



The Goddess and the Bear Hybrid Imagery and Symbolism at Çatalhöyük

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Introduction

The Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey's Konya Plain (c. 7400-6000 BC) was discovered in 1958 by British archaeologist James Mellaart. During four seasons of excavation, between 1961 and 1965, Mellaart's team uncovered over three hundred rooms, many of which contained not only well-built domestic features and skillfully produced crafts and tools, but dozens of polychrome wall paintings, clay and plaster bas reliefs, ritual installations and sculptures indicating a pervasive and sophisticated ritual life that extended throughout the duration of the Neolithic occupation (see Mellaart 1967, 1989).

The people of Çatal Hüyük were not peasants. Apart from being competent agriculturalists, builders and painters, weavers and undertakers, they also made baskets, mats, wooden vessels and clay pots; they smelted copper ore . . . they carved bone and stone into statuettes of their deities, as well as into mortars, pestles, querns, polishing stones, etc. They carried on one of the most sophisticated chipped stone industries in obsidian (volcanic glass) and imported Syrian flint. They were traders and prospectors, ranging far and wide over southern Anatolia, since the Konya Plain itself lacked all manufacturing resources except food, clay, reeds and mud (Mellaart 1989:15).

Within the domestic context, Mellaart found rooms which he considered to be shrines or sanctuaries containing wall paintings, multiple bucrania, reliefs of various kinds, and numerous human burials. A number of these special rooms contained large anthropomorphic bas reliefs in a specific open-leg posture with arms raised in an orant position (Figure 1). The faces, hands and feet had all been carefully removed before each room was filled in to provide the foundation for the construction of a new building.



Figure 1: Bas relief from Shrine VI-10. Mellaart excavation (photo: Joan Marler, courtesy of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey).

Concerning these bas reliefs, Mellaart wrote:

Who is this majestic figure, most often shown with widespread legs and uplifted arms,

frequently pregnant and equally often depicted in the act of child-birth? She is none other than the Great Goddess, source and mistress of all life, the Creatress, the Great Mother, the symbol of life itself (Mellaart 1989:23).

Mellaart also discovered the famous sculpture of the mature woman seated between two leopards with her hands on their heads and their tails wrapped around her shoulders (Figure 2, 1-2). This sculpture, found in a grain storage bin, and the discovery of other beautifully crafted female figurines, along with the anthropomorphic bas reliefs, provided visual evidence for Mellaart of the importance of women's contribution to culture and the veneration of a goddess at Çatalhöyük.¹ As a specialist in Near Eastern archaeology and mythology, Mellaart discerned a connection between these images and later goddesses of the Fertile Crescent and those from Anatolia—such as Arinna, Hapat, Kubaba, Cybele, Artemis. In his view, the female imagery that was painted and sculpted for more than a millennium at Çatalhöyük represents enduring, multifaceted expressions of communal concepts of the sacred source and guardian of life.

She is, then, a truly universal goddess, with many counterparts throughout the world. Her role as mistress of all life in the Upper Palaeolithic—the age of hunters—changed somewhat in the Neolithic when man domesticated animals and plants; these pursuits then became her responsibility, as did other cultural activities (Mellaart 1989:23).

Mellaart's high profile articles, excavation reports, and his 1967 book, *Çatal Hüyük*, created widespread excitement about the site. The groundswell of interest in Neolithic art and symbolism generated by the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1974/1982, 1989, 1991) contributed to its international appeal. Using an interdisciplinary methodology to study the iconography of Neolithic societies in Southeast Europe and Anatolia, Gimbutas described "a cohesive and persistent ideological system" of Neolithic symbolism centered around female imagery (Gimbutas 1989:xv). In her view, the primary deity was a multi-dimensional Goddess,

¹ Many of these sculptures—as well as a reconstruction of Shrine VI-10 from Çatalhöyük featuring a life-sized wall relief above a series of bucrania—are on permanent display at the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara, Turkey.



Figure 2, 1: Clay sculpture found by Mellaart in a grain storage bin, 7th mill. BC (photo: Joan Marler, courtesy of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey).



Figure 2, 2: Reconstructed drawing (after Mellaart 1967).

expressed in numerous manifestations, representing the sacredness of the entire natural world. She also described Neolithic societies as

matrilineal but not matriarchal, with the sexes “on equal footing” (Gimbutas 1991: x, 324).

In the second half of the twentieth century, James Mellaart and Marija Gimbutas were unique among Western archaeologists in their interpretations of Neolithic symbolism based upon their own excavations and primary research. The enthusiastic interest in Neolithic beliefs and symbols that spontaneously developed among members of the American and Western European public came as an initial surprise and an eventual annoyance for many archaeologists for whom Neolithic religion was a non-subject.

In 1954 British Archaeologist Christopher Hawkes presented his four stepped “ladder of reliability in archaeological inference” in which he stated that the first two steps, concerning production techniques and subsistence economies, were “fairly easy” to determine, while socio-political institutions were “considerably harder” to understand. “To infer to the religious institutions and spiritual life is the hardest inference of all” (Hawkes 1954:161-162).

Thus, Hawkes set up a hierarchy in which studies of past religious and spiritual practices are out of reach for anyone but the most experienced archaeologist. This notion—and implicitly the ladder—has become imbedded in archaeological thinking and practice” (Bertemes and Biehl 2001:12-13).

After Mellaart’s excavation was closed by the Turkish government, the site remained dormant for nearly three decades. In 1993, the excavation was reopened under the direction of another British archaeologist, Ian Hodder, whose work continues at Çatalhöyük accompanied by an international team of specialists employing the latest scientific techniques.

In reestablishing the Çatalhöyük excavation, Hodder inherited not only one of the most important archaeological sites in Western Asia, but a locus of intensive interest by a number of different communities and stakeholders. The well-known interpretations by Mellaart and Gimbutas have inspired many groups of people to visit the site. The enthusiastic study, knowledge and questions about Neolithic cultures and symbols by people of various backgrounds, including “non-specialists,” has made it imperative for Hodder to emphasize his own interpretations.

Peter Biehl (1997) notes that “many archaeologists react with alarm when their work is associated with alternative religious beliefs. . .”

There is an overriding fear that their work will be classified alongside and somehow equated with Marija Gimbutas’ work on prehistoric figurines and the so-called “Mother-Goddess-Movement” (Biehl 1997).

Although many archaeologists still seem reluctant to respond to Hawke’s high-level challenge, there is a pressing demand for archaeological theorists to reach beyond the technological and economic domains, and even beyond the social domain, toward a reconstruction of beliefs, values and religious traditions.

The relevance of the archaeological study of religion within our discipline is profound, for a ‘spiritual’ dimension would seem to have been important to humankind since at least the Upper Palaeolithic (Insoll 2004: 5).

To maintain scientific credibility in an increasingly skeptical academic environment, Hodder distanced himself from the interpretations of both Mellaart and Gimbutas concerning the idea of a Neolithic Goddess. By framing the subject primarily in terms of contemporary beliefs projected onto the past, Hodder writes: “It is not possible for archaeologists to contribute to the religious view that the goddess is present at Çatalhöyük” (Hodder 2006a:39).

In his recent book, *The Leopard’s Tale*, Hodder describes “a new approach” he is using to explore “the mysteries of the elaborate symbolism at Çatalhöyük” (2006a:18). This “new approach,” which is positioned at the opposite extreme from Mellaart and Gimbutas, focuses on the importance of “dangerous” wild animals which Hodder associates with male “hunting-feasting-prowess-ancestry” rituals that, in his view, “dominated much of the symbolism at Çatalhöyük” (2006a:249). In shifting the emphasis from female to male, he writes, “We can talk about the violence, sex and death of the imagery at Çatalhöyük simply in terms of male prowess” (2006a:203).

The discovery in 2005 of a well preserved stamp seal, or *pintadera*, in the form of a bear emphasizes the wild animal theme and has introduced a new interpretation of the famous full-

body plaster reliefs, at least ten, of which, have been found on sanctuary walls in Levels VII and VI of the site.

These are stylized figures with outstretched and sometimes upturned arms and legs. In all cases the heads, and usually the hands and feet, have been knocked off in antiquity, apparently as part of a closing ritual. Many have navels indicated. It has never been clear whether these were meant to be humanoid (Mellaart's goddess giving birth), animal, or a therianthrope blend. In one case the surrounding plaster retained signs of what seemed to be rounded ears. Thanks to a stamp seal found in the summer 2005 season . . . we can now argue persuasively that these are animal figures, probably bears (Russell 2006b: 186).

In the recent catalogue of an exhibition on Çatalhöyük that took place in Istanbul where the *pintadera* was displayed, stamp seal specialist Ali Umut Türkcan writes:²

Although these reliefs have been interpreted as figures of the mother goddess, this evidence points to the fact that they actually represent a bear, and are therefore a male image (Türkcan 2006:48).

Türkcan's declaration conforms to Hodder's systematic reinterpretation of symbolism at Çatal in primarily male terms.

The Visible and the Invisible

The fabric of human culture is composed of the realm of the *visible* (artifacts) and of the *invisible* (mentifacts) and their network of symbolic meanings. In preliterate human societies where oral traditions predominate, artifacts are often created to express specific sets of meanings. In other words, the visible dimension becomes the vehicle for the invisible—the dimension of shared significance.

Stamp seals, in a variety of patterns, which are found throughout the settlement levels at Çatalhöyük into the early Chalcolithic period, were used to impress designs on fabric, skin (e.g., Figure 4) and probably also on bread dough and

other media. "Hand and floral motifs found on Çatalhöyük seals are repeated in the wall paintings" (Türkcan 2006:47).

In the catalogue to the exhibition, "From Earth to Eternity," Türkcan wrote:

Ideas expressed as symbols carved on stone or shaped in clay are found to be cultural codes passed from generation to generation in the society. Stamp seals may be regarded as the most important vehicle for duplicating and passing on these cultural codes. [. . .] We can conclude that shared characteristics between these stamp seals and wall paintings, reliefs and other similar figurative motifs are central to understanding the symbolism at Çatalhöyük (Türkcan 2006:48-49).



Figure 3: Clay stamp seal interpreted as a bear (photo: Jason Quinlan, © Çatalhöyük Research Project).

If symbols, serving as "cultural codes," were duplicated and passed on for generations at Çatalhöyük, it can be assumed that some form of shared meanings were involved. A semiotic approach assumes that meaning entails shared symbolic forms, not simply a set of purely

² The exhibition, "From Earth to Eternity: Çatalhöyük" took place at the Yapi Kredi Vedat Nedim Tör Museum in Istanbul, 26 May-20 August, 2006.

functional strategies. Moreover, “the formal character of cultural codes is intrinsic to cultural meaning” (Shore 1998b:165).

However, as Susanne Langer points out,

Symbols are not proxy for their objects but are *vehicles for the conception of objects* . . . In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean* (Langer 1951:61).



Figure 4: Drawing of a seated figurine with body designs. Mellaart excavation (after Mellaart 1967).

