccans and this cultural appropriation has been criticized by other Wiccans as well as by native people. But this debate means little to some Europeans who turn to Celtic, Saxon or Germanic traditions for inspiration, making links to the supposed indigenous traditions of northern Europe. Likewise, feminist Witchcraft, which was shaped by the American feminist movement, has had a profound impact on Wicca in the United States, and is in part responsible for the fact that many Wiccans have dispensed with the god and focus on one great goddess. In the United States in particular a multitude of derivations have developed, including Reclaiming, Faery Wicca, Dianic Wicca and Seax Wicca, all of which have in turn crossed back to Europe.

Both Gardner and Murray emphasized the importance of polarity, of goddess and god, and identified men with masculine qualities and the god, and women with feminine energy and the goddess. However with the influence

of feminism and gay rights movements many Wiccans today believe that same sex couples can work effective rituals together and that men can embody goddess energy just as women can embody the god. Within Wicca there is much diversity of opinion concerning whether or not masculinity and femininity are essential qualities each sex is born with, and these issues remain controversial in some Wiccan communities.

The increase in Wicca's popularity is partly due to the parallel rise in environmental awareness since the 1970s. Vivianne Crowley, a Wiccan priestess and author of *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Age* (1989), notes the changing emphasis within Wicca from nature veneration to nature preservation: "Wicca . . . moved out of the darkness, the occult world of witchery, to occupy the moral high ground - environmentalism" (Crowley 1998: 177). Crowley asserts the centrality of the veneration of nature, which is "considered to be ensouled, alive, 'divine' . . . The divine [being seen] as a 'force' or 'energy' and as manifest in the world of nature" (1998: 170). She further points out that the processes of nature, such as "conception, birth, mating, parenthood, maturation, death" are portrayed in The Wheel of the Year.

However, Wiccans demonstrate a wide range of attitudes toward protecting the natural world. Some are radical environmentalists while others view nature more abstractly. The development of Wicca was influenced by idealized views of nature in the writings of English Romantics as well as more recent works of literature such as J.R.R. Tolkien's description of the woods of Lothlorien in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954). Understandings of nature in Wicca also derive from Western esotericism, particularly as transmitted by nineteenth-century Romanticism. Nature, in esoteric thought, is a reflection of a greater divine reality or part of a greater magical totality, and as such it requires a different level of engagement. The esoteric theory of correspondences portrays the cosmos as complex, plural and hierarchical, with living nature occupying an essential place within it. Nature is at once both an intermediary between humanity and divinity, and imbued with divinity itself. "Nature" is often perceived by Wiccans as something different from "the environment." For those Wiccan groups which retain a link to their heritage in high ritual magic and hence the Western esoteric tradition, there is every reason for a focus on inner nature due to the basic law of magical correspondence: humanity is a part of the cosmos, and therefore any operation performed on or in a person will affect the entire universe. In treating the self as well as nature as sacred center, Wicca follows in the wake of esoteric and occult philosophy, in which these are one and the same. While there may be a spiritual and/or magical engagement with nature, this does not necessarily translate into environmental action.

For some urban-dwelling Wiccans, imaginative descriptions of the natural world may provide a more

"real" experience than an actual walk in the woods. Anthropologist Susan Greenwood observed that some Wiccans show no interest in nature other than as a backdrop for rituals, with celebrations held in the woods becoming in effect a celebration of the liberation of the inner self from the domination of the everyday world. "One Wiccan, when invited to go for a walk, cried off because it was raining and he might get his feet wet: 'Can't we just visualize it?' he said" (Greenwood 2000: 113). The Wiccan response to nature is thus often confused, revealing both intimacy and distance as nature is shaped by the Wheel of the Year, sacred circles, and ritual to suit people's needs for relationship with the Earth. There is a turn to nature as a source of revitalization, an attempt to reengage with a nature from which participants feel estranged, to reenchant the natural world which they feel has been exploited and dominated. The veneration of nature, the concern for the Earth, and the pantheism of seeing the divine in all of nature has led to an attitude of reverence for a romanticized wild, untamed landscape on the one hand, and to sadness or revulsion at human estrangement from this ideal, living in towns and cities away from the land, on the other. For some Wiccans veneration of nature and identification as "Wiccan" or "Pagan" manifests as a romantic attachment to the countryside, a dream of living away from towns and nurturing a closer relationship with nature. Some Wiccans do live in rural areas, but most continue to live urban lives and very few depend on the land for their living. Nature and Wiccans' understanding of it are extraordinarily complex, and this is exacerbated by the diversity of contexts in which an examination of Wicca's engagement with nature must occur.

