Images of Goddesses and Gods

In Neolithic Europe and Asia Minor (ancient Anatolia)—in the era between 7000 B.C. and 3000 B.C.—religion focused on the wheel of life and its cyclical turning. This is the geographic sphere and the time frame I refer to as Old Europe. In Old Europe, the focus of religion encompassed birth, nurturing, growth, death, and regeneration, as well as crop cultivation and the raising of animals. The people of this era pondered untamed natural forces, as well as wild plant and animal cycles, and they worshiped goddesses, or a goddess, in many forms. The goddess manifested her countless forms during various cyclical phases to ensure that they functioned smoothly. She revealed herself in multiple ways through the myriad facets of life, and she is depicted in a very complex symbolism.

First I will explore these forms in detail, looking mainly at goddess figures, and then I will unravel their meaning. The images of the goddess can be loosely categorized under her aspects of life giving and sustaining, death, and renewal. Although male energy also motivated regeneration and life stimulation, in both the plant and animal worlds, it was the feminine force that pervaded existence.

Figurines

Small statues, excavated from Old European settlements, cemeteries, and tombs, comprise an important source for understanding Old European religion. When the Old Europeans discovered how to fire pottery in about the seventh millennium B.C., that pottery provided a new way to express religious ideals. A variety of ceramic forms—vases, figurines, and ritual implements—displayed the spiritual symbols of Old Europe. Although Old European cultures continued to create religious artifacts in other

media—stone, bone, amber, and antler—it was ceramic forms that most richly manifested the symbolic world of Old Europe.

By nature, archaeological preservation favors smaller artifacts. Chances are better for a ceramic sculpture a few inches high to survive seven or more millennia under several feet of dirt than for a life-size ceramic statue. Consequently, we often unearth small images intact and larger statues in many parts. Most of these figurines can be held in one's hand. Their makers often etched them with sacred symbols in the form of facial markings, geometric designs, and signs that may have been a form of script.

Our Neolithic ancestors not only created figurines representing certain deities, priestesses, or other mythical persona; they also reenacted rituals with these figurines. Discoveries include not only female and male figurines, which may have been made to represent goddesses and gods, but also thrones, vases, offering tables, furniture, musical instruments, and even miniature temples. Such miniature temples preserve the prototypes, adding an extra dimension to the archaeological record. Although ancient peoples created religious artifacts in other media (woven cloth and wood, for instance), except in extraordinary cases these have decayed. As a result, small ceramic objects provide some of the most important evidence for deciphering Old European religion.

Almost all archaeological sites in Italy, the Balkans, and central Europe contain these objects, spanning almost every Neolithic time period. We also find them in Asia Minor (ancient Anatolia, modern Turkey), the Near East, and to a much lesser extent, in western and northern Europe. Often where sites reach several meters deep, representing centuries or even millennia of occupation, figurines occur at almost every level. In these significant sites, we can often discern an artistic evolution from the earliest levels to the latest ones, indicating the importance of these objects to generation after generation of inhabitants.

The Neolithic, or earliest agricultural era, provides a much more fertile source for deciphering figurines than the previous archaeological periods, the Mesolithic and the Upper (or later) Paleolithic. The artifacts from this earlier time period often lose their contexts, and for the entire Upper Paleolithic, we have only about three thousand figurines. For Old Europe, with its great outpouring of religious art, so many figurines have been excavated at so many sites that we cannot possibly tabulate them accurately. Total Old European figurines may number one hundred thousand or more, counting all the broken or damaged figurines deemed unimportant in earlier excavations. Fortunately, settlements, cemeteries, and tombs, which provide excellent contexts, constitute the bulk of Neolithic sites. The innumerable Neolithic figurines preserved in their original settings intimate the richness of Old European spirituality.

SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HUMAN BODY

The human body constituted one of Old Europe's most powerful symbols. As a result of modern cultural programming, we often associate nakedness with sexual enticement. The modern analyst naturally projects these attitudes back thousands of years and assumes that ancient depictions of the body served basically the same purpose.

