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## BACK IN THE DAY

This new feature extracts articles from *The Independent Scholar Quarterly* (TISQ) which was the predecessor of *The Independent Scholar* (TIS). Papers that appeared in TISQ did not undergo the same peer review process as those appearing in the main body of TIS; there is nevertheless much of value to be gleaned from TISQ. For this volume I have selected a short but interesting article by Valerie Abrahamsen, adapted from a talk first presented at the Sixth Gender and Archaeology Conference, Northern Arizona University, October 2000, in which she examines the legacy of the prehistoric goddess in Christian symbolism. The article originally appeared in TISQ Vol. 25, No. 1 (February 2012): 16-23.

SHELBY SHAPIRO

General Editor

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## SYMBOLS OF THE PREHISTORIC GODDESS IN OLD EUROPE: CONTINUITY AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA

Valerie Abrahamsen, Th.D.

(Brattleboro, Vermont, USA)

In the beginning was the Goddess! In the beginning, when *homo sapiens* first emerged and began populating Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, a female deity reigned supreme. In the beginning, before civilization as we know it, for upwards of 200,000 years, ancestors of modern Westerners worshipped a powerful goddess.<sup>1</sup> The veneration of male deities, in contrast, began around the time of the Bronze Age (3200-1500 Before the Common Era [BCE]).<sup>2</sup> Who was this powerful, persistent goddess, and why did she seemingly disappear? Why did the culture that worshipped her last so long, and what kind was it? What can we learn from her that can inform our life in the 21st century?

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987) 49 and Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, ed. Joan Marler. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers and San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 222.

<sup>2</sup> Gimbutas, *Civilization*, 401.

### THE SYMBOLS AND THE GODDESS

As a New Testament scholar and early church historian by training, I fell into the topic of the prehistoric goddess almost by accident. My doctoral research had focused on female cults in the city of Philippi in northern Greece, Philippi being one of the major cities visited by St. Paul. Designs on the mosaic floors of the city's early Byzantine basilicas included birds, plants and geometric shapes. The basilicas had been built in the fourth to sixth centuries of the Common Era (CE).<sup>3</sup> As I read *The Civilization of the Goddess* by the late archaeologist and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas about her work at prehistoric sites in former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, I realized that the designs on the basilica's mosaics closely resembled those that Gimbutas had found on thousands of prehistoric artifacts. Was this just a coincidence?

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<sup>3</sup> Valerie A. Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and Other Cults in the Early Christian Era* (Portland, ME: Astarte Shell Press, 1995) 151-77 and Abrahamsen, *Goddess and God*, 199-205.

Several facts about ancient Philippi suggested that adoration of a female deity in some form was far from dead as Christianity developed: two of Philippi's most prominent deities were Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and Isis, an Egyptian deity. Isis survived into the Byzantine era at Philippi despite the growth of the Christ-cult, and women had prominent roles there in both paganism and Christianity.<sup>4</sup> My search was on for evidence of the goddess' survival at Philippi and beyond – and it started with interpretation of the symbols. The symbols, which appeared on paintings, jewelry, pottery, ritual and everyday vessels, and figurines, included birds and animals – ram, owl, vulture, duck, pig, stag, ox, peacock – as well as plants, trees, flowers and geometric symbols. The artifacts dated to about 7000-3500 BCE, roughly the Neolithic era in Europe, with the figurines uncovered by Gimbutas in her excavations being overwhelmingly female. This female figure is often pregnant or giving birth, yet in the guise of the White Lady, she represents inevitable death.<sup>5</sup>

As Gimbutas began to analyze what she found, she identified the goddess in her various manifestations – Bird Goddess, Snake Goddess, Goddess of Death and Regeneration. Some of Gimbutas' interpretations may seem like a stretch to us, yet in a pre-industrial society totally dependent upon Nature, they make perfect sense. The snake is a good example: contrary to the Jewish and Christian notion that the snake is the evil seducer, the snake of the goddess symbolized energy and, through the shedding of its skin, regeneration. Similarly, the bull is not a symbol of male ferocity but female power: its horns resemble both the crescent moon and Fallopian tubes.

