





ARKANA

THE MYTH OF THE GODDESS

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ANNE BARING AND JULES CASHFORD

THE MYTH OF THE GODDESS

EVOLUTION OF AN IMAGE

ARKANA

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FOREWORD

BY

SIR LAURENS VAN DER POST

This is a long book but it is not a page too long. It is a very important book and of great significance for the reappraisal – which is grossly overdue – of our approach to history. History as a record of the past has been told almost entirely in terms of its outer eventfulness and, in a sense, this is the least of history. History progresses on two levels, a manifest one and a profound one which is irresistible but not fully expressed, demanding to make itself known through the way we shape our lives in the world without, and through the failures and disasters brought about because this hidden, inner eventfulness is not fully recognized and given its due role in the human spirit and its societies.

There is no dimension of history of which this is more true than the way the feminine half of the human spirit has been dealt with by masculine-dominated societies, and inadequately acknowledged and evolved in our cultures and civilizations. We see the result of this neglect which is with us still, in the decay of the feeling and the caring values of life and in the pursuit of the masculine rationalism which seems to be the dominant element in the establishments of today.

But here at last is a work of immense pioneering significance. It is pioneering that has been done admirably in all sorts of sorties and forays of imaginative men into this undiscovered dimension, but it has never been done as it should have been done – by women, by the feminine itself looking for the feminine, as we have looked for the masculine in the remote origins of life on earth and our progression into this great and tumultuous time of ours.

Jules Cashford and Anne Baring have done precisely this. They have gone as far down into history as one can go and followed it through into the present day. It is a great story that they have to tell and it is a timely story, because it is the loss of this feminine eventfulness which has led to the most urgent and dangerous problem of our time: the exploitation and also the rejection of our Mother Earth, our mother not only deprived of the great store of life it had prepared for us but increasingly being denied the chance to do more.

Here, for the first time to my knowledge, the story is told in full. It is the awful, yet at the same time strangely inspiring story of the feminine, still unvanquished and undismayed, which we are all called to honour and obey if we are not also to vanish, like so many other cultures in the labyrinth of the past through which the authors follow this golden thread. The horizon behind us is littered with the rubble of civilizations which have failed to renew themselves, have failed a challenge somehow to transcend their opposites in something that will combine in balance both the masculine and the feminine and, in their union, create something greater than the sum of their parts.

Laurens van der Post
October 1990

PREFACE

When we began this book we intended simply to gather together the stories and images of goddesses as they were expressed in different cultures, from the first sculpted figures of the Palaeolithic era in 20,000 BC down to contemporary pictures of the Virgin Mary. This seemed worth doing because one way in which humans apprehend their own being is by making it visible in the images of their goddesses and gods. But in the course of this research we discovered such surprising similarities and parallels in all the goddess myths of apparently unrelated cultures that we concluded that there had been a continuous transmission of images throughout history. This continuity is so striking that we feel entitled to talk of ‘the myth of the goddess’, since the underlying vision expressed in all the variety of goddess images is constant: the vision of life as a living unity.

The Mother Goddess, wherever she is found, is an image that inspires and focuses a perception of the universe as an organic, alive and sacred whole, in which humanity, the Earth and all life on Earth participate as ‘her children’. Everything is woven together in one cosmic web, where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are related, because all share in the sanctity of the original source.

However, it was evident that in our present age the goddess myth is nowhere to be found. Of course, in the Catholic version of Christianity Mary, ‘the Virgin’, ‘Queen of Heaven’, is clothed in all the old goddess images – except that, significantly, she is not ‘Queen of Earth’. The Earth used to have, as it were, a goddess to call her own, because the Earth and all creation were of the same substance as the Goddess. Earth was her epiphany: the divine was immanent as creation. Our mythic image of Earth has lost this dimension.

So we set out to discover what had happened to the goddess image, how and when it disappeared, and what were the implications of this loss. Since mythic images implicitly govern a culture, what did this tell us about a particular culture – such as our own – that either did not have or did not acknowledge a mythic image of the feminine principle? It began to seem no coincidence that ours is the age above all others that has desacralized Nature: generally speaking, the Earth is no longer instinctively experienced as a living being as in earlier times, or so it would seem from the evidence of pollution (itself a term that originally meant the profaning of what was sacred). And now is also the time when the whole body of the Earth is threatened in a way unique to the history of the planet.