It appears that both the stamp seal and the wall reliefs under discussion³ share a specific formal character that was repeated as a recognizable convention. Both have widely open, unnaturally turned up lower legs (although some reliefs are simply open-legged) with raised, open arms. Both are iconic (resembling both human and bear) sharing the same body posture, infused with meaning. When a posture or movement becomes standardized, it functions as a cultural model (Shore 1998a:159). The formal similarity between the stamp seal and these wall reliefs, therefore, suggests an intentional coordination that was part of the fabric of cultural knowledge.

³ Other wall reliefs are well known at Çatalhöyük, such as the famous twin leopards and the row of sculpted forms Mellaart interpreted as breasts. In this article, the references to wall reliefs refer to the so-called splayed figures.

Hodder (2006) points out that there was no separation between the sacred and the mundane at Çatalhöyük (see interview, this issue); all of the rooms were domestic in nature, contra Mellaart’s designation that the rooms with a higher concentration of wall paintings, bucrania and bas reliefs functioned as sanctuaries or shrines. Moreover, “All buildings appear to fluctuate through their lifetimes along a spectrum of elaboration and domesticity, with elements of both extremes always present” (Matthews 2002:93).

While access to a sanctuary could be privileged, it is less likely that the movement of inhabitants in domestic spaces would be necessarily restricted. Pierre Bourdieu’s 1973 study of Berber houses is instructive as a way of appreciating the cognitive effect of living in domestic spaces that are rich with cultural imagery. Bourdieu discovered that children brought up surrounded by traditional images within Berber houses absorbed Berber concepts through “an education of attention” that focused and informed their perceptions.

In a similar way, the paintings, sculptural installations, bas reliefs, figurines, and the experience of reproducing symbolic imagery on cloth, walls and skin at Çatal would have created a vital, interactive milieu in which cultural meanings were most readily absorbed. After all, “The house at Çatalhöyük is a microcosm of the society as a whole” (Hodder 2006b:22) in which life and death are staged, ritualized and mediated (Bischoff 2002:241).

Makilam, a Berber scholar raised in Kabylia, northern Algeria, describes the traditional Berber house in ways that suggest parallels with Çatalhöyük. The house reproduces a tripartite macrocosm—an underworld, an earthly world, and an upper world. Its interior functions like a living organism and is infused with vital forces, the “guardian spirits of the home” that dwell in every object. According to Makilam, a Kabyle woman views the interior of her home as an extension of her own body, where even the smallest actions of everyday life have the value of a ceremony. “In its anthropomorphic image and as a result of the artistic work of the women painters of Kabylia, the house represents the inner temple of a woman and the essential fecundity of her body” (Makilam 2007: 206-208). In that vital world, embellished with symbols, the lives of the ancestors are extended into the lives of the living through the continuous transmission of cultural knowledge.

Although women's language of symbols in Kabylia is passed on secretly from mother to daughter, other forms of cultural knowledge are shared by all members of the group creating the basis of their shared worldview. Something similar may have taken place at Çatalhöyük.

This is foundational knowledge and it is likely to be learned by infants as part of primary socialization. Foundational knowledge is intersubjective in that it provides a shared framework of knowing upon which most subjective or personal knowing rests (Shore 1998a:157-158).

While the bear seal is small, not larger than a human hand, the life-sized reliefs at Çatalhöyük—in concert with other reliefs, numerous bucrania, portable sculptures and polychrome paintings—would have created a continuously dynamic visual presence in the relatively intimate spaces of the rooms. One can imagine the inhabitants of these houses interacting in meaningful ways with these images, as documented in Kabylia, rather than treating them as passive elements in the background of everyday activities.

Symbols are not abstractions or fixed entities, but are embedded in the practices and personal experiences of daily life (Asouti in Bischoff 2002:247). “The important point here is to note the wealth and variety of symbolically charged artefacts participating in the daily interactions of social life at Çatalhöyük” (Matthews 2002:94).

Symbolism was a glue for aggregation, for the cohesion of the people in Çatalhöyük. There are, for instance, no changing patterns over twelve levels; throughout twelve levels we see the continuation of the same symbols in wall paintings, in bucrania, in mouldings and in seals as well. And seals are very important symbolic objects, especially in Çatalhöyük, showing a continuation as far as the symbolic depictions on them are concerned from Level VI to Level II (Türkcan in Bischoff 2002:246).

Cultural elements that take iconic form, especially in non-literate societies, are usually not tacitly transmitted, but are the subject of songs, stories, riddles, chants, laments, epic tales, myths and other expressions of an oral tradition. Such verbal or voiced engagements create a familiarity with the images and foster a relationship with them in the imagination and activities of each individual.

It has been suggested that the walls of the rooms were ritually important and functioned as permeable membranes through which spirits emerged. “Images could, by oft-repeated ritual replastering and repainting, be coaxed through this mediatory surface; each replastering and repainting may have been a new celebration and enactment of the emergence of spirit-animals and ‘goddesses’” (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: 112). According to Mellaart, some of the female images emerging from the walls were replastered up to a hundred times (Mellaart 1976: 132).

The renewal of images by means of the very substance of the walls themselves was, we argue, a meaningful act, not just an aesthetic refurbishing. [. . .] The *act of making* and *remaking* was as important as—or, perhaps, more important than—the finished image” (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: 110-111).

Hybrid Imagery and Visual Metaphor

In rejecting Mellaart's goddess interpretation of the bas reliefs, Hodder and his team have substituted the term “splayed figures” to refer to these ambiguously anthropomorphic images. The clay and plaster reliefs without full heads and hands resemble stylized human forms with no apparent association with an animal, although Mellaart found traces of ears in the wall plaster which he thought were feline. After the discovery of the stamp seal, Hodder called the reliefs “some sort of wild animal or animal-human hybrid” (Hodder 2006a:201). A bear paw with plaster still on it, found in a side room of Shrine VI/10, suggests that the paw may have originally been attached to the bas relief in the main room (Hodder 2006a:199). It is even possible that a bear skin, with paws attached, could have been stretched over the human-like contours of the relief creating a fusion between human and bear.

Both animal and hybrid imagery were widely found in Anatolia and the Middle East in the period leading up to settled village life (Hodder 2006a:202). In southeast Anatolia, hybrid figures significantly predate Çatalhöyük. For instance, at Nevalı Çori (established in the 9th millennium BC), monumental sculptures featuring composite imagery are integrated within ceremonial buildings (see Hauptmann 1993:57-67). A nose-like projection resembling the beak of a bird is attached to the top part of a sculpted human torso

(Hauptmann 1999:76). Part of a limestone basin from the same site is carved into a relief that depicts two human figures with mask-like faces and swollen bellies, suggesting pregnancy. Between them is a smaller round-bellied figure which Hauptmann identifies as a Euphrates tortoise, which can also be seen as a frog-like creature in an upright human posture. All three figures have their arms raised high and their legs wide-spread as though they are dancing (Hauptmann 1999:76). “[T]hese figures are particularly interesting because of their raised arms—calling to mind a series of wall sculptures found at Çatal Höyük . . .” (Voigt 2000:273). Hauptmann also describes the upper part of a carved pillar “decorated rather like a totem-pole” at Nevalı Çori, “featuring two women crouching back to back and surmounted by a bird, which by comparison can be identified as a vulture” (Hauptmann 2002:266).

Their hair, obviously gathered into net, falls over their shoulders; their rounded bellies and articulated sexual organs designate them as women. The theme is probably that of birth. The column was crowned by the figure of a bird that must have been perched upon one of the women’s heads (Hauptmann 1999:76).

While these figures are not obviously bird-women, they resemble harpies in their crouched posture and are fused with the bird creating an interconnected motif. Hauptmann emphasizes that at Nevalı Çori “women, or the female part, are combined with birth, life and death, together with birds [especially the] vulture” (Hauptmann in Bischoff 2002:247).⁴

The sculpture of a female head grasped by a bird is another symbol-fraught image anticipating the much later wall paintings at Çatalhöyük. This motif—female head grasped by a vulture—apparently provides evidence for ancestor worship, practised throughout the Neolithic period, and depicted in the wall painting of the vulture shrine at Çatalhöyük Level VII (Mellaart 1967:167, Fig. 47). There is no representation of a predominant goddess, of the so-called Great Mother, as seemed to be characteristic for a Neolithic ‘pantheon’ (Hauptmann 2002:266).

⁴ This comment by Hauptmann took place in a discussion following the paper presented by Damien Fischeff during The International CANeW Table Ronde (held in Istanbul, 23-24 November 2001). For an online transcription of the papers and discussions, see <http://www.canew.org/tableronde.html>.

At Çatalhöyük, Mellaart found stylized vultures painted in red with human legs on the wall of Shrine E VII-23 (Mellaart 1967:82). These great scavengers, which appear to be pregnant with breast-like shapes above the wings, are converging on a headless corpse (Figure 5). As Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2005:118) explain, “therianthropy (combination of human and animal forms) is a common component of shamanistic and other beliefs, many of which are associated with altered states of consciousness” as well as “shamanic dismemberment.” The consumption of a corpse by pregnant vultures may represent a ritual of dismemberment through excarnation as well as the promise of regeneration.

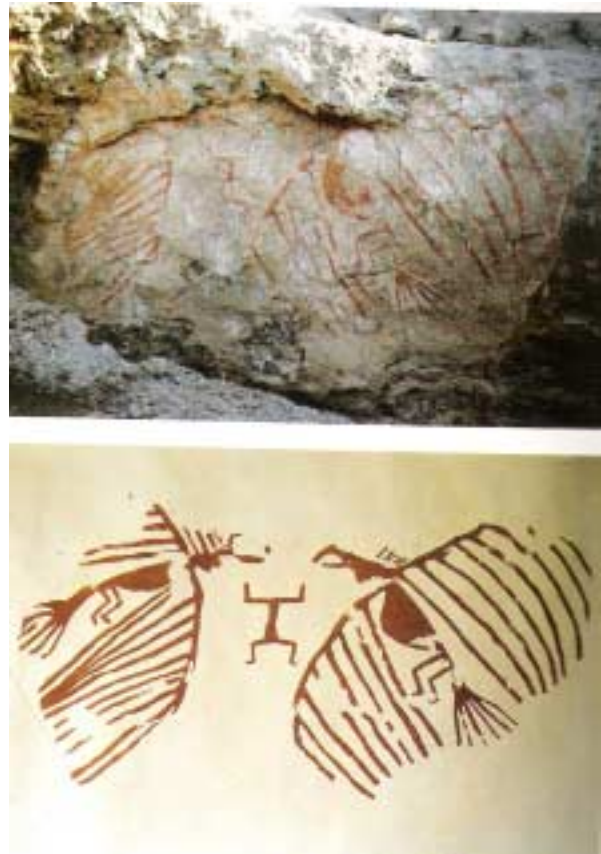


Figure 5: Wall painting of pregnant, stylized vultures devouring a headless corpse. Mellaart excavation, 7th mill. BC (after Mellaart 1989).