Some Wiccans have become involved in environmental struggles as a way of putting their beliefs into practice. One of the most vocal of these is the American Starhawk, whose writings have been heavily influenced by feminist and environmentalist movements. Starhawk's popular book *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979) is largely responsible for spreading feminist Wicca in the United States. Starhawk has also been the most vocal American Wiccan in promoting activism of all kinds and has involved herself in numerous protests that range from anti-nuclear demonstrations, to forest activism blocking logging in old-growth redwood groves in northern California, to anti-globalization resistance. Although much of her environmental activism has been in high-profile protests, she has also organized workshops combining watershed conservation and forest ecology with magic and ritual. Other environmentalists also hold Wiccan beliefs and practice "eco-magic," such as organizations like the Dragon Environmental Group in England and both British and American Earth First! radical environmentalists. While Wicca and environmentalism do not automatically go hand in hand, although some Wiccans argue that they

should, in practice Wiccans live their relationship to nature in different ways.

Wicca has become a global phenomenon and significant Wiccan communities can be found in most countries inhabited by significant populations of people of European descent, including Great Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa, but Wicca has also spread to countries such as Japan that are closely linked to Western cultures by the global economy and media. Gardner's original prototype of a coven meeting in the woods and dancing naked under the trees retains its attraction as a fertility religion that allowed men and women to feel closer to the natural world and to pass on their knowledge by secret initiation, but today it is as likely to be spread through internet sites and how-to books that can be ordered from online stores, even while it maintains a focus on nature.

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- See also: Animism; Animism – A Contemporary Perspective; Aradia; Astrology; Circle Sanctuary; Donga Tribe; Dragon Environmental Network (United Kingdom); Druids and Druidry; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Ecofeminism (various); Eisler, Riane; Feminist Spirituality Movement; Freemasonry; Gimbutas, Marija; Goddesses –

History of; Golden Dawn; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Middle Earth; New Age; Pagan Calendar; Pagan Festivals; Paganism – Contemporary; Pantheism; Polytheism; Radical Environmentalism; Reclaiming; Shamanism (various); Starhawk; Wicca – Dianic; Z Budapest.

Wicca – Dianic

Dianic Wicca, sometimes called feminist Witchcraft, began in Southern California in 1971, when Z Budapest and five friends met to celebrate the Winter Solstice. The time was ripe for a meeting of Wicca and feminism. Both were gaining in visibility. By 1969, "Marion's Cauldron" was being broadcast over the airwaves regularly in New York City, and Central Park was the site of a 1970 "Witch-In" attended by over 1000. In the same year, some 50,000 people marched down Fifth Avenue in support of the Women's Liberation Movement. A few years earlier, a small group of radical feminists calling themselves W.I.T.C.H. had publicly and theatrically linked the image of the witch to women's empowerment. Arguing that all oppression, including the abuse of nature, was due to male domination, they saw themselves as resistance fighters, and proceeded to use Halloween costumes and guerilla street theater to get their message across with drama and humor. Their success led to autonomous covens of W.I.T.C.H. springing up in major cities across the country.

W.I.T.C.H. was decidedly political, not spiritual. Like other feminists critical of religion, Budapest argued that the spiritual *was* political. She claimed that patriarchal religions had colonized women's souls and her unique contribution was to embrace the image of the witch as a symbol of women's empowerment and use it to create a feminist version of Wicca. Building on the then-popular belief in ancient Goddess-worshipping matriarchies, she called her new tradition Dianic Witchcraft after the Goddess of the Witches in Charles Leland's *Aradia*. That the Goddess Diana was independent of men added to the attraction of the name. Presented as a new religion with ancient roots, the Dianic Craft incorporated many elements of Gardnerian Wicca, so many that it is considered a Wiccan tradition.