Our cultural programming also leads to the assumption that female representations invariably represent "earth as fertility"; therefore all naked female artifacts become "fertility figurines." The Old European cultures certainly cared about fertility. But, as we will see, the wide variety of figurines, and particularly their Neolithic archaeological contexts, suggests that the feminine force played a wider religious role.[1] The many sophisticated Neolithic art forms accentuating the female body unveil a natural and sacred sexuality neglected by modern culture.

In religious art, the human body symbolizes myriad functions beyond the sexual, especially the procreative, nurturing, and life enhancing. I believe that in earlier times, obscenity as a concept surrounding either the male or female body did not exist. Renditions of the body expressed other functions, specifically the nourishing and procreative aspects of the female body and the life-stimulating qualities of the male body. The female force, as the pregnant vegetation goddess, intimately embodied the earth's fertility. But the sophisticated, complex art surrounding the Neolithic goddess is a shifting kaleidoscope of meaning: she personified every phase of life, death, and regeneration. She was the Creator from whom all life—human, plant, and animal—arose, and to whom everything returned. Her role extended far beyond eroticism.

The fact that these female figurines do not typically resemble an actual human or animal body belies their use as mere erotic art. The body is almost always abstracted or exaggerated in some manner. These modifications are not accidental: a brief survey of Neolithic art shows that the highly skilled ceramic workers of this time could achieve whatever effect they wished. Their intentional modifications of the human body expressed various manifestations of the inmost divine force. Before discussing the types of divinities represented by the figurines, it is necessary to focus on several peculiarities of figurine art: schematization, masks, hieroglyphs, and exaggeration of certain body parts, all of which were conventions used by the Old European artist.

SCHEMATIC FORMS

In Old Europe, schematic female and male bodies, in conjunction with other symbols, often represented the sacred force. Although many figurines

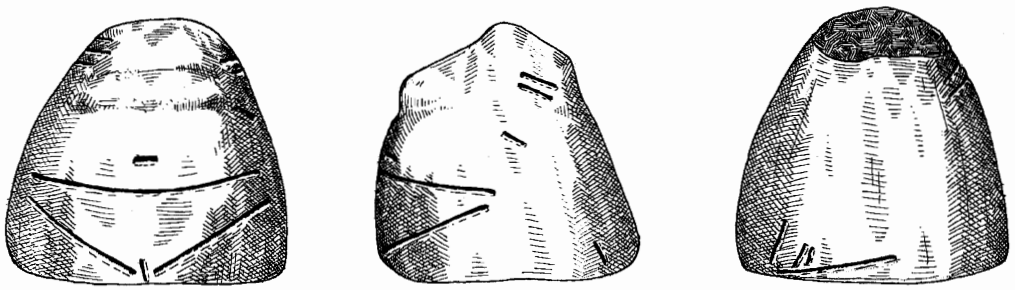

Figure 1. Clearly the artisan had no intention of reproducing a human body on this figurine without legs, arms, or head. Attention here focuses on the large pubic triangle. One, two, or three dashes mark the figurine; a V sign and two lines are etched in back. Sesklo culture; c. 6200–6100 B.C. (Achilleion Phase III, Thessaly, northern Greece).

are ceramic masterpieces, other figurines appear strangely unfinished, sometimes resembling nothing more than a single clay cylinder with exaggerated breasts or buttocks, or a pregnant belly without arms or legs (Fig. 1). Their makers often incised them with symbols, such as two or three lines, spirals or meanders, a chevron or a lozenge. These geometric symbols may have stimulated or identified certain functions of the divinity. In fact, I believe that these schematic renderings distinctively focused attention on the symbolic message they conveyed.

Schematic figurines comprise one of the most captivating and intriguing aspects of Old European art. Although realistic, beautiful likenesses attract more attention, many more schematic figurines are excavated than lifelike ones. This should not surprise us, because prehistoric art was symbolic art. Old European artisans could create schematic figurines easily, and, like the Christian cross, in religious practice these figures communicated the same symbolic concepts as the more representational art. These simplified images do not disparage the human body, as has been commonly thought; instead, they express a sacred message.