Consequently, the second aim of this book became to explore the way in which the goddess myth was lost; when, where and how the images of ‘the god’ arose, and how goddess and god related to each other in earlier cultures and times. It soon became clear that, from Babylonian mythology onwards (c. 2000 BC), the Goddess became almost exclusively associated with ‘Nature’ as the chaotic force to be mastered, and the God took the role of conquering or ordering nature from his counterpole of ‘Spirit’. Yet this opposition had not previously existed, so it needed to be placed in the context of the evolution of consciousness. One way of understanding this process is to view it as the progressive withdrawal of participation from nature, which makes possible an increasing independence of natural phenomena and a

gradual transference of 'nature's life' into humanity. This is how it seems to be that Humanity and Nature become polarized. But while this polarization can be seen to be a first stage in the process – perhaps even an inevitable one – it does not constitute an absolute description of the two terms that were once one. Yet so much are we still living with the thought structure initiated in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages that we were obliged continually to remind ourselves that this was not intrinsic to the way in which we had to reflect upon these terms.

It came, then, as a surprise to discover the extent to which our Judaeo-Christian religion and mythology (depending on the point of view) had inherited the paradigm images of Babylonian mythology, particularly the opposition between Creative Spirit and Chaotic Nature, and also the habit of thinking in oppositions generally. We find this, for instance, in the common assumption that the spiritual and the physical worlds are different in kind, an assumption that, unreflectively held, separates mind from matter, soul from body, thinking from feeling, intellect from intuition and reason from instinct. When, in addition, the 'spiritual' pole of these dualisms is valued as 'higher' than the 'physical' pole, then the two terms fall into an opposition that is almost impossible to reunite without dissolving both of the terms.

We concluded that, for the last 4,000 years, the feminine principle, which manifests in mythological history as 'the goddess' and in cultural history as the values placed upon spontaneity, feeling, instinct and intuition, had been lost as a valid expression of the sanctity and unity of life. In Judaeo-Christian mythology there is now, formally, no feminine dimension of the divine, since our particular culture is structured in the image of a masculine god who is beyond creation, ordering it from without; he is not within creation, as were the mother goddesses before him. This results, inevitably, in an imbalance of the masculine and feminine principles, which has fundamental implications for how we create our world and live in it.

We also found that even when the goddess myth was debased and devalued, it did not go away, but continued to exist in disguise – in images that were prevented from expressing themselves vitally and spontaneously, particularly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In Greek mythology, for example, Zeus 'married' the old mother goddesses, one after the other, and they continued to rule the provinces of childbirth, fertility or spiritual transformation in their own right, even though they were finally answerable to the Father God himself. But in Hebrew mythology the goddess went, so to speak, underground. She was hidden in the chaotic dragons of Leviathan and Behemoth, whose destruction was never complete, or in the ineluctable appeal of the forbidden Canaanite goddess Astarte, or, more abstractly, in the feminine personification of Yahweh's 'wisdom' – Sophia – and his 'presence' – the Shekhinah. Eve, though human and cursed, was given by Adam the displaced name of the mother goddesses of old – 'the Mother of All Living' – though with fatally new and limited meaning. The Virgin Mary, as the 'Second Eve' – who has been gathering importance over the centuries in answer, it must be, to some unfulfilled need of many people – was finally declared 'Assumed into Heaven, Body and Soul' as Queen only in the 1950s.

In all these instances, as we hope to show, the myth of the goddess continued to act on the prevailing world view of the time. However, since this myth was contrary to formal doctrine, its action had to be implicit and indirect in the manner of any less-than-fully conscious attitude, which meant that its unacknowledged but persistent presence often distorted even

the finest expressions of the prevailing myth of the god. It seemed clear that the feminine principle was an aspect of human consciousness that could not and should not be eradicated. Consequently, it needed to be brought back into consciousness and restored to full complementarity with the masculine principle if we were to achieve a harmonious balance between these two essential ways of experiencing life.

So where was the goddess myth now? Turning then to the discoveries of the 'new' science it appeared, astonishingly, as if the old goddess myth were re-emerging in a new form, not a personalized image of a female deity, but as what that image represented: a vision of life as a sacred whole in which all life participated in mutual relationship, and where all participants were dynamically 'alive'. For, beginning with Heisenberg and Einstein, physicists were claiming that in subatomic physics the universe could be understood only as a unity, that this unity was expressed in patterns of relationship, and that the observer was necessarily included in the act of observation. Characteristically, these conclusions were themselves expressed in many of the images that belonged to the old goddess myth. The web of space and time that the mother goddess once spun from her eternal womb – from Neolithic goddess figures buried with spindle whorls, through the Greek spinners of destiny, down to Mary – had become the 'cosmic web' in which all life was related. All the mother goddesses were born from the sea – from the Sumerian Nammu, the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, down to the Christian Mary (whose name in Latin means sea). Now this image had come back into the imagination as the 'ocean of energy' of the 'Implicate Order'.