Dianic Witches do a radical feminist analysis of gender and power, seeing women's oppression and environmental abuse as intimately linked and firmly rooted in patriarchal religions, in hierarchies that privilege the spiritual over the material, the mind over the body, and men over women. Like other Wiccans, they celebrate the Earth and the turning of the seasons. Unlike them, Dianics also celebrate women's "blood mysteries" – birth, menstruation, birth/lactation, menopause and death – which are understood as women's ability to create life, sustain it, and return it to the Source. In doing this they attempt to link what they

believe is the sacred within them to the sacred around them in the natural world.

Divinity is envisioned as an autonomous female goddess. Some Dianics believe she is an entity, others see her as a metaphor for the Earth. Almost all agree that it is not necessary to believe in Goddess in order to experience her, as she is also understood to be immanent in nature as well as the interconnection between every living thing. The dynamic cycle of birth, life and death is represented in Goddess' three aspects of Maiden, Mother and Crone and mirrored in the phases of the moon. This image of the Triple Goddess represents major stages of women's lived experience, and provides a symbol with which they may identify throughout their lives. She is seen as the Original Creatrix, drawing all life out of herself in an act of divine parthenogenesis. She is the matrix from which all else arises. Acknowledging Goddess, the Divine Self, within themselves allows Dianics to spiritually give birth to themselves as they leave behind male-dominated and sometimes misogynist religious conditioning.

Unlike other Wiccans, Dianics do not incorporate concepts of male divinity into their practice and reject the belief in the need for sexual polarity in order to practice magic. Men are traditionally not allowed to participate in Dianic rituals nor become members of Dianic covens.

Hierarchy is seen as a patriarchal "thought form," and most Dianic covens attempt to govern themselves by consensus or through a circle of elders, rather than incorporate the more familiar Wiccan role of high priestess. An exception to this is the McFarland Dianic tradition out of Texas. Developing independently from Budapest's lineage, this feminist group functions with high priestesses and includes men. However its impact has been limited and the name Dianic usually refers to those whose spiritual roots can be traced back to that first winter solstice in Los Angeles.

At least two Dianic groups in the United States do a great deal of teaching, and welcome to their classes any women who are open to "Goddess consciousness," whether or not they are or become Dianics. These are the Reformed Congregation of the Goddess (RCG) out of Madison, Wisconsin, and its affiliate, the Circle of Aradia (CoA) in Los Angeles. Literally thousands of women have passed through their training classes, making their influence felt far beyond their numbers would suggest. Although Starhawk - Witch, theologian and widely read author - is not Dianic, she has also had a significant impact upon the Dianic Craft, especially in the strong commitments to the environment and peace that are present in the practice today.

Wendy Griffin

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See also: Aradia; Astrology; Circle Sanctuary; Ecofeminism (various); Eisler, Riane; Feminist Spirituality Movement; Gimbutas, Marija; Goddesses - History of; Pagan Festivals; Paganism - Contemporary; Reclaiming; Starhawk; Wicca; Z Budapest.

Wilber, Ken (1949-)

Drawing on thinkers ranging from Plotinus and Aurobindo to Hegel and Piaget, and grounding his own thought in extensive meditation practices, Ken Wilber synthesizes modern science and traditional spirituality to provide a progressive understanding of cosmic, biotic, human, and divine evolution. In *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (1981), Wilber describes the three basic modes of human development: prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal. The prepersonal characterizes societies oriented by magical and mythical modes of consciousness. Personal consciousness emerges in a few elite persons thousands of years ago and eventually culminated in the mental-egoic consciousness of Enlightenment modernity. Unfortunately, mental-egoic or personal consciousness often (but not always) involves dissociation of ego-mind from body, emotions, nature, female, and God. Mental-egoic consciousness entails heightened death-anxiety, which people (especially men) have sought to assuage through Atman projects that seek to make the mortal ego immortal. The technological domination of nature may be understood in part as such an Atman project. Although alienated and dissociated both from nature and from God, mental-egoic consciousness may continue its evolutionary trajectory toward the centauric stage, which reintegrates mind/body while recognizing the perspectival and thus partial character of worldviews. In subsequent transpersonal stages, humankind would experience the divine presence in all phenomena, thereby generating compassion for all sentient beings. According to Wilber, all phenomena are manifestations of the divine, the Alpha and Omega of cosmic history.

Despite the drawbacks of mental-egoic consciousness, Wilber maintains that worldwide achievement of it and the institutions related to it (including constitutional democratic government, freedom of inquiry, sustainable economic development) could have a dramatic positive