EXAGGERATED BODY PARTS

To express different sacred functions, figurines and other ceramic art often display unusual modifications or exaggerations. Female figurines, representing the complex feminine force, particularly show such enhancements. Some figurines show exaggerated body weight, and they have been interpreted by some as obese figures or "fat ladies." Undoubtedly, this exaggerated body weight is valued, since it appears on female figurines from several different cultures. Other figurines focus on the generative organs, the breasts and vulva, as well as the buttocks. Such emphasis enhances the power of that particular part of the body. For instance, many figurines and vases prominently display breasts. The tradition of emphasizing breasts actually began much earlier, during the Upper Paleolithic, and continued much later, into the Bronze Age. Breasts symbolize the nurturing and regen-

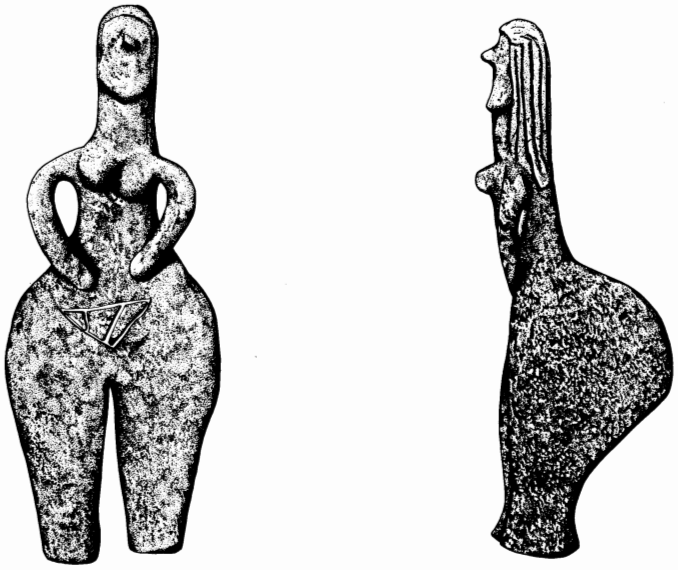

Figure 2. Disproportionate, supernatural buttocks on this figurine reveal their symbolic importance (as a regenerative symbol related to double-egg symbolism). Her pubic triangle is marked with two lines. Starčevo culture; c. 6000–5800 B.C. (Donja Branjevina, near Osijek, Serbia).

eration of life. The depiction of breasts on ceramic vessels used in rituals clearly shows the female body, and by extension the body of the divine female, as a vessel of nourishment or renewal. Although breasts obviously embody nourishment and life sustenance, their portrayal on megalithic tomb walls also attests to the comprehensive spiritual role of the Old European goddess in death and the regeneration of life.

On many figurines, the breasts and the upper part of the body appear relatively thin and de-emphasized, while the lower parts—the buttocks, thighs, and legs—are enlarged beyond natural proportion (Fig. 2). The figurine's center of gravity, and its religious significance, rests in the lower part of the body. These figurines often display exaggerated vulvas and buttocks. Although we almost automatically think of the vulva and buttocks as sexual symbols, in Old European art they most likely signified life giving and sustenance, rather than eroticism. The symbolic value of exaggerated buttocks relates to breasts and double eggs, where the power of the life-giving symbol increases by doubling. Sometimes the artisan molded the buttocks of a figurine on egg-shaped clay cores or pebbles; thus she or he may have felt the interconnectedness of the symbols of buttocks and eggs. This symbolism was inherited from the Upper Paleolithic: on rocks dating to the Magdalenian period, in southern France (La Roche, Lalinde) and southern Germany (Gönnersdorf), artisans engraved buttocks in silhouette and marked them with one, two, or more lines. The early Neolithic figurines with egg-shaped buttocks often exhibit two lines as well, perhaps illustrating the state where one human being becomes two, in pregnancy.