The more abstract symbols on the artifacts are especially intriguing because lines and geometric shapes are often viewed as merely decorative. Gimbutas, however, postulated an entire symbolic language that Neolithic peoples used to communicate with their deity. The triangle, V and chevron were symbols of the goddess' pubic triangle, center of her vital life-producing power. Wavy lines and an M figure

meant water, milk, and breasts, fluids of life and their source.<sup>6</sup>

Through the symbols, Gimbutas could describe the kind of society that worshipped this deity: a true civilization where people lived in harmony with Nature and each other, where no weapons of war were found, where buildings could be several stories high – with plumbing – and where high artistic achievement was the norm, not the exception.<sup>7</sup> By coercion, conversion, and violence, the female deity was subdued and eventually replaced by the male deity, at least at the official level. The goddess' ownership of life, resurrection, regeneration and rebirth were appropriated by the god; her strength became his strength; her wisdom became his wisdom.<sup>8</sup> However, it is also apparent in examining some of these androcentric (male-centered) religious systems that the goddess did not entirely disappear. Athena, Artemis, Isis, Demeter, and Persephone still appear in the Graeco-Roman pantheon. Among Jews, God appears sometimes as Sophia/Wisdom and has maternal attributes. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary's cult was unsurpassed.

What is taking place? Are these female images only figments of male imagination, refashioned by male elites for their own misogynist purposes? What can women really take from Athena, the war goddess, or Mary, the impossible-to-emulate virgin-mother-saint? What, if anything, can we moderns learn from the knowledge that, millennia ago, the goddess reigned supreme?

The evidence strongly suggests that the prehistoric goddess survived in symbolism, myth, private ritual, liturgies, folklore, and magic into and through later ages and did so primarily among the common folk – “underground,” as it were. The early Byzantine basilicas at Philippi contained symbols reminiscent of the goddess partly because they still resonated with the worshippers in those buildings. Although Christians reinterpreted the images, as we shall see, the Christian message could not have been successfully promulgated without some reference to images familiar to the people.

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<sup>4</sup> For an examination of women's roles in early Christianity at Philippi, see Valerie Abrahamsen, “Women at Philippi: The Pagan and Christian Evidence,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (Fall 1987) 17-30.

<sup>5</sup> Gimbutas extensively discusses goddess symbolism in *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989).

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<sup>6</sup> See especially Gimbutas, *Language*, 3-23 and 81-111, and Abrahamsen, *Goddess and God*, 237-44.

<sup>7</sup> Gimbutas, *Civilization*, x-xi and 52.

<sup>8</sup> See Sjöo and Mor, *Cosmic Mother*, passim.

## TWO SYMBOLS: THE CROSS AND THE LABYRINTH

Many prehistoric symbols linked to the omnipotent goddess were ultimately appropriated in Judaism and Christianity. Here we will trace the development of two of those symbols in Christianity, the cross and the labyrinth. In Christian theology, the cross is the instrument of the ignominious death of Jesus: he was crucified on a cross of wood but then resurrected, with the cross becoming a symbol of victory over death. Prior to Christianity, however, the cross, especially in the form of a tree, symbolized life, vegetation, and fruitfulness – attributes of the goddess. Likewise, the earth out of which the tree grows is the body of the goddess.<sup>9</sup> In human procreative terms, this earth, this body, is the goddess's "veil" or hymen. In the ancient imagination, the image is not obscene or vulgar but sacred: it was about Life – human, floral and faunal.<sup>10</sup>