The mature seated woman between two leopards from Çatalhöyük, with her hands on their heads and their tails curled around her shoulders, functions as a composite, even hybrid, image in the sense that the potencies of woman and leopards are linked. They may have signified a symbiotic fusion or circulation of powers between the

enthroned woman with an enormously extended belly (who appears to have just given birth) and the female leopards—who are fierce, protective mothers and excellent providers. In this image, there is no separation between the wild and the domestic realms. The placement of this sculpture in a grain bin may have functioned to protect the harvest of grain that nourished the community. Such protection would not have been a trivial matter, for the very life of the community depended upon the ability to successfully bring forth new life and to nurture and sustain present and future generations.



Figure 6, 1: Front view of a clay figurine of a pregnant, full-breasted woman with a skeletal back (photo: Jason Quinlan, © Çatalhöyük Research Project).

“Around the world, large and physically powerful animals, such as bears and felines, are associated with shamans” (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:145). The enthroned woman between two felines, therefore, could have represented a female shaman as a protective, ancestral mother. In a similar way, the bear seal and, by extension, the anthropomorphic bas reliefs, may have signified a therianthrope image combining bear and human forms, linked to the shamanic realm.

A recently discovered pregnant figurine with hands on her full breasts (see Meskell and Nakamura 2006:114-115) seems to express a mythic hybridization between the giver of life and the presence of death (Figure 6, 1-2). The back of

the image is skeletal as though simultaneously expressing the polar opposite of the source of life. Such hybrid imagery functions as visual metaphor by combining different, even opposite, symbols into one polyvalent image.



Figure 6, 2: Back view of same figurine (photo: Jason Quinlan, © Çatalhöyük Research Project).

As Neolithic technologies spread through Anatolia, into the Balkan peninsula, then throughout Southeast Europe, hybrid imagery of various kinds appeared. At Hacilar (House Q, VI-5, end of the 6th millennium BC) Mellaart discovered the clay sculpture of a frog-woman with hands cupping her well-formed breasts, resting on her belly in an open-legged position reminiscent of the “splayed” figures from Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, and Çatalhöyük.

In the Sesklo culture of Thessaly (early 6th millennium BC), female sculptures with pronounced breasts have the long neck of a water bird with a bird mask and human hairdo (see Gimbutas 1989:35, Figure 53). Clay sculptures of women with bird, pig and bear masks are found throughout the Vinča culture (in Serbia and areas of Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania) from the first half of the 5th millennium BC. Examples include numerous statuettes including a bird-masked mother with bird-masked baby from the Vinča site near Belgrade, female figurines with torsos engraved with labyrinthine designs wearing

owl masks with wing-like arms (such as from Gradešnica, northwest Bulgaria), pig-masked figurines from western Romania, a clay sculpture of a seated woman with a bear mask holding a bear baby, among countless others (see Gimbutas 1982:62, 120, 126, 139, 140, 143, 194, 1989:35, 117, 300). Such images indicate an intimate kinship between women and animals. The frequent sculptures of women wearing animal masks suggest ritual activities, shape-shifting, and shamanic integration between the human and animal worlds. These composite images, which imply a mythic dimension, appear to have functioned as complex visual metaphors.

Hodder presents a different perspective:

I guess the thing that worries me about the idea of visual metaphor is that it implies that there is some answer to the metaphor, that it is a metaphor of something. . . . I think that there's an ambiguity that is the most interesting thing—not that they're meant to mean anything very specific. . . . It's also possible that people thought that if they made an image like that—it was rather like we might take a pill or do something like turn on the car, it's something we know works. . . . One doesn't have to think of it in mythical terms (from an Interview with Ian Hodder, this issue).

It is important, of course, to be cautious when attempting to interpret specific meanings for prehistoric cultural material. But to assume that Neolithic peoples preferred ambiguity and ascribed no particular meanings to their own cultural symbols is, in our view, a projection of contemporary post-modern fragmentation onto the past. An approach to interpretation which denies the mythic dimension is unsatisfactory. There is a pressing demand to reach further and to recognize the significance of visual metaphor.

Traditional societies that are stable and very long lived function according to a set of beliefs, symbols and shared mythology that align the mentality of people to a social order and bring each individual into accord with the universe. An understanding of metaphor requires a non-linear mode of thinking, but too often myth and metaphor are concretized into facts that are then considered to be untrue. Unfortunately, “The realm of nonverbal and cross-media metaphors remains largely unexplored” (Forceville 1998: 413).

Under the influence of logical positivism, often only true statements were seen as contributing anything to human knowledge, and metaphor was hence regarded by many as irrelevant to epistemology. . . .but the issue of truth or falsity is simply not pertinent (Forceville 1998:412).

One view of metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5) is “understanding one thing in terms of another.” While Hodder has jettisoned Mellaart's interpretation that the reliefs represent a Mother Goddess, preferring the notion that they are simply bears, it useful to inquire into the possibility that a bear-woman may indeed have functioned as a complex metaphor for the people of Çatalhöyük.

I'm only willing to go so far as the evidence will take it and we either have to wait for more things to be found or you have to come up with some other idea of how to look at the evidence that will show that the mother is there, or that the bear things are women (from Interview with Ian Hodder, this issue).

In examining the visual similarities between the bear seal and the human-like wall reliefs, it is possible to notice the following shared attributes:

- The torso of both the seal and the reliefs in question are aligned to a vertical axis.
- The arms of both are raised in a deliberate, open position in which the upper arms are lifted straight out to the side of the body, parallel to the floor, the elbows are bent at right angles, with lower arms lifted straight upwards. While the upper arms of the clay seal appear truncated, the engravings on the arms turn upwards, indicating an upward gesture.
- The legs are in an extremely open position straight out to the sides, while the lower legs are bent in an anatomically unnatural posture straight upwards, echoing the shape of the arms. Some bas reliefs express a variant with the legs straight outwards. The lower legs of the seal end in claws, reminiscent of the bear paw found with plaster still intact.
- The body of the seal is engraved with parallel lines that interweave along the axis of the torso and in the direction of the

appendages. At least one of the bas reliefs is decorated with an overall pattern of red and black geometrical designs.



Figure 7: Plaster bas relief with geometric designs and red concentric circles around the navel (© James Mellaart).

- Both the bear seal and bas reliefs have clearly depicted navels. In one relief, the belly is protruding, as though pregnant, with two engraved and red-painted concentric circles emphasizing the navel (Figure 7). In the seal, the two sets of lines that weave upwards along the torso, embrace the navel.

Some comments can also be offered for consideration that link the visible with the invisible:

- The energetic posture of the arms, known as the “orant” pose, is often associated with a gesture of prayer, blessing, homage, or protection.
- The wide open lower legs resemble a display posture (as seen in the Irish Sheela-na-gigs).⁵ In human experience, the open legs can be associated with sexuality, birth-giving, energetic openness, even protection (as in the exposure of genitalia as an apotropaic gesture).
- The engraved lines on the bear seal recall the designs drawn on figures in Aboriginal rock art, as though the invisible energetic dimension is made visible on the surface. Türkcan (2006: 47) compares what he

calls the “pseudo-meander” motif on the bear seal with a corresponding interlinked zigzag pattern from the Upper Palaeolithic site at Mezine (Ukraine), dating to c. 15,000 BP.

- The biological attributes of bear and woman include being birth-givers, fiercely protective mothers, and nurturers of the young who are dependent on the mothers for their survival. In a mythic hybridization between woman and bear, the woman would most likely take on bear-like features including fangs and claws, comparable to descriptions of the Gorgon from Classical Greek sources. A bear goddess may have functioned as the one who determined the end of life as well as its renewal.
- Both humans and bears have navels, as do all mammals. The navel is the scar left by the umbilical cord that connected the developing fetus to the womb of its mother through which it received all nourishment. The deliberate and consistent marking of the navel in these representations may have symbolized a connection to the Great Mother as the source of life, a sense of belonging to the motherline, to a matrilineage.

In 1987 Hodder wrote: “The ambiguous and contradictory meanings of symbols were involved both in establishing women as life-givers and life-takers. The dependence of society on women is incorporated, transformed, and denied” (Hodder 1987:52). Whether or not the dependence on women was ever denied by the people of Çatalhöyük, we concur with Bischoff that “Every aspect of iconography [at Çatal] is related to the significance of life” (Bischoff 2002:240). Is it hazardous to suggest that at this stage of cultural development the source of both life and death may have been articulated as a sacred concept rendered in female forms?

The newly discovered sculpture of the pregnant woman with a skeletal back suggests that the seemingly contradictory realities of life and death were equally acknowledged and meaningfully united in a specifically gendered visual metaphor. The bear seal and wall reliefs may also have functioned to unite a range of meanings—wild/domestic, life-giver/death-wielder, protector/

⁵ See, e.g., Goode and Dexter 2000.

destroyer, animal/woman—into one sacred, polyvalent image. To explore this possibility further, it is useful to examine the symbolism of Çatalhöyük in a broader temporal and geographical context.

Neolithic background

At the time that James Mellaart discovered the site of Çatalhöyük, it was commonly assumed that Anatolia functioned only as a land bridge for the introduction of Neolithic technologies into Europe. In 1956 Seton Lloyd, former Director of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, asserted that Anatolia “shows no sign whatever of habitation during the Neolithic period” (Lloyd 1956:53).

The subject of the development and spread of Neolithic lifeways, even the meaning of the term “Neolithic,” has been researched and debated for decades. What was previously known as the “Neolithic revolution” (Childe 1936), is now recognized to have been a complex and nuanced process that took more than two millennia to emerge, develop and mature. The Neolithic “formation zone” in the Near East is a vast area with broad ecological and cultural diversity where communities made the transition from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to mixed economies with a growing dependence on domesticated animals and crops. The appearance of sedentary communities and experiments with farming seem to have taken place throughout the region with a dynamic exchange of knowledge between divergent groups (Özdoğan 2005: 16-18).

According to Mehmet Özdoğan, the sharing of knowledge, new technologies and common values seems to characterize the Neolithic cultures of the Near East. A broad and rapid exchange applied to “almost all components of the culture, from architectural practices to building types, from burial customs to cult practices, from stylish status objects to utilitarian objects” which accelerated the momentum of change in the Neolithic communities of the Near East (Özdoğan 2005:19).

The long-distance obsidian trade that was “sustained without interruption for more than four millennia” (ibid) may have set the stage for this vibrant atmosphere of cooperation. While it is not known how this system functioned, Özdoğan remarks that such an interaction and sharing of

knowledge could not have taken place under stress of hostility.

In explaining the triggering impact behind this intensive interaction, we do not agree with the interpretations such as ‘rivalry’ or ‘competition’ or ‘conflict’ among settlements. Almost all known PPN⁶ sites were becoming prosperous in course of time, and to our knowledge, there is no evidence of either hostility or of plunder (Özdoğan 2005:19).

One of the early sites that challenges the traditional definition of Neolithic⁷ is Göbekli Tepe, in the Urfa region of southeast Anatolia. This settlement, which began during the 10th millennium BC, was a community of fully sedentary hunter-gatherers showing no signs of farming or plant and animal domestication. The inhabitants created elaborate ritual buildings with monumental sculpture emphasizing a range of wild animals that were significant to “a vanishing society of archaic hunters” (Hauptmann 2002:270).