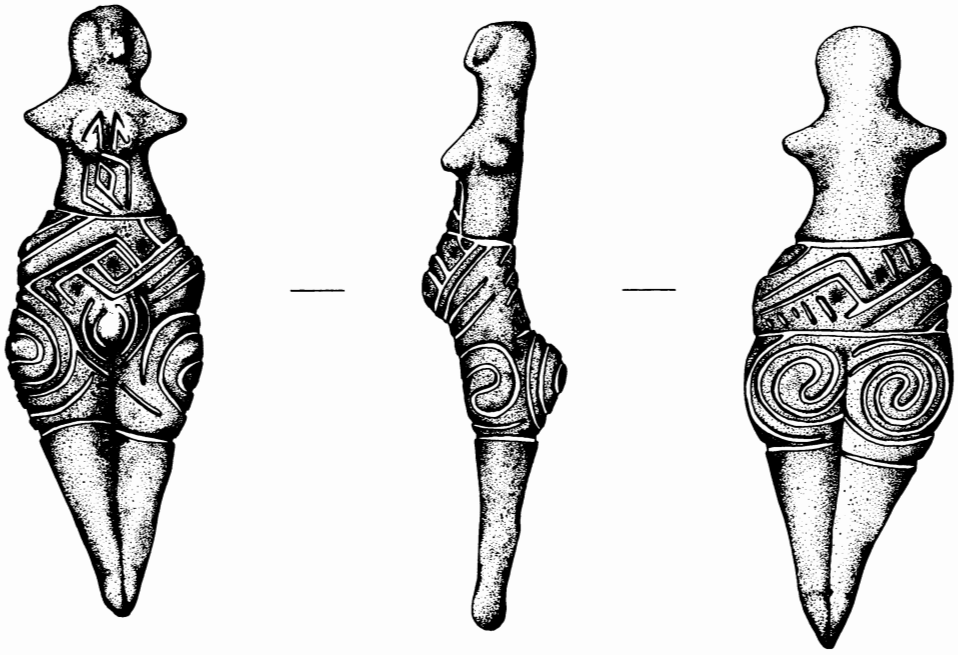

Figure 3. Interest centers on the vulva of this terra-cotta figurine, which is flanked by semicircles and surrounded by spirals and meanders. Lines across her waist and thighs delineate the body section that contains these engraved symbols. The artisan carved V signs over her breasts and a possible script sign below them. Vinča culture; c. 5000 B.C. (Slatino, western Bulgaria).

In both Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic art, the vulva dominates symbolic portrayals, appearing separately or greatly enlarged on figurines and pottery vessels. The vulva appears as a triangle, an oval, an open circle, or even as a bud or branch—a fact that emphasizes its life-giving, rather than erotic, role. The frequency and longevity of this symbol in the archaeological record (over thirty thousand years) speaks for its essential role in the belief system. Three large rock-carved female figures from Angles-sur-l'Anglin (Vienne), in southern France (dated circa 17,000–14,000 B.C.), exhibit neither heads, breasts, arms, nor feet, but their vulvas are displayed prominently. Giedion (1962, 178) comments on the L'Anglin frieze, saying, "Had there been a need to represent the entire body, it could easily have been done in the space available. But apparently no such need was felt, and so only the abdomen, the pelvic area, and the vulva have been carved. The entire figure was not important, but only the fragment which stood for the whole." We can easily understand why the vulva figured so prominently among the script and symbolic messages encoded by artisans on figurines. On one figurine dating to about 5000 B.C., semicircles enhance the oval vulva, while a meander and spirals decorate the thighs and buttocks (Fig. 3). This symbolic combination conveys dynamism: growing, flowing, and turning. As in other symbolism, the feminine force is active and life producing. The goddess embodied the mystery of new life.

The faces of both male and female figurines display a peculiar shape: some show severely angular jawbones, while others look perfectly oval. This feature, combined with stylized eyes and other facial features, gives these figurines an otherworldly appearance (Figs. 4 and 5; see also Figs. 13, 14, 24, 28, below). Closer scrutiny reveals that these peculiar "facial features" represent masks. For many decades, archaeologists have failed to recognize masks on figurines, even those with a distinct demarcation between the face and the edge of the mask. In fact, at the Achilleion site in northern Greece (which dates from 6400 B.C. to 5600 B.C.), we found pregnant goddess figurines with detachable masks on rod-shaped necks. In exceptional cases, figurines hold a mask instead of wearing it (Fig. 6). In contemporary cultures that still use masks in ritual, the masks serve to personify a supernatural force. The ancient Greeks employed masks in drama and in ritual for the same function: to embody the deities, as well as heroines and heroes. Masks most likely had a similar purpose during the European Neolithic. In fact, the masks of the Greeks undoubtedly descended from Neolithic times.