From a mythological perspective, the goddess myth can also be seen in the attempts of many human beings to live in a new way, allowing their feeling of participation with the Earth as a whole to affect how they think about it and act towards it, aware of the urgent need to comprehend the world as a unity. Einstein is the spokesman for this need: 'With the splitting of the atom everything has changed save our mode of thinking, and thus we drift towards unparalleled disaster.'

But the predominant mythic image of the age – which could be characterized as 'the god without the goddess' – continues to support the very oppositional and mechanistic paradigm that the latest scientific discoveries are refuting. This means that two essential aspects of the human mind are out of accord with each other. It may seem a lot to claim that mythic images are so important to all areas of human experience, but the discoveries of Depth Psychology have shown how radically we are influenced and motivated by impulses below the threshold of consciousness, both in our personal and in our collective life as members of the human race. We cannot, then, afford to be indifferent to the prevailing climate of thought. It would seem necessary to make the attempt to move beyond our mythological inheritance in the same way that we try to gain some perspective on our individual inheritance – our specific family, tribe and country.

One way of bringing the myth of the goddess back into consciousness is to tell again the stories people have told down the millennia, and to follow the continuous chain of images through different cultures from 20,000 BC onwards, gathering them all together so that their underlying unity can appear. Then this neglected, devalued but apparently unquenchable tradition may speak for itself. This we have tried to do, in the hope that the vision of life as a sacred whole, which at its finest the goddess myth embodies, might be brought into relation with the god myth, and so contribute to the new mode of thinking for which Einstein calls.

We took a decision to focus on the Western tradition and so we have not attempted to tell the stories of India, Africa and the Far East. This is obviously a limitation, but the book is long enough already! Perhaps readers will see parallels and points of contrast that would contribute to a truly universal theme.

One word about myth. Myth, as the foremost exponent of mythology, Joseph Campbell, has written, is a dream everyone has, just as everyone also dreams her or his own personal myths: 'Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream':

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.¹

Myths are the stories of the human race that we dream onwards. In fact, the most we can do, according to Jung, is 'to dream the dream onwards and give it a modern dress'.²

Back in the Bronze Age a union of the mythic images of the feminine and the masculine principles was symbolized in the 'sacred marriage' of the goddess and the god, a ritual ceremony that was believed to assist the regeneration of nature. With the greater self-consciousness of 4,000 years later, may it not be possible to re-create in the human imagination the same kind of insights that once were enacted in unconscious participation with the same purpose: the renewal of creative life? What would the modern dress of this ancient dream be? With the restoration of the feminine to a complementary relation with the masculine, might there then be the possibility of a new mythology of the universe as one harmonious living whole? Nature and Spirit, after the many millennia of their separation, newly embraced as one and the same?

PART I

THE MOTHER GODDESS AND HER SON-LOVER

Figure 1. Goddess of Laussel; rock carving, c. 22,000–18,000 BC, height 17 in. (43 cm). Dordogne, France.

IN THE BEGINNING: THE PALAEOOLITHIC MOTHER GODDESS

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people. We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man, all belong to the same family. The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. Each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father. The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give any brother ... Remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life ... Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth, befalls all the sons of the earth. This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Chief Seattle, 1855¹

Long ago, some 20,000 years ago and more, the image of a goddess appeared across a vast expanse of land stretching from the Pyrenees to Lake Baikal in Siberia. Statues in stone, bone and ivory, tiny figures with long bodies and falling breasts, rounded motherly figures pregnant with birth, figures with signs scratched upon them – lines, triangles, zigzags, circles, nets, leaves, spirals, holes – graceful figures rising out of rock and painted with red ochre – all these have survived through the unrecorded generations of human beings who compose the history of the race.

At what point in human history did these sacred images appear? Fire was discovered about 600,000 years ago. What happened in the half a million years or so between this time and the beginning of the Upper

Map 1. Distribution of Goddess figurines in the Palaeolithic era.

Palaeolithic era, about 50,000 BC? What dreams were dreamed, what stories were told around the fire? Four great ice ages, each one taking thousands of years, came and went. When the glaciers that had covered much of Europe and Asia were melting – between 50,000 and 30,000 BC (although they did not finally disappear until about 10,000 BC) – a type of human being emerged with whom we can feel a sense of affinity: *Homo sapiens*. Before this, few animals could live on the frozen ground except the woolly mammoth, the woolly rhinoceros and the reindeer; but now grassy steppeland began to grow, which supported great herds of bison, horse and cattle. Later on – between 20,000 and 15,000 BC – the grasslands gave way to thick forests and so the herds moved eastwards, with the hunters following them. Some tribes stayed behind, like those in south-western France, making their homes in the caves of the fertile river valleys of the Dordogne, the Vézère and the Ariège. This was the time when the walls of the caves were painted and statues of goddesses were carved.