The decorated pillars and sculptures of Göbekli Tepe possibly represent a materialisation of the imaginative world and spiritual beliefs of this hunter-gatherer society, which shows traditions similar to those apparent in the Late Palaeolithic cave-art of the Franco-Cantabrian region (Hauptmann 2002:264).

The site of Göbekli Tepe rivals Çatalhöyük in terms of its animal symbolism and monumental art. The carved relief of a “splayed figure” with a tail, and the image of a woman with wide open legs engraved on a stone slab within a sanctuary resemble the plaster wall reliefs at Çatal. In drawing a connection between the symbolism of Çatalhöyük and earlier sites in southeast Anatolia, Hodder emphasizes male motifs:

The symbolism there is very, very male and all the animals that are shown in the art have penises, or erect penises, and the site is surrounded by phalluses. Nearby at Nevalı Çori there is a two meter high, 6 foot high, stone sculpture of a man holding his erect

⁶ PPN refers to Pre-Pottery Neolithic.

⁷ “Neolithic” traditionally refers to the production of ground stone tools, pottery, a sedentary lifestyle based on farming and the domestication of plants and animals. It has typically been assumed that hunter-gatherers are nomadic, or at least semi-nomadic, and would never create sophisticated stone architecture and monumental sculpture.

penis. So that is a very, very male symbolism, and there's hardly any female imagery—only one or two images that are female (Interview with Ian Hodder, this volume).

While male figures at Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori are related to cult buildings, female figurines, primarily at Nevali Çori, occur all around the site. The excavator, Harald Hauptmann (1999, 77), indicates that while 179 male figurines have been found, there are 491 female figurines (159 naked and seated females, 2 mother and child figures, and 330 other female figurines) and 30 zoomorphic sculptures. As noted earlier, there are also images of women within the ritual areas, such as those carved on a pillar at Nevali Çori. Özdoğan (2001:315) comments that while animal symbolism at Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori demonstrates a spiritual attachment or devotion to nature, “it is possible to infer that the symbolism attached to the female identity would seem to be a more domestic phenomenon, to be considered as personal” (Özdoğan 2001:315-316).

Hodder states, quite plausibly, that the vulture, bull, “upraised arm splayed figure” and other Neolithic images (not to mention the veneration of skulls, intramural burials and use of figurines) found at Çatalhöyük could have reflected “generalized myths that circulated very widely in Anatolia and the Middle East prior to Çatalhöyük and later into historical times.” He emphasizes that “many of the most important symbols at Çatalhöyük have a long-term, widespread ancestry” and that “these same ideas were taken up and retold and reset” at Çatal (Hodder 2006a:163-164). Çatalhöyük, therefore, represents a continuum and spirited elaboration of ancient cultural elements.

The spread of farming during the neolithisation of the Anatolian highlands from a common source in Upper Mesopotamia and the Levant may have influenced also the symbolic world of Neolithic Central Anatolia, materialised in the art of Çatalhöyük. We could propose therefore that there is a mental and spiritual continuity within the Near East, as is suggested by the materialisation of the symbolic world of an archaic society of hunter-gatherers; a continuity particularly in evidence at Çatalhöyük with its own symbolic world representing a more ‘achieved’ Neolithic (Hauptmann 2002:267-268).

At the beginning of the Pottery Neolithic period, during the 7th millennium BC, the Neolithic

lifestyle—which included not only domesticated animals and plants, tools and technologies, but also beliefs, social organization, ritual practices and symbols—began to appear more frequently in Central Anatolia, amalgamated with local traditions. As the number of settlements in Central Anatolia increased, people eventually migrated, infiltrated or acculturated into the Western Aegean regions, along the Mediterranean, into the Balkan peninsula, and further into Southeast Europe. According to Özdoğan ancient population centers in the East progressively decreased, implying a westward movement of population (Özdoğan 2002, 2005).⁸

There are two elements that did not move westward with the Neolithic dispersal: the special cult buildings (such as those from the southeast Anatolian sites of Göbekli Tepe, Çayönü and Nevali Çori) and dominant male imagery. The buildings used for rituals further west resembled domestic structures, and the male imagery associated with eastern cult buildings was no longer evident.

The chronological distribution of the figurines and mural art suggests that there is a shift in religious practice at Çatal Höyük between levels VI and V. . . roughly contemporary with the transition between the Final PPNB and Pottery Neolithic in eastern Anatolia, northern Syria, and somewhat later than this transition in the south-central Levant. Before level V stone figures of males and females were made and used, and these figures have some stylistic links to figures from PPNB site of Nevali Çori to the east, where context suggests use in community-wide ritual (Voigt 2000:287).

According to Mellaart (1967:181; Özdoğan 2001:316, n. 22) the male figures at Çatalhöyük are restricted to the earlier layers of the site. Voigt points out that the stone sculptures of males from level VI at Çatal were “destroyed, gathered, and effectively entombed . . . [which] will *only* occur when the images lose power” (DeBoer 1995 in Voigt 2000:287). It is interesting to note that this

⁸ Several trends have dominated the scholarship concerning the expansion of Neolithic societies. The diffusionist model, utilized during the early 20th century, was later rejected in favor of an autochthonous model that favored the concept of local development in concert with cultural interaction and acculturation. After decades of debate, the idea of migrant farmers is being reconsidered as a result of recent interdisciplinary research (see Özdoğan 2005:13-15).

is the time when the “splayed figures” became most numerous. Although female figurines are found at all levels of the site, after level VI, the numbers of clay figures of women increase, suggesting their prominent use in domestic rituals. Naomi Hamilton interprets the greater numbers of finely modeled female figurines as indicating an “increasing concern with women’s roles” (Hamilton 1996:225). “It is understood that the figurines at Çatalhöyük have strong symbolic expressions as much as the wall paintings and reliefs” (Meskell and Nakamura 2006: 109).

In the main room of AII.1, clustered around a hearth, were seven seated and one standing clay figures, some quite beautifully modeled . . . [which] can be interpreted as cult figures. [. . .] The predominance of carefully modeled female figures continued in later central Anatolian settlements, and the form of the female clay figures from Çatal is clearly similar to the larger and more diverse corpus from the slightly later occupation at Hacilar (Voigt 2000:281).

Of the human figurines whose sex can be determined, those depicting women are the most elaborate. Only one figurine of an alleged seated man is crafted with special attention. And yet, the sex organ of the figure remains hidden; the only indicator that the figurine might be male is the lack of prominent breasts. Flat breasts are no decisive indicator of maleness as many of the Cycladic figurines of the Bronze Age may demonstrate (Getz-Preziosi 1985). In sum, this seated figure is not necessarily male for this reason. Using strict morphological criteria, “all of the Çatal clay figures are female or indeterminate” (Voigt 2000).

In 1992 before beginning the excavations at Çatalhöyük, Hodder wrote, “The use of decoration, miniatures and ‘signs’ links together a series of activities in which representations of women are central.” He stressed “the central importance and power of women as reproducers and as the nodes of links to other lineages,” although he also imagined that women were somehow controlled (Hodder 1992:67-68). Hodder, who associates women with “danger and wild animals,” argues that the process of domestication (control of the wild) was a mechanism for men’s control of women (Hodder 1990:12). Lewis-Williams and Pearce ask perceptively, “*who* saw the process of domestication as a metaphor for the control of women: the people of Çatalhöyük themselves, or

the archaeologists who study them?” (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:138).

Although there is no consensus among archaeologists about the role and meaning of the ubiquitous female figurines, Özdoğan nevertheless states, “we neither exclude the presence of female deities, nor their significance during the Neolithic period” (Özdoğan 2001: 314). As the Neolithic subsistence pattern, technologies and way of life moved westward, “the female deity or goddess, which was more of a personal symbolic value also moved. Perhaps this is the moment when the conventional image of the ‘Mother Goddess’ made her actual appearance” (Özdoğan 2001:317). Therefore, the existence of female divinity for communal life cannot reasonably be ruled out.

Roger Matthews, who worked at Çatal, comments: “What can we say about an ideology of Çatalhöyük? The overwhelming message appears to be one of cultural egalitarianism” (Matthews 2002). Two decades earlier Marija Gimbutas described the earliest farming societies of Europe, as well as in Anatolia, as balanced and egalitarian. She wrote, “we do not find in Old Europe, nor in all of the Old World, a system of autocratic rule by women with an equivalent suppression of men” (Gimbutas 1991: 324). There is also no evidence for the control of women at Çatalhöyük.

In January 2004, after a decade of work at Çatalhöyük, Hodder announced in *Scientific American* that his research team had found “fresh evidence of the relative power of the sexes” indicating a peaceful, non-hierarchical society in which sex was relatively unimportant in assigning social roles.⁹

As Neolithic technologies, lifeways and symbols spread westward, similar patterns of balanced, non-hierarchical societies which emphasized female imagery also became established.

Çatalhöyük in a zone of cultural convergence: The “Mythological Crescent”

The area where the beginnings of sedentism and plant cultivation have been identified is called the “Fertile Crescent” because of its prominent geographical shape. Thousands of years of intensive interaction, trade and exchange of

⁹ For a response to Hodder 2004 see Marler, this issue.

knowledge throughout this enormous region amplified the potency of this Neolithic “formation zone” as a laboratory of innovation.

What is outstanding is the fact that sites living on different lines of subsistence, could still interact with each other, indicating that this was not considered as a criteria in selecting communities to share knowledge (Özdoğan 2005:16).

As Neolithic settlements spread toward the west, Özdoğan describes the development of an “interim zone” between the eastern and the western regions of Neolithic settlements in which “endemic movement was not on a linear line, but was a composite event, moving from all areas to all areas” (Özdoğan 2003: 257, 2005:26). The boundaries of this interim zone in Anatolia are suggested by the surrounding presence of Mesolithic assemblages (Özdoğan 2005: 17-18).

Ongoing research on the nature of Mesolithic societies in Eurasia indicate that this stage of development was far from homogeneous (see, e.g., Larsson et al. 2003). Long-term cultural contacts between Neolithic and Mesolithic communities resulted in modes of interaction that encouraged the exchange of raw materials, local knowledge and technologies. Societies living on different lines of subsistence were influenced over time by factors including population movements which may have included intermarriage, acculturation, and the amalgamation of various beliefs and traditions.

During the process of Neolithization, a complex convergence of social and mythological traditions took place over thousands of years within an expansive geographical region which also has a pertinent geographical shape. This area extends beyond the ancient Middle East and Anatolia into southeastern Europe and opens into the wide cultural landscape of Eurasia. Within this vast region, the movements of influences over time were multi-directional. We refer to this region as the “Mythological Crescent.”

Çatalhöyük, established during the 8th millennium BC and lasting 1400 years, is the earliest agrarian settlement to develop a sustained community within this convergence zone. As Hodder (2006a:163) has pointed out, “many of the most important symbols at Çatalhöyük have a widespread and long-term ancestry.”