By extension, the cross/tree also symbolized the phallus, an instrument of fertility. The tree/cross growing out of the earth is a powerful symbol of Life, directed by the goddess but played out androgynously. When the story started to circulate in the early years of the Common Era that Jesus died on a cross – on a tree – the ancient, pre-industrial mindset could easily see the connections: the phallus of Jesus (the cross) penetrates the body of the goddess (her "veil" or hymen). According to Barbara Walker, this imagery may be reflected in John 19:30: "It is consummated" or "It is accomplished." Jesus, the male god/phallus/cross/tree, has united with the earth/goddess/hymen, to give life to the world. This may further be reflected in Luke's version of Jesus' death: in 23:45, the veil of the temple is torn in half as Jesus dies.<sup>11</sup>

These interpretations are now a long way from the tree as a symbol of life emerging naturally from the body of Mother Earth, the goddess. Early on, Christians believed that Jesus died unjustly, as a criminal, at the hands of a foreign power. When the goddess died, she was generally not murdered – she died because all of Nature dies and is then regenerated. In Jesus' case, however, his father, the supreme male God, *asks* that he die – grotesquely and violently. When the goddess dies, usually no blood is

shed; but when Jesus dies, his blood is shed, at the hands of human beings. State-sanctioned death is not natural, and such an image is indeed violent.

Christian interpreters, therefore, transformed a female symbol of *life* into a male symbol of *death*. The ensuing resurrection in Christian theology is not a natural phenomenon but a miracle attributed to the supreme male deity. In this interpretation, Christians are asked to believe that a gruesome death is salvific, beautiful, noble, life-affirming and holy. While Christ's victory over death has deep meaning to millions, it is important to realize that we have been asked to suspend our normal impulse to be disgusted and repelled by human beings killing each other – especially unjust death, and by the will of our sovereign, parental deity. We are asked to deny that a tree that grows, gives fruit, nourishes us and protects us from the sun, is unworthy of adoration. The natural world, our intuition and our intellect are turned upside down.

The labyrinth is another ancient symbol of the prehistoric goddess that has been appropriated by patriarchal religion. In recent years, labyrinths have been created in churches and church yards as an introspective form of meditation, centered on uniting with the male God, or as a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where Jesus died.

To discuss the history of labyrinths is to discuss caves. People from the Paleolithic era communed with the deepest, most resonant and awesome powers in these dark spaces. The paintings in the caves, probably executed by religious leaders who were in touch with sublime truths, "could be reached only with great difficulty, along winding paths, narrow ledges, slippery and dangerous passages. . ."<sup>12</sup> Creating the paintings and viewing them were not casual, everyday experiences but rather became ritualized as expressions of deep, vitally important experiences.

Because pre-industrial peoples viewed the very earth as "mother," a cave represented the womb of this mother – dark, mysterious, life-giving, and a repository of mystic influences.<sup>13</sup> To be fully in touch and united with the goddess, indeed with oneself, one had to dance or walk the labyrinth – to travel through the mother goddess to one's real, ultimate self. This travel, or initiation, entailed ritualistically "dying" to one's past and then opening oneself to the mother's,

<sup>9</sup> Sjöo and Mor, *Cosmic Mother*, 163-64.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara G. Walker, "Jesus Christ," in Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) 468.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, "Jesus Christ," 468.

<sup>12</sup> Sjöo and Mor, *Cosmic Mother*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Walker, *Encyclopedia*, 154.

the earth's, mysteries. The labyrinth, maze and spiral were associated with "the internal organs of the human anatomy as well as with the underworld, the one being the microcosm of the other." The tomb-cave is built to resemble the womb so that the initiate becomes reborn by following the spiral to the all-important center point.<sup>14</sup>

To prehistoric and other pre-industrial peoples, it would have been extremely important to be initiated in this manner once in a lifetime. Joseph Campbell illustrates this with a myth from the island of Malekula in the New Hebrides:

[w]hen the soul has been carried on a wind across the waters of death and is approaching the entrance of the underworld, it perceives a female guardian sitting before the entrance, drawing a labyrinth design across the path, of which she erases half as the soul approaches. The voyager must restore the design perfectly if he [sic] is to pass through it to the Land of the Dead. Those who fail, the threshold guardian eats. One may understand how very important it must have been, then, to learn the secret of the labyrinth before death.<sup>15</sup>