More than 130 of these statues were discovered resting in rock and soil among the bones and tools of the people of the Palaeolithic time, or appeared, when more closely observed,

sculpted on ledges and terraces of rock above the caves where many of the people lived. The statues are always naked, generally small and often pregnant. Some look like ordinary women, but most of them have the look of mothers, as though all that were female in them had been focused on the overwhelming mystery of birth. Many figures have been sprinkled with red ochre, the colour of life-giving blood, and frequently they taper to a point without feet, as if they were once fixed upright in the ground for a ritual purpose. The tribes who lived just inside the caves, painting the dark inner walls with the vibrant reds, ochres and browns of wild animals, would place the statues outside the cave, at the entrance to their home or their sanctuary.

Over a rock shelter in Laussel in the Dordogne, only a few miles from the great cave at Lascaux where the most brilliant of these paintings still cover the walls, the figure of a woman 17 inches (43 cm) tall once gazed out over the valley (Fig. 1). Palaeolithic sculptors chiselled her out of limestone with tools of flint, and gave her to hold in her right hand a bison's horn, crescent-shaped like the moon, notched with the thirteen days of the waxing moon and the thirteen months of the lunar year. With her left hand she points to her swelling womb. Her head is tilted towards the crescent moon, drawing a curve of relationship from her fingers on the womb up through the incline of her head to the crescent horn in her hand, so creating a connection between the waxing phase of the moon and the fecundity of the human womb. In this way the pattern of relationship between the earthly and the heavenly orders is acknowledged.

Joseph Campbell makes the connection between past and present:

The phases of the moon were the same for Old Stone Age man as they are for us; so also were the processes of the womb. It may therefore be that the initial observation that gave birth in the mind of man to a mythology of one mystery informing earthly and celestial things was the recognition of an accord between these two 'time-factored' orders: the celestial order of the waxing moon and the earthly order of the womb.²

A hundred miles (161 km) to the south, in the foothills of the Pyrenees at a place called Lespugue, the delicate statue shown in Figure 2 lay resting for millennia in a muddy ditch. She was carved from the ivory of a mammoth, only 5½ inches (14 cm) high. She has no hands or feet and her legs taper to a point, suggesting that she was pressed into the earth or fixed into wood to enable her to stand where she could be seen. Her upper chest is flattened into a curve, rising upwards to an almost serpentine head, which inclines forwards, so that the emphasis of her fragile body falls upon her capacity to give birth and nourishment.

Large, pendulous breasts, with her arms resting on them, merge into her full and rounded womb; her buttocks and thighs are disproportionately swollen, as though also contributing to the act of birth. Her breasts and buttocks give the feeling of four great eggs carried in the nest of her pregnant body. Ten vertical lines have been etched from beneath her buttocks to the back of her knees, giving the impression of the waters of

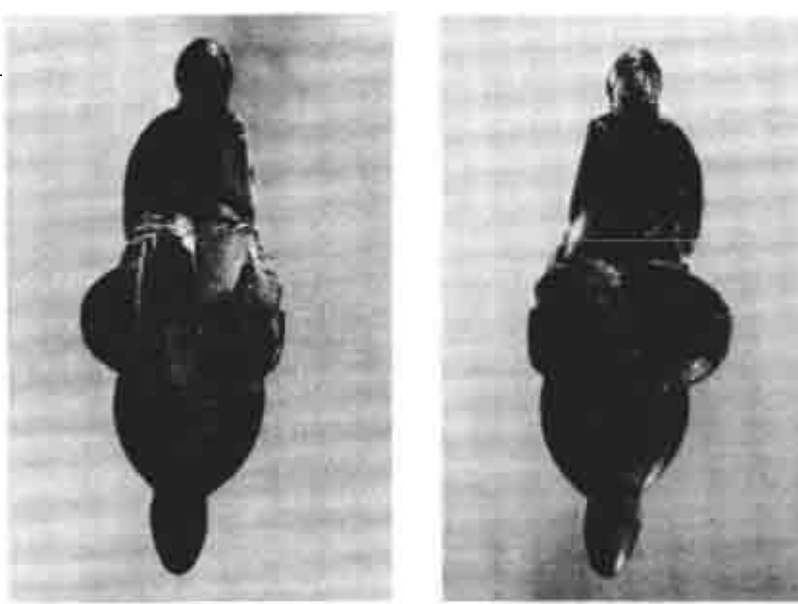


Figure 2. Goddess of Lespugue, front and back view; mammoth-ivory statue, c. 20,000–18,000 BC, height 5½ in. (14 cm). Haute-Garonne, France.

birth falling profusely from the womb, like rain. The ten lines are suggestive of the ten lunar months of gestation in the womb.