It is important to note the enormous expanses of time (at least three millennia) over which such symbols seem to stay stable. Of course, archaeologists have long been aware of the slow rate of change of material culture in the Upper Palaeolithic of Europe, where types of stone tool, and even types of cave painting, stay relatively unchanged for millennia. While the rate of change may speed up a little in the Neolithic of the Middle East and Anatolia, it remains very slow” (Hodder 2006:163-164).

In their recent book, *Inside the Neolithic Mind*, Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2005:148) describe the imagery at Çatalhöyük as “consistent with a classic shamanistic hunter-gatherer society” which belies its Palaeo-Mesolithic roots.

The people at Çatalhöyük constructed a cosmology (derived in part from ‘hard-wired’ experiences of certain altered states) and reproduced that cosmology in architecture and images (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2006:148).

This approach does not stand isolated even in the current context of archaeology in Turkey. In his report on Göbekli Tepe, Klaus Schmidt discusses the transition of socio-economic systems and socio-cultural patterns from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic, and with the continuity of archaic worldviews (Schmidt 2006). Other researchers have also commented on the fusion of Palaeolithic and early agrarian beliefs:

Cosmic logics are superimposed over the old cosmic geneses and configurations of the shamanist cosmos. They are still not forgotten forgotten in Çatalhöyük (Bischoff 2002: 241).

Çatalhöyük, therefore, did not develop in a vacuum. Evidence of long-distance trade and the ancient circulation of peoples and ideas are evidenced in Anatolia and throughout Eurasia. Recent geological research indicates that for thousands of years a land bridge existed in the region of the Bosphorus facilitating contact on both sides of the Aegean Sea.

During the Mesolithic period and into the first seven hundred years after the establishment of Çatalhöyük, the Pontic basin contained a freshwater Euxine lake, much smaller than the present Black Sea. A huge area of land was exposed along its northern borders, now underwater, that would have facilitated the

multidirectional movement of animal and human populations. Due to the prolonged melting of glacial ice and the global rise of ocean level, marine water eventually pressed in from the Mediterranean, through the Sea of Marmara to spill into the Euxine lake. The Pontic basin became filled to its present level around 6700 BC. The Great Flood which caused the birth of the Black Sea, opened the Bosphorus Strait and cut off the northern and southern land bridges that connected Europe and Anatolia for millennia (see Haarmann 2006a).

Evidence of continued Anatolian-Balkan convergence has been addressed by Yakar (1997), Garašanin (2000), Brukner (2002) and Özdoğan (2005) who recognize similarities in pottery and other cultural material between Anatolia and the Balkans during the sixth and fifth millennia BC. Similarities between Anatolia and southeastern Europe can also be reconstructed in terms of the ubiquity of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery, ritual practices and social structure.

The spread of Neolithic lifeways throughout Eurasia was not simply a matter of replacement or colonization by one group over another. The layering of influences in this extensive zone of convergence was the result of complex transitions over a long and extended period including amalgamations, intermarriage, exchange of technologies, and fusions with indigenous practices. As Neolithic technologies, beliefs and symbols were transposed into various ecologies and cultural histories, incoming beliefs and practices merged with more ancient indigenous patterns. It is still not understood to what degree the transformation to agrarian societies was the product of population movements or of non-demic diffusion of cultural patterns.

Among the cultural markers within the Mythological Crescent that document the persistence of ancient beliefs are female figurines. Although the frequency of their occurrence varies in different periods and regions, female imagery nevertheless constitutes an important element of cultural continuity. The chronology of Neolithic figurines shows that, by the seventh millennium BC, this category of artifacts had spread over the entire convergence zone. As agrarian practices reached further to the north, they came into contact, and sometimes melded with beliefs and rituals preserving extremely archaic symbolic elements.

Female figurines represent one of the most ancient mobiliary artifacts, carried and repeatedly reproduced throughout Eurasia for thousands of years. Both Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers and early horticulturalists were intimately embedded in the cycles of birth, death and rebirth of the natural world. Moreover, it is worth recognizing that all mammals—including humans and bears—are born, protected and nurtured into life by their mothers. Given such fundamental experiences, it is not surprising to find similarities over time in multiple social and ecological contexts concerning visual expressions of the source of life and its cyclic continuity.

Certain elements of ancient beliefs were shared both by the foraging communities in the northern Pontic zone and by the agrarian populations in the south. This pronouncement may seem cavalier given the differences in lifestyles, economy and cultural evolution on either side of the Black Sea. The common ground for religious beliefs in the circum-Pontic zone becomes evident when we investigate the northern and southern settings in terms of a developmental sequence and the continuity of specific motifs.

The convergence of belief systems in the Circum-Pontic region: Female spirits of nature in Eurasia

Eurasia was continually inhabited from the Palaeolithic through the Neolithic Age. The southern Ural mountains were settled during the late glacial period, at least from 20,000 years BP onwards. Evidence for human presence is found in cave paintings and in dwelling sites with fireplaces and stone tools. The local populations of the late Paleolithic period were akin to the people who inhabited the Ural region later on and spread westward and northward from there (Carpelan 2001).

As the glaciers receded, the subsistence system of the hunters and gathers, who had followed the herds in the plains of southern Russia, changed from big game hunting to the trapping of smaller animals. The post-glacial (Holocene) period, therefore, was a time of economic transition. The northern land mass, which was inaccessible during the Ice Age, was gradually populated as the ice shield melted. By c. 8000 BCE modern humans had already reached southern Finland.

Contrary to the changes in post-glacial regional economy, no dramatic transformation of beliefs is apparent from Palaeolithic times to those that can be reconstructed from the earliest recorded myths and historical folk art of the region. Documentation of early evidence in Eurasia comes from the mythology of Uralic peoples, especially those of Finno-Ugrian affiliation (Hoppál and Pentikäinen 1989).

There is consensus among scholars that certain motifs and themes in Uralic mythology are indicative of highly archaic belief systems concerning human relationships with the natural environment that can be traced to the immediate post-glacial era. But the roots of those themes go back even deeper in time. For instance, individual motifs in Paleolithic cave paintings—such as the prominent female figure in the sanctuary of the Ignatievka Cave in the southern Urals—reflect very ancient mythic patterns. In the ritual tradition of Uralic peoples, forests and waters (rivers, lakes and springs) are believed to be the dwelling places of female spirits. Beliefs in female guardian spirits of nature have been preserved well into the 20th century, even among the northernmost groups, such as the Finns, Karelians and Saamic people (see Sarmela 1994: 168 f. concerning the “supernatural maiden of the forest”). In the oral tradition of Finno-Ugrian peoples, there is also the figure of a Forest Mother as well as a variety of female guardian spirits.

It is typical of the beliefs of Finno-Ugrians that the earth as well as different elements and natural phenomena of the middle world (water, fire, wind, forest etc.) are incarnated by female deities, ‘mother-spirits’ (Ajkenvald et al. 1989: 158).

As long as the Uralian tribes lived as hunters and gatherers, their beliefs concentrated on female spirits of nature. By the time these foragers became accustomed to a sedentary lifestyle and had adopted the “agrarian package” from farmers in the south, the earlier layers of animistic beliefs in female nature spirits became transformed into a central agrarian goddess, as earth mother (Honko 1993: 66 ff.). Certain archaic traits in the iconography of the goddess, showing a female deity with animal limbs, for instance, continued throughout the Bronze Age into the Iron Age.

Female spirits and later female deities functioned as agents in the belief system of the people north of the Black Sea. Such mythical beliefs were wide-spread over a vast geographical area and had strong repercussions in the horizon of time. Such beliefs were persistent and continued into the goddess religions of later periods. This is true for the Thracians and their central veneration of the mother goddess whose name was Toti (Fol 2000: 35, Marazov 2001: 18 ff.) as much as for the Scythians with Tabiti, Api and Argimpasa as the most venerated female deities.

In the archaeological record of the Greek colonies of the ancient Bosphorus (today the Strait of Kerch), between the ancient Maeotis (Sea of Azov) and the Pontus Euxinus (Black Sea), the goddess's imagery is well documented. There is also evidence for the central worship of the goddess in the Bosphorus region from the 6th century BC to the 3rd century AD.

Yet the sound mythological tradition demonstrates that in the South Russian steppes the anguipede goddess belonged to the local Scythian foremother long before artifacts with her representations began to be executed by Greek artisans for the Scythian and Sindo-Maeotian aristocracy (Ustinova 1999: 107).

In Siberia, there is evidence for human occupation for about 35,000 years. As evidenced by the archaeological record from Palaeolithic sites in that region, stone tools retained their traditional features much longer than in Europe. The Mesolithic transitional stage, between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, does not exist in Siberia. The Final Upper Palaeolithic ended there about 10,000 BP at a time when the Mesolithic in Southeastern Europe had already reached its final stage.

From the standpoint of mythical belief systems, Eurasia as a culturally interconnected zone is divided into two areas (Map 1), a western area (extending over northeastern Europe) and an eastern area (extending over the whole of Siberia). In the eastern area, a number of archaic traits of Eurasian shamanism have been preserved while the western area shows features of a younger stage of mythical traditions.



Map 1: Peoples and landscapes in northern Eurasia (after Slezkine 1994).

Among the oldest sites are those of Dyukhtai, Berelekh and Ushki Lake in the Far East, and Mal'ta in central Siberia. These belong to two "primary Upper Paleolithic cultures" (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994: 197). Mal'ta, situated about eighty km west of Irkutsk, harbors the richest iconography that is known from the Siberian Palaeolithic (Abramova 1995: 106ff.). According to their thematic identification, the sculptures of Mal'ta represent what may be called a prototypical repertory of the major motifs around which the belief system of northern Eurasian peoples crystallizes.

Conservatism is a feature of the Siberian material culture as well as of the worldview that people in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions have shared. The search for the foundations of the belief systems in northern Eurasia is like a scholarly travel in time.

While there is a lack of written sources for older periods, there is a wealth of rock engravings with narrative scenes as well as mobile art which abounds with information about community life in prehistoric times reaching back to the Upper Palaeolithic. In some modern interpretations, Palaeolithic rock art in Western Europe is identified as the work of shamans (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1996: 11ff.). Nothing speaks against the assumption that this could also have

been the case in the Siberian Palaeolithic. Rock engravings and the mobile art in Siberian sites may well have been produced by the experts of spiritual communication in the supernatural sphere.

Since the Palaeolithic, mythological iconography has experienced transformations reflecting innovative stylistic variations of basic motifs. It is noteworthy that during tens of thousands of years there has not been any radical change in cultural patterns or cultural disruption. The visual constituents of the Palaeolithic paradigm of a shamanistic worldview persist into later periods despite changes in the use of specific materials for the creation of images.

The Creatrix, the Ancestral Mother and the Mistress of Nature

In Eurasian mythology the cycle of life is expressed through various manifestations of female deity. There are more than two dozen local cultures in the Eurasian expanse of the Mythological Crescent and each of these cultures has its own mythological profile resembling an unambiguous fractal structure.