The Neolithic Old Europeans used actual life-sized masks in rituals and ceremonies. They probably created some masks from wood, so we have lost them to decay. But life-sized masks of ceramic and metal have been discovered from the Vinča culture and in the Varna cemetery of Bulgaria. Archaeologists have uncovered masks from Neolithic sites in the Near East, such as the Naḥal Ḥemar cave in the Judaean desert of Israel.[2] The figurines of Old Europe may represent ritual participants wearing masks, or an actual deity. Some masked figurines lack specific features, but others retain intricate details that reveal which aspect of the goddess the figurine embodies.

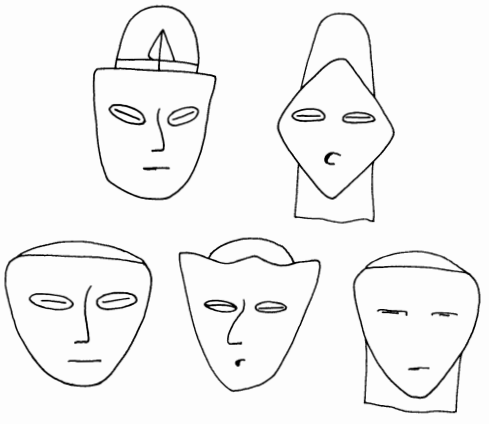

Figure 4. Masked figurine heads from the Sesklo culture; c. 6000–5700 B.C. (from sites near Larisa, Thessaly, northern Greece).

Figure 5. Frequently the divinity's mask is depicted in relief upon a vase neck. Starčevo culture; early sixth millennium B.C. (Gladnice near Priština, Kosovo-Metohije). Preserved H 10.4 cm.

Although Old European artists often used masks to indicate special aspects of the female divine, figurines sometimes directly assimilated animal characteristics. Figurines with animal-shaped heads occur frequently. Snake-, bird-, pig-, and bear-headed figurines have all been discovered. All of these manifestations, whether masked or not, represent the intimate relationship among humankind, nature, and the divine during the Neolithic.

By studying markings on the masks and figurines, we can discern how the divine manifested through different animals. These masks represent

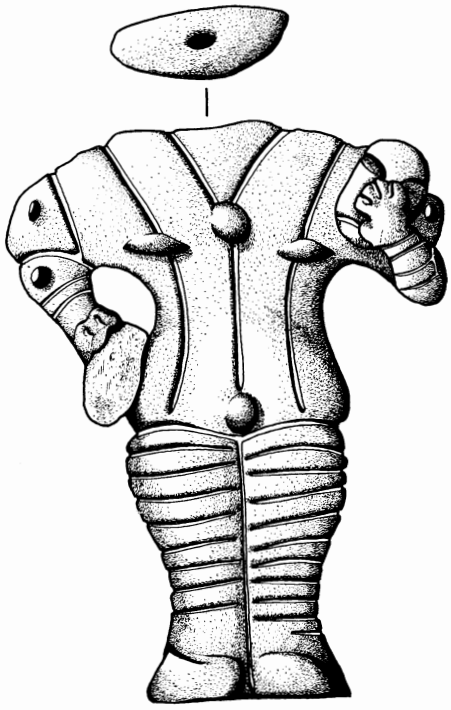

Figure 6. Exceptional figurine holds a mask instead of wearing it. The figurine's left hand clasps a mask, and its right hand holds an askos (bird-shaped vase). It was unearthed in a burned aboveground building, along with four other anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines. Vinča culture (Phase C); c. 4700–4500 B.C. (Liubcova, Caraş-Severin, southwestern Romania). Preserved H 11.5 cm (head was inserted into a hole).

the goddess' sacred animals, and when worn by a human figure they embody a fusion of animal and human forces. Figurines take on bird beaks, snake eyes, ram horns, or bear or pig snouts. Sometimes figurines with animal bodies wear human masks (see Fig. 24, below). Deer, fish, elk, snakes, bears, frogs, rams, pigs, dogs, boars, hedgehogs, and waterbirds (to name a few) all played important parts in religious symbolism.