What are the grounds for claiming that these sculptures of women are goddesses, not simply the beauties of the local tribe or the girls in the cave next door? Firstly, the sculptures are not naturalistic, unless we assume that the Palaeolithic artist had no sense of proportion for human females while having exquisite artistry for animals. To describe them in the cautious language of ‘Statue of a Woman’ often found on museum plaques is to overlook the symbolism of arranging all the features of the body in such a coherent and consistent manner. Because the whole of the body is concentrated on the drama of birth, the story that these and many other figures tell is the story of how life comes into being.

The female figure is the only evidence before us in each case. We can interpret this as a particular woman, or women in general, or a woman whose specific characteristics are given ritual significance and made translucent to convey something beyond what any particular woman is or does. No similar male figures have been found. Why, then, would the figure of a woman, or, more precisely, the figure of a woman giving birth, be ritualized? Here we leave the evidence and come to interpretation.

The mystery of the female body is the mystery of birth, which is also the mystery of the unmanifest becoming manifest in the whole of nature. This far transcends the female body and woman as carrier of this image, for the body of the female of any species leads through the mystery of birth to the mystery of life itself.

If we acknowledge the religious significance of these figures, we cannot then dismiss them in the term ‘idols of fertility’. For the word ‘idol’ invariably trivializes the numinosity of the religious experience since it is used only of other people’s forms of worship, and the word ‘fertility’ also, rather grandly, overlooks the fact that many people in our time pray to the Virgin Mary to grant them children. Similarly, to call them ‘Venus figurines’ – as in *Venus of Laussel* or *Venus of Lespugue*, which are their usual names – is to reduce the universality of a first principle – the Mother – to the name of the Roman goddess of love, who was by then only one goddess among many, all of them long superseded by the Father God as ruler if not

creator of the world. So, to try to restore to the Palaeolithic figures their own original dignity, we prefer to ascribe the name of 'Mother Goddess', or simply 'Goddess', to these sacred images of the life-giving, nourishing and regenerating powers of the universe.

We shall not try to define 'the sacred' and 'the numinous', since they are terms that point to an ultimate reality that is unique for each person, yet whose shared meaning appears over the millennia to change imperceptibly from age to age. What is important is that an experience of a sacred dimension is found in all cultures whether their organization is simple or very complex. This suggests that the sacred is not a *stage* in the history of consciousness but an element in the *structure* of consciousness,



Figure 3. Head of Goddess; mammoth-ivory, c. 22,000 BC, height 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (3.65 cm). Brassempouy, Landes, France.

belonging to all people at all times. It is therefore part of the character of the human race, perhaps the essential part. So it is crucially necessary for an understanding of that other aspect of being human, which is to have been born at a particular time into a specific family within a certain tribal group. If we accept that the images of other cultures have an equally valid claim to the sacred, then we are less likely to overlook similarities between our own numinous images and those of others.

The oldest sculpture of a goddess, from about 22,000 BC, is the one that looks most modern, of which only a tiny head remains (Fig. 3). She was carved from mammoth-ivory, only 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (3.65 cm) tall, with fine, delicate features: a long neck framed by long straight hair, a most distinctive nose and eyebrows, and the design of a net precisely chiselled over the full length of her hair. She comes from Brassempouy in the Landes area of France.

THE MOTHER GODDESS AS THE CREATIVE SOURCE OF LIFE

Looking back so many thousands of years later at these earliest figures, it seems as if humanity's first image of life was the Mother. This must go back to a time when human beings experienced themselves as the children of Nature, in relationship with all things, part of the whole. It may seem astonishing that people who lived then were already speaking a language that is still intelligible to us today. Yet, exploring the art of that time from the perspective of the present, it seems that many of the images known to us later from the worship of the Mother Goddess in more complex traditions had here their earliest manifestation. Images of giving birth, offering nourishment from the breast and receiving the dead back into the womb for rebirth occur in the Palaeolithic as they do 10,000 years later in the Neolithic and 5,000 years after that in the Bronze and Iron Ages – and, indeed, are present to this day in Western culture in the rituals surrounding the Virgin Mary. It is not

surprising that these images of the goddess appear throughout human history, for they all express a similar vision of life on Earth, one where the creative source of life is conceived in the image of a Mother and where humanity feels itself and the rest of creation to be the Mother's children.