An overarching presence of sacredness, refracted in Eurasian mythology into multiple female spirits, is not yet recognized in the world of Western

scholarship. This sacred presence does not feature in the canon of goddesses who have been catalogued for the cultures of the world. The absence of a Eurasian goddess in mythological studies may be due to the fact that she is not known by one single name. She has many functions and many guises in the local cultures of northern Eurasia (Haarmann 2006b). In a spring ceremony among the Nganasan in central Siberia, for example, elder women make offerings to not one goddess, but to the mothers of nature: *Kóu-n'ámy* 'Mother Sun', *Móu-n'ámy* 'Mother Earth,' *Nilu-n'ámy* 'Mother Life' (Novik 1989: 257-58).

Mother Sun is the Creatrix, the great Ancestral Mother, the force that generates all living things. The solar deity is radiant; light and warmth stream from her. In the Arctic and sub-Arctic zones, Mother Sun provides the conditions for life to persist. The Saami people in northern Scandinavia personify the sun as the "Sun Maiden." When the shaman transcends the limits of the world of the living and flies to heaven, he/she has to be careful not to be burnt by the hot breasts of the Sun Maiden. In the petroglyphs of Siberia, representations of the Creatrix are often associated with animals.

Neolithic depictions of this divinity are known from the area of Okunevo in western Siberia. Snakes undulating as the flames of the sun are symbols of the regenerative potential of this solar deity who takes on the task of creation, the great labor of generating and regenerating life. As a related variant, "In the shamanism of the Altaic peoples, the origin of all life was born from the goddess of fire ('*Ene*')" (Dyakonova 2001: 64).

In the communities of the Tungus, Mongol and Turkic peoples of Siberia there was a special professional group of female shamans, the *udagan*, whose rituals focused on fire-worship. Pregnancy and life-giving are the major themes of the goddess of fire, expressed in pictorial associations of the primordial goddess with the tree of life.

It is important to emphasize that in the earliest north Asian representations of the Tree of Life, in the Okunevo culture, the figures [insofar as they are human] are female. Moreover, these women are often shown with protruding or pendant abdomens, i.e., pregnant or soon after giving birth" (Martynov 1991: 107).

The impression of a diversity of female spirits in their relation to a female divinity may seem confusing at first sight, but it makes sense when one thinks of the primordial deity who is personified according to the diversity of her functions. The Creatrix transforms into her daughters, the guardian spirits, embodying and protecting her creation.

The mythical figure of the ancestral mother has been termed "the female (mother-ancestor) or clan-based sacred principle" (Ovsyannikov and Terebikhin 1994: 71). Visual reference to sacred female spirits and/or ancestral mothers among Siberian peoples is of high age, dating back as far as the earliest cultural horizon in Eurasia. In the repertory of mobile art from Mal'ta, this central aspect of the Eurasian belief system materializes in some thirty female statuettes.

Two types of figurines can be identified: one depicts full-figured women with prominent female attributes (Figure 8), and the other is a slim type with stylized, delicate forms (Figure 9). The full-figured statuettes may be related to the larger cycle of fecundity which includes fertility, life-giving, life-sustaining and regeneration, while both could be linked to guardian spirits.

In the cultural sphere of the Siberian Palaeolithic, a close relationship between "the woman, mistress of the habitation, and the female ancestor of the household, and the domestic fire-place" has been postulated (Abramova 1995: 82). In eastern Siberia, ancestral women who established the matrilineage of the clan or tribe play a key role in people's cultural memory. This memory finds a visual expression in female sculptures made of wood (among the Evenki) or dolls (among the Chukchee) which are kept in each family tent as ancestor guardians of the household and its members (Haarmann 2000: 13). Here, the image of the female guardian spirit is perceived as that of a mature woman.

In the historical tradition of giving dolls to the bride among the Chukchee, it is interesting to note that the dolls are filled with hairy animal skin associated with fecundity. The mother gives her doll to her oldest daughter who will be given a new doll when marrying. If the daughter's child is a girl, some hair from the mother's doll is taken and stuffed into the new doll. Closely related to this is the belief that the doll makes visual the soul of an ancestral woman (Bogoraz-Tan 1939: 70-1).

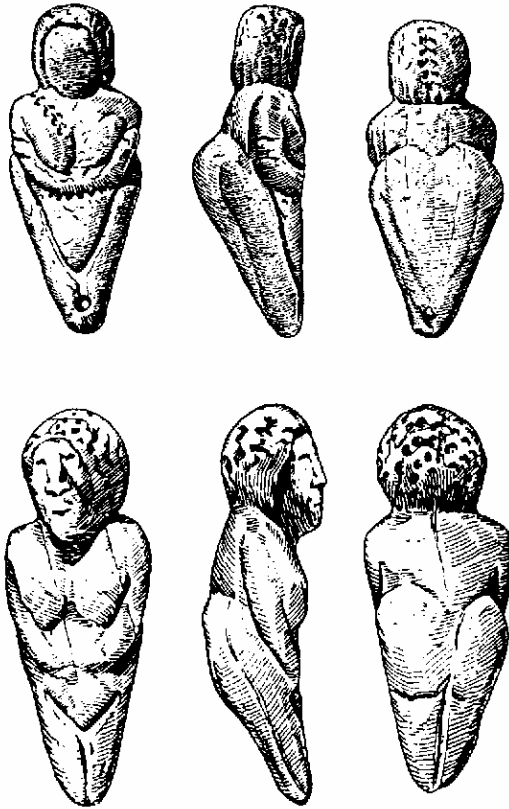


Figure 8: Female statuettes from Mal'ta, full-figured type (after Abramova 1995).

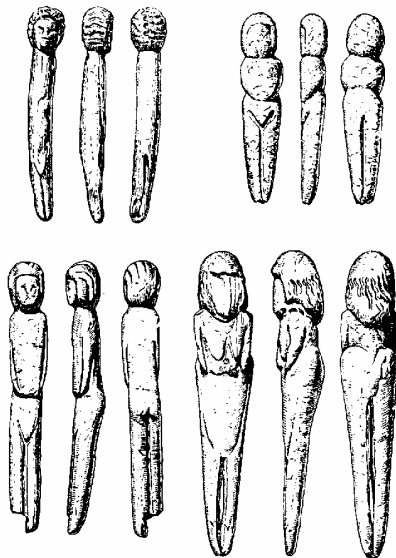


Figure 9: Female statuettes from Mal'ta, slim type (after Abramova 1995).

It is also believed that the doll is inhabited by a guardian spirit protecting the fireplace and the household. This protective spirit is addressed by the bride who enters the tent of her future husband for the first time. She gathers a handful of ashes, rub them in her hands and addresses the guardian spirit by saying: "Live well with me!" (Bogoraz-Tan 1934: 131).

The mythical power that has been attributed to female figures in different roles from prehistoric times to the present finds its counterpart in the respect for women's spiritual abilities for maintaining community life and the rules of cosmic order as, for instance, among the Nenets.

Violation of the rules could lead to universal catastrophe, and women in particular were responsible for maintaining the existing order of things since, according to mythological and poetic stereotypes, they were endowed with enormous capacities for both destruction and creation (Ovsyannikov and Terebikhin 1994: 71).

The Goddess and the Bear (I): The Sacred Bear as an Ancestor Spirit

In northern Eurasia, climatic, economic and cultural conditions have remained relatively stable.¹⁰ Hunting under Arctic conditions has not changed considerably from Palaeolithic times. Another example of stability is the continuity of mythological beliefs crystallized around the bear. Evidence for the cult of the bear dates from remote times, and bear hunting rituals are still performed in western Siberia. The relationship of a female divinity with the bear is present, with regional variations, throughout Eurasia, from the Saami culture in the west to the Chukchee culture on the eastern tip of Siberia.

Many animal species are depicted in Eurasian iconography, usually in a realistic fashion. Abramova (1995: 39ff.) lists the following species represented in the visual heritage of the Siberian Palaeolithic: mammoth, rhinoceros, bison, horse, felines, bear, wolf, birds, serpents and fishes. The first three animal species disappeared from the iconographic record of later periods because they become extinct. There are no traces in the oral traditions of Siberian peoples that might provide a

¹⁰ This climatic stability is now being threatened due to global warming.

clue about the mythological value of those Palaeolithic animals for the prehistoric communities.

The animal which shows the most vivid persistence in visual imagery is the bear. No other animal has been continuously venerated throughout the ages in such a respectful manner as the bear. Representations of this animal goes back to the Siberian Palaeolithic (such as sculptures from Mal'ta and Tolbaga). The oldest miniature bear sculpture comes from the site of Tolbaga, east of Lake Baykal, which is dated to c. 34,000 BP.¹¹ The bear has been continuously modeled as sculpture, depicted in relief, engraved in petroglyphs, and painted as a sacred symbol on shamans' drums (Figure 10).

For many peoples in northern Eurasia, the bear is the revered ancestor of the entire clan or ethnic group. As an ancestor spirit the bear is amply celebrated in oral literature (Honko et al. 1993: 160 f.). Among the Uralic peoples in western Siberia, the Khanty and Mansi, "elements of the 'bear' concept pervade the entire Ob-Ugrian culture, creating one of the world's richest bear cults" (Schmidt 1989: 189). There are about 360 items of taboo terminology—euphemistic and periphrastic expressions referring to the bear, its body parts and to its behavior—which form part of the Khanty and Mansi vocabularies (Bakró-Nagy 1979).

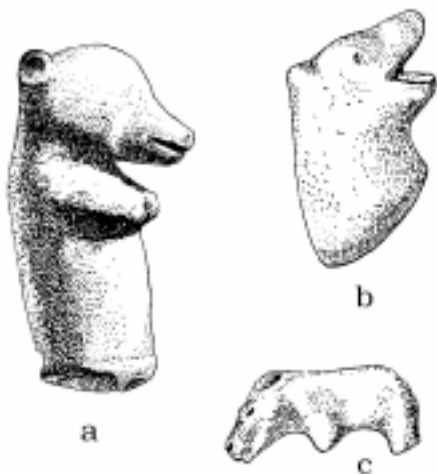


Figure 10: Bear figurines from Siberia (early Neolithic); a) western Siberia; b) and c) eastern Siberia, Amur region (after Martynov 1991).

¹¹ Tolbaga belongs to an earlier stage of the same cultural horizon as Mal'ta.

In the cultural memory of the Ob-Ugrians and the Tungus of central and eastern Siberia, many stories about the bear have been preserved, in particular about its role in human genesis. The bear is considered to have come from the sky down to earth. There, the bear takes a female guardian spirit of the forest as his wife, and their offspring become the first ancestors of the Khanty (and Mansi, respectively). Among the Palaeoasiatic Ket, the female being chosen by the bear as his wife was "Heaven's Daughter, disguised as a female reindeer" (Aleksyenko 2001: 58).

The totemistic ancestry relating to the bear is familiar also among the peoples in western Eurasia, for example among the Mordvinians who live on both sides of the central Volga. In their cultural heritage, tales about relationships between the bear and humans have been preserved. Such stories form also part of the oral tradition among Finns, Karelians and Saami (the Skolt Saami, in particular). This theme has remained popular up to the present day.