The "energy" of the labyrinth is crucial. The initiation rites in and around the labyrinth were very powerful and memorable but made even more so by energy and related natural phenomena in the caves themselves. A series of experiments conducted in Neolithic monuments in Great Britain a decade ago illustrate some of these phenomena. "Standing waves" of sound can be produced in passage graves by combining two sound waves of equal frequency and intensity traveling in opposite directions. When a group of people chanted in one of these spaces, the volume and intensity of the sound became so enhanced that it was difficult to determine its source. Even more disconcerting was "the disquieting feeling that some sounds were emerging from inside the head and body of the listener" and that the sound became "louder as the listener moved away from the source, or fluctuated as others moved around the chamber."<sup>16</sup>

At certain Neolithic monuments, these researchers also demonstrated a phenomenon called the Helmholtz Resonance. This is created when sound waves generated in the burial or other chamber make the air expand and contract repeatedly. In prehistory, such a sound was created by drumming, probably at two beats per second; the notes are *felt*, not heard. In the British experiments, "volunteers reported dizziness, sensations of ascent, and the feeling that their breathing and pulse were affected. In the research literature, there are accounts of vibration, balance disturbance, headaches, and even altered states of consciousness caused by similar sounds. For the people of prehistory, it is easy to imagine that such sensations seemed to originate in the supernatural realm,"<sup>17</sup> making the entire cave experience memorable, if not life-altering.

Relatedly, the ancients saw the earth as alive, with a life-spirit of energy connected to the very core of the planet and to the stars, the moon and the sun. Scientists can now confirm their intuition: the earth force, like a magnetic current, is in fact emitted by underground waters. This force causes wave-motions perpendicular to the earth's surface, forming spiral patterns, mazes and labyrinths. Lines formed by this motion remain constant over time and are utilized by birds and animals. Ancient peoples knew about these phenomena and built their sacred monuments and pathways accordingly. Places in the earth that were particularly affected by or in tune with these energy forces were known to foster social and personal harmony, bring about healing, ease labor pains, and enable communication with the divine.<sup>18</sup>

The more modern usages of the labyrinth, originating in Medieval times, are very different from the goddess-centered journey inward to tap into the powers of the earth and one's own soul and psyche, for the purpose of living harmoniously with other people and all of Nature. While there is nothing wrong with a meditative walk through the labyrinth, and nothing wrong with attempting to connect with something higher than oneself, we should consider what has been lost. If what has been lost is something

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982; first ed., Viking Press, 1959) 69.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, *Primitive*, 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> Aaron Watson, "Sounds of the Spirit World," *Scientific American Discovering Archaeology* (January/February 2000) 88-89.

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<sup>17</sup> Watson, "Spirit World," 90-91.

<sup>18</sup> Sjöo and Mor, *Cosmic Mother*, 124-28. They refer here to Guy Underwood, *The Pattern of the Past* (London: Museum Press, 1969; London: Abacus, 1972) and John Mitchell, *The Earth Spirit* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975; New York: Avon Books, 1975).

that humanity could use at this point in its journey, then we must reclaim it.

#### CONCLUSION

As we can see, current Christian symbols have a long history, originating in a time when human beings were closely connected to the earth and Nature. Early peoples viewed their world in female terms and venerated an all-powerful female deity. The goddess of prehistory, though eventually overshadowed by male deities, survived "underground" through time and into the Graeco-Roman era when Christianity took hold and developed. Early Christians, still agrarian and close to the earth, retained many of the symbols, beliefs and rites associated with an all-powerful female deity. A look under the surface of the male-centered aspects of Christianity can uncover perspectives and attitudes helpful to us today. The recapture of an awesome veneration for Life in all its forms is perhaps the greatest legacy of the prehistoric goddess.

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