Moving from west to east, the Goddess of Willendorf in Austria (Fig. 4) is only $4\frac{1}{3}$ inches (11 cm) tall but seems massive. Made of limestone, this figure is weighed down with fertility, so rooted in the earth that she seems to be part of it. The centripetal heaviness of her body – where breasts, womb and thighs fall into a round and the arms rest on top of the hugely swollen breasts – forms a distinct contrast to the separateness of the head with its precisely carved notations. The curiously bulbous head is vertically layered in seven strata, with each layer notched horizontally all the way round, giving the appearance of seven circles around the head. The number seven, as one quarter of the moon's full circle and the number of the moving planets, may here be coincidental, but certainly was a sacred number of wholeness by the time of the Bronze Age (c. 3500 BC), 15,000 years later.

The flowing breast is the essential image of trust in the universe. Even the faintest pattern of stars was once seen as iridescent drops of milk streaming from the breast of the Mother Goddess: the galaxy that came to be called the Milky Way. In the ivory figurine from Pavlov near Dolni Věstonice in Czechoslovakia, in Figure 6, the breasts are the entire focus of meaning, and everything else has been abstracted away to render the central theme of nourishment all-inclusive. The lines etched around the



Figure 4. Goddess of Willendorf, front view; limestone, 20,000–18,000 BC, height $4\frac{1}{3}$ in. (11 cm). Austria.



Figure 5. Goddess of Willendorf, close-up of the top of the head, showing seven strata of notched circles.



Figure 6. Ivory rod with breasts; c. 25,000–20,000 BC. Dolni Věstonice, Czechoslovakia.



Figure 7. Goddess; fired clay, c. 20,000 BC, torso height $4\frac{1}{4}$ in (11.5 cm). Dolni Věstonice, Czechoslovakia.

outside of the breasts and the horizontal lines beneath them direct attention to the sacred source. It seems incredible that when this image was found in 1937 it was described as ‘a diluvial (i.e. Ice Age or pre-Flood) plastic pornography’.³

The strange dark goddess in [Figure 7](#), found near a hearth also in Dolni Věstonice, was sculpted from clay and pulverized bone and fired rock-hard. Her face has two upward slanting slits for eyes and a downward stroke for the nose, and in the top of her head four holes were made in the wet clay to hold flowers, leaves or feathers, forming her ‘hair’ or ‘head-dress’ – an image, perhaps, that explores how plants grow. Again, it is the feeling of fecundity that predominates: the shape of the full hanging breasts followed in the swelling curve of the hips and belly, with a large hole for the belly button, emphasizing the umbilical cord and possibly taking the place of the vulva, which is absent. Since her legs end in a point she would also have been placed upright in soil or wood, or carried by hand.

The goddess as the creative source of life was also frequently rendered abstractly in the shape of a triangle ([Fig. 8](#)) or in a distinct division of the legs opened at the entrance to the womb. There are more than 100 images of the vulva in Palaeolithic France alone, suggesting

that stories of the goddess who gives birth were so familiar that they could be instantly recognized. Sometimes the vulvas have seeds and sprouts drawn over or beside them, or even the rippling movement of water, suggesting that the



Figure 8. Genital triangle, meanders and chevrons incised on bone figurines, 30,000–20,000 BC. Mezin, western Ukraine.

cosmic womb was recognized as the source of the vegetative world and also of the waters of life. In [Figure 8](#) the meander of chevron patterns that are incised on the ivory may be the markings of bird wings or the wavy lines of water.

In the forked bone pendant in [Figure 9](#), again from Dolni Věstonice, the body is abstracted to form a symbol, its meaning focused on the deeply marked groove where the ‘legs’ divide. Over 10,000 years later, the bone engraving from Teyjat in the Dordogne ([Fig. 10](#)) looks like an evolution of this image: the figure is also abstract, yet it may be more readily recognized as a goddess. She has a tiny head, angular shoulders, a serpentine design down the outer length of the body and curious rectangular shapes engraved upon it. The vulva or womb is drawn as a double oval with the two horizontal lines beneath it, further emphasized by the cleft between the tapering legs.

Moving further eastwards across to Siberia, an extraordinary burial site was discovered at Mal’ta near Lake Baikal, dating to c. 16,000–13,000 BC; in this site, along with fourteen animal burials, there were at least twenty



Figure 9. Ivory pendant; c. 20,000 BC. Dolni Věstonice, Czechoslovakia.



Figure 10. Drawing of goddess engraved on bone; c. 10,000 BC. Teyjat, France.