The bear was not seen as a fearsome animal. It was respected and revered. The Erzian Mordvinians worshipped the bear as a deity and gave it the name *nishkepaz*. Among the Mordvinians, the bear was considered the protector of people's homesteads. The bear was even seen in the role of a godfather to newly wed couples.

In marriage rituals, the bear's role was usually played by a woman in a fur-coat turned inside out. She also came out to meet a newly-married couple. The bear symbolized progenitiveness of the future married couple and wealth. A bride and bridegroom were seated on a bear's skin or fur-coat. The bride stepped on a fur-coat after a marriage ceremony in church when entering the bridegroom's house. The newly-married couple's bed was also covered with a fur-coat (Devyatkina 2004: 40).

The aspect of progenitiveness leaves space for the interpretation of the mythical bear as either male or female. In the folkloristic tradition of several peoples of northern Eurasia, the appearance of the female bear dominates rituals and oral literature. In connection with the spring festival of the Nganasan, the elderly woman who is presiding over the ceremonies is called *in'áku* 'bear' (Novik 1989: 257). In Mansi mythology, the ancestor bear can be male or female.

The sacred trinity in Eurasian symbolism: Female divinity, the bear, and birds

The concept of the Sacred in female forms serves as the metaphor par excellence for symbolizing the Source from which the world originates—the generative force which creates and protects all forms of life and assigns all things their proper purpose. All that is created returns to the Source for regeneration, and, in this way, the Life Cycle is renewed. The elementary perception that all of nature is interconnected through this generative force is so central that it exists as the originating morphic field of the deep structure of Eurasian mythology.

In the canon of Eurasian belief systems, there are dozens of symbols with mythological significance. The bear is the most important link between humans and the fauna of totemistic beliefs. Birds also have a totemistic significance and possess fundamental functions in the shamanistic worldview. Without birds, the shaman would be unable to perform her or his transcendental journeys.

The sacred woman, or goddess, the bear, and the bird are key symbols in Palaeo-Siberian imagery, grouped “as a defined compositional unit according to definite stylistic traditions” (Martynov 1991:107). All three constituents form a harmonic unity in the same archetypal context. As expressed in a bronze pendant from western Siberia (Figure 11), the bird, with the shape of an eagle, has the head of a bear. On its breast, the face of the goddess as Mistress of Nature is depicted. In front of her image, a bear is positioned in a venerating posture. In this ensemble, the ancient animistic beliefs of northern Eurasia are visualized.

The Mistress or Goddess of Nature is a character with motherly features, giving the fruits of the forest as gifts to people and protecting the animals. But as the one who reigns in the realm of nature, the deity is shown in an awe-inspiring posture, demanding respect and obedience (Figure 12). A closer inspection of her bodily features reveals that her hands are shaped like eagle’s claws, while her legs and feet resemble those of a bear. In a highly sophisticated web of visual allusions with floating boundaries between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features, this sculpture illustrates the sacred trinity of northern Eurasia.



Figure 11: The trinity of goddess, bear and bird. Okunevo, 7th century AD (after Autio 2000).



Figure 12: Representation of the Mistress of Nature with zoomorphic features. Perm, 7th or 8th century AD (after Autio 2000).

Depictions of this trinity are highly varied. The image of the Mistress of Nature may be completely human, and yet, the heads of elks may “grow” from her head. In one ensemble, she is depicted as standing on a double-headed bear (Figure 13). Here, the bear takes the role of a vehicle of the goddess. The two fantastic birds on either side of her serve as a frame for the whole setting.

The Goddess and the Bear (II): Features of a mythical fusion in early agrarian society

In the earliest Eurasian mythology, the identification of the mythical bear as female is less common than the veneration of the male bear as ancestor spirit. Seemingly, an older tradition has to be distinguished from a younger stage of cultural development.

The older stage, with the bear as male ancestor, transforms into a younger stage where the mythical animal assumes the role of the ancestress, as the bear mother. This suggests a merger of the bear’s female guardian spirit with the role of the bear as ancestor. The older stage is preserved in pre-agrarian Eurasian mythology while the younger stage manifests itself in the iconographic heritage and folk traditions of early Neolithic societies.

In Southeastern Europe, elements of a formerly prominent role of the bear as a mythical animal, dating to Palaeolithic times, are preserved in Neolithic iconography. In the cultural horizon of the Danube civilization (Old Europe, respectively), the bear is directly associated with female imagery. In the synoptic overview of functions and images of the goddess elaborated by Gimbutas (1989: 328 f.), the mythical bear appears in different guises: as a bear woman (Figure 14) and as a bear mother (Figure 15), protectress of young life (Gimbutas 1989: 116 f.).

Since the archaic Greek period, the bear has been associated with Artemis in her role as the patron of nature and the mistress of wild animals, especially in her sanctuary at Brauron in Attica (Haarmann 1996: 114). At certain remote places in Greece, the mother bear is still worshipped in festivals. At the cave of Akrotiri near the ancient Kydonia, western Crete, for instance, the festival of *Panagia Arkoudiotissa*, “Virgin Mary of the Bear,” is celebrated on February 2nd. The city of Berne,

Switzerland, once a Celtic ritual center, is identified with the Bear Goddess, Dea Artio, venerated by the Helvetians, a Celtic population in the western Alps (Gimbutas 1989: 116).



Figure 13: Representation of the Mistress of Nature standing on a two-headed bear, flanked by water birds with her sacred animals arising from her head. Perm, 7th or 8th century AD (after Autio 2000).

In European folk memories, the bear is an ancestress, a divine birth-giving mother and protectress. The practice of a grandmother placing a newborn baby on a bearskin, described in the 3rd century AD by Porphyry, was continued in Slavic lands into the 20th century. The Bulgarians held ritual feasts for “Grandmother Bear” as did the Belorussians, who associated the bear with healing powers, fecundity and prosperity. Linguistic evidence connects the bear with the ability to give birth, as in the Old European root *bher-*, Germanic **beran* ‘to bear children’, ‘to carry’, Germanic **barnam*, ‘child’, and Old Norse *burdh*, ‘birth’. In eastern Lithuania, a woman who has just given birth was traditionally called *Meška* ‘Bear’. When the new mother approached the sauna for a ritual bath some weeks following the birth, the women



Figure 14: Woman with a bear mask. Vinča culture, Cuprija, Serbia; c. 4500 BC (after Gimbutas 1989).

preparing the ritual would call out, “The Bear is coming, the Bear is coming,” suggesting a remnant of an archaic ritual formula (Gimbutas 1989: 116).

The Goddess and the Bear (III): The Path of Visual Metaphor

The longevity of the bear as a sacred animal in association with a primordial ancestress is well established for large regions of Eurasia. The ancient roots of symbolism at Çatalhöyük and the ubiquity of female and hybrid imagery in Neolithic contexts have been previously discussed.

The discovery of the bear seal and a bear paw that may have been attached to a plaster wall relief at Çatalhöyük highlights the question of what evidence there may be to interpret the life-sized anthropomorphic reliefs as representing a fusion between bear and woman or female deity. The reconstruction of an image such as this stands at the center of contemporary debates and controversy concerning the role of women and concepts of the sacred in prehistoric societies.



Figure 15: Figurine of the Bear Mother. Vinča culture; Fafos II, northern Kosovo, Serbia; first half of the 5th millennium BC (after Gimbutas 1989).

Hodder correctly acknowledges the danger of imposing ideas from our own world onto ancient societies and states the necessity to be “suspicious of our assumptions and sensitive to the radical differences that we find” (Hodder 2006a:25). One of the “radical differences” concerns the polyvalent nature of prehistoric symbolism. In both Eurasian shamanic and Neolithic imagery, there is no inherent contradiction between the human and animal realms, nor is there a prohibition against concepts of the sacred in female forms. The bear as a sacred animal is venerated as a progenitor, a human-like mother, a protectress and an ancestress. The argument that a symbolic image cannot be a goddess because it is a bear would have no currency in these realms. Such a dualistic assumption imposes contemporary notions of binary opposition.

The word “goddess” in the Western lexicon can be problematic when applied to Palaeolithic and Neolithic imagery because the term often carries concepts derived from studies of ancient Egypt, classical Greece, or from other mythological domains. Antique goddesses are individualized as personified characters identified by specific names and attributes described by classical authors and known from early inscriptions. Many of these goddesses, while retaining various aspects of their ancient roots, function within the power structure of hierarchical pantheons. It is unsatisfactory to utilize conceptual parameters derived from historical mythology to identify sacred figures from prehistoric cultures. By doing so, abstract

categorizations from much later contexts are projected onto culturally specific mentifacts where they do not fit. The complex, interactive network of more ancient associations becomes atomized and the functional range of the image in question is too often reduced.

In contrast to goddesses of the historical periods, Gimbutas (1989) defined an earlier concept of goddess “in all her manifestations” as “a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature.”

Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees, and flowers. Hence the holistic and mythopoeic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on Earth (Gimbutas 1989: 321).

According to this definition, Goddess is not imagined as an external being with a specific personality who dominates the human sphere, but as a human *perception of* and *reverence for* the *interconnected sacredness* of “all life in Nature.” This sacred wholeness, as an overarching

metaphor, is teeming with multiplicity. The metaphor itself becomes diversified according to various contextual associations. For instance, the figure of the Creatrix in the Eurasian context, the mythical Ancestral Mother, proliferates into the numerous guardian spirits of nature which may be reflected in different styles and forms of female imagery.

Makilam (2007), in her description of Kabyle Berber society, indicates the inappropriateness of an elevated concept of goddess. As she explains, women in traditional Berber society “knew in the depths of their beings that their human essence was divine, like the whole planet and all its natural life” (Makilam 2007: 252). This experience of the sacred connecting humans and all of nature may be seen as parallel with Neolithic beliefs.

In Neolithic contexts, female figures with bird or animal masks, with eagle claws instead of human hands, with bear legs, or arms foreshortened into wings, suggest a deep resonance of mutual participation and kinship with the animal world.