Life-Giving and Life-Sustaining Images

LIFE-GIVING IMAGES

The Birth-Giving Goddess

Figurines depicting birth eloquently attest to the goddess' most obvious role as life giver. Neolithic artisans rendered her seated or semireclining in the birth-giving position, with knees bent and legs raised, sometimes with a hand behind her head. Her vulva may swell in parturition, the physiologic state just before birth. The presence of masks and symbolic markings on many of these birth-giving figurines affirms their spiritual nature and the attempt of the artisan to communicate with the goddess. The birth goddess appears for more than twenty thousand years, from the Upper Paleolithic through the Neolithic. She may appear in threes, often as three Fates, in early historical religions: the Germanic Norns, the Greek Moirai, and the Roman Parcae are all threefold goddesses of fate.

Birth was sacred—in fact, it was probably one of the most sacrosanct events in Neolithic religion. In the early Neolithic, peoples constructed special rooms where birth took place. We may conceive of these rooms as birthing shrines. At Çatal Hüyük, in south central Turkey (ancient Anatolia), excavations revealed a room where inhabitants apparently performed rituals connected with birthing. They painted the room red, reminding us that red, the color of blood, was the color of life. Stylized figures on the walls illustrate women giving birth, while circular forms and wavy lines painted nearby may symbolize the cervix, umbilical cord, and amniotic fluid. A low plaster platform could have been used for actual birthing. The color and symbolism in the room suggest that people regarded birth as a religious event, and that they accompanied it with ritual. On the island of Malta in the central Mediterranean, the Tarxien and Mnajdra temple artifacts indicate similar practices; these artifacts include a model of a low couch that could have served birth giving, and a birth-giving figurine with nine lines across her back.

The connection between moisture, life, and the life-giving goddess contained deep cosmological significance. Human life began in the watery realm of a woman's womb. So, by analogy, the goddess was the source of

all human, plant, and animal life. She ruled all water sources: lakes, rivers, springs, wells, and rain clouds.

The fact that the goddess birthed new life into existence explains the water symbols, such as nets, streams, and parallel lines, on many of her images. New life springs from the mysterious watery realm, analogous to the womb's amniotic fluid. Net symbolism, which continues from the Neolithic through the historic ages,[3] seems to be specifically associated with this mystical life-bringing fluid. This net symbol occurs repeatedly through time in squares, ovals, circles, lozenges, bladder forms, triangles (pubic triangles), and bands on figurines and vases, often in association with snakes, bears, frogs, fish, bulls' heads, and rams' heads.

Even in historical times, people have considered wells, springs, and ponds to be sacred places of healing inhabited by female spirits. Many early Christian pilgrims visited springs whose patron saint was female (usually the Virgin Mary or, in Ireland, Saint Brigit).[4]

The birth-giving goddess survived in classical Greek religion as Artemis Eileithyia, and in pan-European folklore as one of three goddesses or Fates. Latvians and Lithuanians celebrated birth in saunas up to the twentieth century. They propitiated Laima, the birth-giving goddess, the spinner and weaver of human life, with offerings that included a hen, or towels and other woven materials. We shall return to this amazingly tenacious goddess in the last chapter.

Mother and Child

The mother and child sculptural tradition so venerated during Christian times actually began millennia ago, and Neolithic art provides numerous examples. Just as their historical equivalents, the figurines show a mother nursing or holding her child, but the representations are distinctly Neolithic. The mother and child have human bodies, but both may assume animal masks that show communication with, or embodiment of, the divine. Some of the most touching Old European figurines show a mother tenderly embracing or nursing her child. Sometimes both mother and child wear bear masks. In addition, several bear-headed figurines display pouches on their backs, perhaps for carrying a baby.

The Bear and Deer

The bear and deer consistently appear with the birth-giving goddess. She often incarnated in these forms to assist with the birthing and nursing of the young. Ancient Greeks considered these two animals as incarnations of Artemis,[5] and other European folktales with deep prehistoric roots also connect the bear, deer, and birth-giving goddess.

The bear's history as the cosmic nurturer extends back into the Upper