Figure 11. Goddess figure carved from mammoth-ivory; c. 16,000–13,000 BC. Mal'ta, Siberia.

mammoth-ivory figures of goddesses, all from 1¼ to 5¼ inches (3.2 to 13.3 cm) tall, one of them apparently clothed in a lion's skin. The small thin goddess in [Figure 11](#) has unusually defined arms, with the breasts and head emphasized, and again she has tapering legs that allow us to imagine her standing upright, fixed into the earth, just like the Goddess of Lespugue. The resemblance of many of the goddess figures all the way from France to Russia suggests that there was a continuity of religious structure stretching from Europe to Siberia, unimaginable before the excavations of the twentieth century.

THE GODDESS AS BIRD

The bird who appears out of a distant sky has always been a messenger of wonder as the visible incarnation of the invisible world. In many Bronze Age myths the cosmic egg of the universe was laid by the Cosmic Mother Bird, and its cracking open was the beginning of time and space. The ivory bead from Dolni Věstonice in [Figure 12](#) is the centre-piece of a necklace of beads, carved from the ivory of a mammoth tooth. It has a long, faceless neck and two breasts, which could also be the wings of a bird, because the sign of the double V chevron engraved on them resembles the striped markings of many birds, as do the grooves on the lower tips. It anticipates similar figures in the Neolithic era (10,000–3500 BC), by which time the power and protection of the one Mother Goddess has clearly differentiated into the three regions of Sky or the Upper Waters, Earth, and the Lower Waters or the Waters Beneath the Earth. From the evidence of art, the notion of 'the underworld', with its connotations of

darkness, lifelessness and menace, was not present before the traumas and anarchy of the late Bronze Age. The Goddess of the Upper Waters in the Neolithic is the Bird Goddess who brings the life-giving rain, just as, even in much later times, birds were believed to make the weather or be a sign of weather to come. The stork who in folk-lore brings the baby through the air was once the Stork who brought back the spring, the rebirth of the year. The Neolithic goddess in [Figure 13](#) has the head of a bird, and sometimes she also has a bird body with wings; or her body becomes the pots and vases holding the waters of life, her bird face staring out from them and rain torrents streaking across them.

Nearly 15,000 years lie between these two images, yet they and many others travelled across many thousands of miles and many hundreds of centuries, carried either by the constantly dispersing tribes as they moved into new lands, or re-enacted, more obscurely, by successive generations moved by the same need to articulate a similar feeling in a similar way. The debate on whether some recurrent images radiate from a central source or are a spontaneous recurrence brought about by constant characteristics in the nature of the human psyche is virtually unsolvable once both alternatives are held to be possible. When we talk of archetypal images here we are assuming that even if an image were, so to say, physically transported from one place to another (as many undoubtedly were), it would not have caught the imagination of the inhabitants of any new place if there had not been some essential resonance in the hearts and minds of all the people.



Figure 12. Pendant bead (enlarged) of mammoth-ivory in the shape of an elongated neck with pierced hole and two breasts engraved as wings on the front; c. 20,000 BC, height 1 in. (2.5 cm). Dolni Věstonice, Czechoslovakia.



Figure 13. Bird goddess with breasts and chevrons; terracotta, c. 6000 BC. Sesklo, Thessaly, Greece.



Figure 14. Female figurine; coal, c. 14,000 BC, height 1¾ in. (4.4 cm). Petersfels, Germany.



Figure 15. Engraving of female figure with cosmic egg; c. 18,000–14,000 BC. Fontales, France.

Egg-shaped buttocks or buttocks round enough to hold an egg also render the goddess as the source of life through the metaphor of a bird. Many so-called ‘buttocks’ figures were engraved on cave walls in south-western France from 30,000 BC to 10,000 BC (from the Aurignacian to the Magdalenian periods). The tiny piece of coal from a cave in Petersfels, Germany, in [Figure 14](#), beautifully carved and polished to a smooth ebony, is only 1¾ inches (4.4 cm) tall and has a hole at the top, so it might have been hung around the neck by a leather thong. The egg inside the buttocks of the engraving from Fontales in southern France in [Figure 15](#) may suggest a fusion of the goddess with the bird who lays the cosmic egg, or it may be that the egg is placed inside the body of the goddess to make an analogy between the miraculous way a baby bird comes forth from the egg and the way the world is imagined as coming forth from the body of the goddess.

THE CAVE AS THE WOMB OF THE MOTHER GODDESS

Scarcely more than 100 years ago no one knew that there was human life at the time when the woolly mammoth ranged over the frozen wastes that covered most of Europe and Asia. Then came the astonishing discoveries of the Palaeolithic caves of northern Spain and south-western France: first, Altamira (1879); then La Pasiega (1911), Les Trois Frères (1912), Tuc d'Audoubert (1914), Niaux, Les Combarelles, Pech-Merle and Lascaux (1940), to mention only the best known. Layer after layer, painstakingly lifted from the floors of these caves, have revealed a continuity of life inside them over an immense span of time. The excavations at El Castillo in northern Spain, for instance, show that Neanderthal Man (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*), who preceded Modern Man (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), lived here before the Riss–Würm interglacial period, that is, before 186,000 BC.⁴ In the past century more than 100 decorated caves have been uncovered, overturning earlier theories of barely human warrior-hunters lurking at the dawn of history and sleeping unquietly in the depths of the human heart.