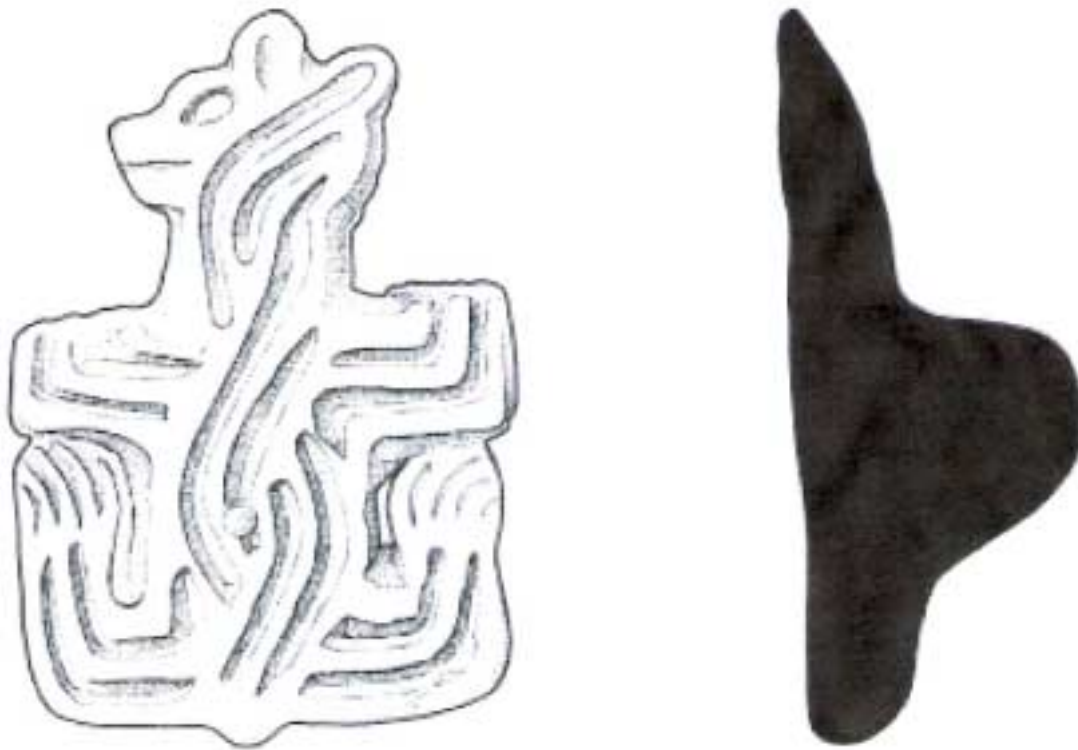


Figure 16: Drawing of Bear Seal with silhouette of handle by Jason Quinlan (© Çatalhöyük Research Project).

The blending of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features may also tilt to the other extreme, such as the depiction of animals in human-like postures, as with the Vinča bear mother holding her cub like a human mother (Figure 15).

In terms of the bear seal from Çatalhöyük, a clue to the connection between the bear and the anthropomorphic female form has come from an unexpected place. A detailed drawing by John Swogger of the Çatalhöyük research team shows the silhouette of a carefully moulded contour on the opposite side of the engraved surface of the seal (Figure 16). This precisely sculpted shape, which functions as a handle, has strong associations with a long lineage of female images found throughout the Mythological Crescent. Although many clay seals, or pintaderas, have been discovered at Çatalhöyük, their handles are primarily formed in a utilitarian manner. In this case, the deliberately crafted handle of the bear seal serves as a cryptic depiction of a specific stylized shape that has been used as a visual metaphor of the human female form for thousands of years.



Figure 17: Upper Perigordian/ Gravettian Calcite figurine from Weinberg cave Near Mauern, Bavaria c. 25,000–23,000 BP. H. 7.2 cm.

Figurines and engravings crafted in this shape strictly adhere to an iconic style depicting “over-represented buttocks, extending well beyond the axis of symmetry, long beheaded trunks and only occasionally marked breasts and/or hands”

(Fiedorczuk et al. 2007:97; Bosinski and Fischer 1974). Examples of figurines sculpted in this distinctive, abstract manner are dated to as early as the Upper Perigordian/Gravettian period (Figure 17) and are represented throughout the Upper Paleolithic (see, e.g., Figure 18).

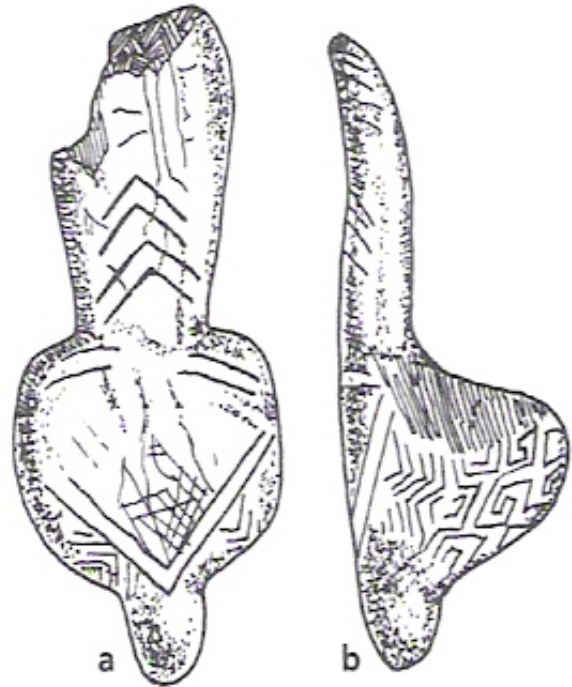


Figure 18: Upper Paleolithic Ivory sculpture with large V, chevrons and Meanders. Mezin, River Desna, W. Ukraine c. 18,000-15,000 BC. H. 8.67 cm. a) front view; b) side profile (after Gimbutas 1989).

This silhouette, sculpted and engraved in various media, is especially well evidenced during the Magdalenian period (Figures 19-22). Its frequency appears to reflect “a common symbolic expression of societies which shared technological templates preserved from the time of reoccupation of north-western and central Europe after the Last Glacial Maximum” (Fiedorczuk et al. 2007:97; Otto 1990:189). This schematic form is sometimes referred to as the “Lalinde/Gönnersdorf type” (Lorblanchet and Welté 1990:47) after the well-known engravings and sculptures found at the eponymous site in western Germany on the upper Rhine (Figures 21-22).

New examples of the “Lalinde/Gönnersdorf style” of figurines in the form of thirty flint plaquettes



Figure 19: Coal Pendant, Petersfels, S. Germany Upper Magdalenian (Gimbutas collection, with permission).

have recently been discovered at a Late Magdalenian site near the village of Wilczyce in central Poland (Fiedorczuk 2001). According to the excavators, these

symbolic representations of women, portrayed according to the commonly understood style, are a material signal of affiliation with a large cultural and spiritual entity extending from Dordogne to central Poland and from Moravia to Saxony and Westphalia (Fiedorczuk et al. 2007:103).

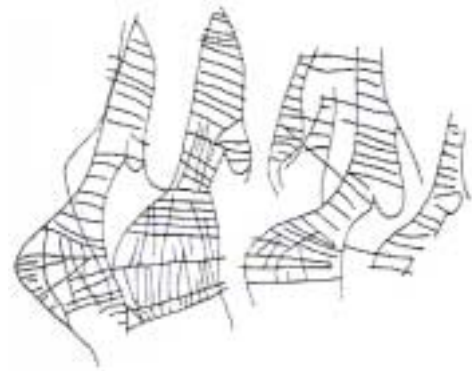


Figure 21: Engraved plaquette, Gönnersdorf, upper Rhine, north of Koblenz, western Germany, Late Magdalenian V, c. 10,000 BC, H. 6.4 cm. (after Gimbutas 1989).



Figure 20: Early Magdalenian finger drawing on the ceiling of a cave sanctuary, Pech Merle, southern France, c. 15,000-13,000 BC (after Gimbutas 1989).



Figure 22: Ivory figure, Gönnersdorf, S. Germany. Late Magdalenian. H. 7.2 cm (Gimbutas collection, with permission).

This schematic template was not confined to early prototypes but was continually reproduced over thousands of years from Palaeolithic Europe to Neolithic Anatolia.

In presenting these images for comparison, we are not ignoring the fact that each sculpture held contextual meanings for the different communities that produced them. Iconic images created by any society form part of a network of symbolic and metaphoric functions. This network is no accidental amassment of mentifacts; it is organized according to certain principles of cognition and attitudinal strategies that constitute the fabric of *cultural memory*.

In traditional societies without written language, the transmission of cultural memory depends upon the use of symbolic images as mnemonic devices to perpetuate the transmission of knowledge.



Figure 23: Female figurine from Cafer Höyük, Level VIb, SE Anatolia c. 7000 BC (after Cauvin et al. 1999).

The continuity of a similar stylized rendering of the female form, created and recreated over time in numerous ecological and societal settings, perpetuated an image that was recognizable across social and temporal boundaries, albeit with different names and local associations. In our view, this formal canon may have functioned in various stylistic ‘dialects’ as a visual lingua franca—quite possibly promoting the recognition of commonalities between divergent groups.



Figure 24: Terracotta figurine from Donja Branjevina, Voivodina, Serbia, c. 6300-6000 BC (drawing courtesy of Bogdan Brukner).



Figure 25: Neolithic clay figurine from Klepice, district of Hrotovice, Moravia, Czech Republic, 6th Mill. BC. H. 7.7 cm. (after Gimbutas 1989).

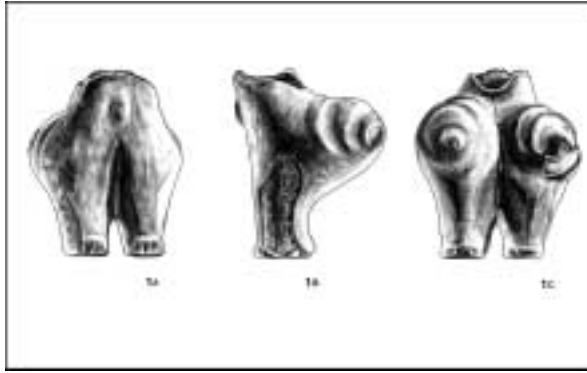


Figure 26: Steatopygous hollow figurine. Mostonga I site by Odžaci. Körös culture. Middle Neolithic, c. 5500 cal. BC (after Karmanski 1968).



Figure 27: Figurines from Ilipinar, NW Anatolia, 6th mill. BC (after Roodenberg 1999).



Figure 28: Early Vinča figurine, Vinča mound near Belgrade, early 6th mill. BC (Gimbutas collection, with permission).

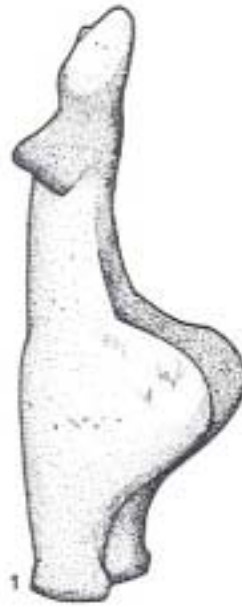


Figure 29: Starčevo-Körös figurine, Mehtelek, Upper Tisza, NE Hungary c.5500 BC. H. 16.2 cm. (after Gimbutas 1989).

The cryptic handle of the bear seal, which is precisely in this iconic shape, replicates an exceedingly ancient visual formula for woman. It therefore provides a visual key for recognizing the conjoining of both bear and woman into one composite image. It also provides a key for acknowledging the hybrid nature of the anthropomorphic bas reliefs found on the walls of houses at Çatalhöyük.

Given the great longevity of this female imagery, the visual and mythological associations between woman and bear, and the nature of female bears as fierce protective mothers, we therefore propose that a bear woman, or Bear Goddess at Çatalhöyük may have represented the primordial potency of the one who gives birth to all life, who is the protector of life, and who is also the death-wielder and source of rebirth.

While it is not possible to know the specific lore and ritual practices associated with such an image, this Bear Woman, or Bear Goddess—who, as a potent presence, was ritually replastered and renewed again and again in specially appointed rooms—must have functioned as a powerful visual metaphor of enduring significance for the inhabitants of the remarkable settlement of Çatalhöyük.

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