The story of a great primeval goddess is told in the caves of south-western France through

the art and the rituals that took place inside them. For at least 20,000 years (from 30,000 to 10,000 BC) the Palaeolithic cave seems to be the most sacred place, the sanctuary of the Goddess and the source of her regenerative power. Entering one of these caves is like making a journey into another world, one which is *inside* the body of the goddess. To those who would have lived in a sacred world, the actual hollowed shape would have symbolized her all-containing womb, which brought forth the living and took back the dead. The cave as the place of transformation was the binding link between the past and future of the men and women who lived in the forefront of it and held their religious rites deep in its interior sanctuary. Inside the cave were placed the stones that represented the souls of the dead who would be reborn from her womb. On the exterior walls her image was sculpted; on the interior walls were painted the male and female animals who may have embodied the different aspects of her being, and the artist-shamans who could hear her voice in the voice of the animal.

Just before 1914, in the Ariège region of south-western France, a vast complex of labyrinthine caves was discovered 60 feet (18 metres) below the surface of the ground. Campbell points out that this cave-labyrinth of Tuc d'Audoubert and Les Trois Frères together was used for at least 20,000 years and was one of the most important centres of religion, if not the greatest in the world.⁵

All the magnificently decorated caves of the Palaeolithic tribes were guarded by a formidably arduous approach. Going from daylight into complete darkness, it is impossible not to feel a tremor of fear and awe, treading the same path into the heart of the earth as people did 30,000 years ago. They had only lamps of hollowed stone with juniper twig wick and oil made from animal fat to give them light. How did they find the courage to creep and slither and gasp their way through narrow labyrinthine passages, through caverns vast enough to contain a cathedral, to a sanctuary at the end, often 1–2 miles (2–3 km) from the mouth of the cave? Following the tortuous pathway to the sanctuary or descending into an enormous light and spacious womb-cavern has all the characteristics of a tribal initiation of the kind still practised by some contemporary tribes. The vision at the end of this journey at Lascaux – the dazzling animals known only from field and forest – must have felt like a ‘second birth’ into a new dimension. Dr Herbert Kuhn describes his breakthrough into



Figure 16. Interior of the great cave at Lombrives, near Tarascon-sur-Ariège, France.

the ultimate cavern at Les Trois Frères in 1926:

The hall in which we are now standing is gigantic. We let the light of the lamps run along the ceiling and walls; a majestic room – and there, finally, are the pictures. From top to bottom a whole wall is covered with engravings. The surface has been worked with tools of stone, and there we see marshaled the beasts that lived at the time in southern France: the mammoth, rhinoceros, bison, wild horse, bear, wild ass, reindeer, wolverine, musk ox; also, the smaller animals appear: snowy owls, hares, and fish ... And one sees darts everywhere, flying at the game. Truly a picture of the hunt; the picture of the magic of the hunt.⁶

Inside the caves an inspiration for the art of sculpture may have been offered by the elongated stalactites that hung from the roof to the floor, as well as by the rounded stalagmites thrown upwards from the ground. Watching and listening to the constant dripping of water on to stone, the cave dwellers may also have seen the connection of what is above with what is below as symbolizing a universal relationship between heaven and earth. Some cave shapes at least were alive with meaning: at Pech-Merle in France, for instance, red and black dots were painted around stalactites, transforming them into breasts.

André Leroi-Gourhan, the pioneering French Palaeolithic scholar, who analysed thousands of paintings and sculptures from a great number of caves, proposed that the figures and signs could be distinguished into what he called ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ categories, and that there was a fundamental, though very complicated, emphasis on ‘pairing’ of polarized forces. Not every animal of all those known to have been alive then was portrayed, so that those especially selected were, he concluded, chosen for their dramatic role in a specific mythology, the main actors being the bison and the horse. What is fascinating is his observation that the figures, animals and signs he interpreted as feminine were situated in a central position, which was clearly ‘the special heart and core of the caves’.⁷ The masculine animals and signs, by contrast, supplemented the feminine signs: either they were arranged around the feminine signs or they featured only peripherally in the narrow entrances toward the sanctuary or in the narrow tunnels at the back.⁸

THE GODDESS AS THE MOON

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