



The Monstrous Goddess: The Degeneration of Ancient Bird and Snake Goddesses into Historic Age Witches and Monsters

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An earlier form of this paper was published as "The Frightful Goddess: Birds, Snakes and Witches,"¹ a paper I wrote for a Gedenkschrift which I co-edited in memory of Marija Gimbutas. Several years later, in June of 2005, I gave a lecture on this topic to Ivan Marazov's class at the New Bulgarian University in Sophia. At Ivan's request, I updated the paper. Now, in 2011, there is a lovely synchrony: I have been asked to produce a paper for a Festschrift in honor of Ivan's seventieth birthday, and, as well, a paper for an issue of the Institute of Archaeomythology Journal in honor of what would have been Marija Gimbutas' ninetieth birthday. I dedicate this paper, in two somewhat different forms, to both Marija and Ivan, two broad-thinking scholars and teachers who have given deep insights into antiquity.

Introduction

This paper discusses the relationship of birds and snakes to ancient goddesses and heroines. Birds and snakes are related to goddesses, or the beneficent avatar of the prehistoric goddess, and to witches and monsters: the maleficent or, more correctly, the fearsome aspect of the same goddess. By comparing archaeological data on prehistoric European bird and snake iconography, and historic mythological data, I hope

1) to demonstrate the broad geographic basis of this iconography and myth, 2) to determine the meaning of the bird and the snake, and 3) to demonstrate that these female figures inherited the mantle of the Neolithic and Bronze Age European bird and snake goddess. We discuss who this goddess was, what was her importance, and how she can have meaning for us. Further, we attempt to establish the existence of and meaning of the *unity* of the goddess, for she was a unity as well as a multiplicity. That is, although she was multifunctional, yet she was also an integral whole. In this wholeness, she manifested life and death, as well as rebirth, and her avian and serpentine iconography give evidence of her different aspects. In fact, the goddess was responsible not only for the life continuum of birth, death, and rebirth; at least in the texts of the early historic era, she was also responsible for wisdom, prophecy, war, love, judgment, and justice as well.²

In the twentieth-century we are attempting to extract, from prehistoric iconography and early historic myth, lessons which we can apply in order to construct a spiritual view which speaks to our time, a spirituality of *wholeness* similar to the spiritual system embraced by ancient women and men. Thus we look to ancient iconography for an integrating message.

In her beneficent, life-giving aspect, for the most part, the goddess continued in the early

¹ Dexter 1997.

² See Dexter 1990a.

historic eras to be worshipped and revered. In her death-bringing aspect, however, the goddess often metamorphosed from goddess into witch or monster. Life and death, in most European historic cultures, ceased to be viewed as a continuum, worthy of equal veneration. Thus, the death-bringing aspect of the goddess became an object—or, in a typically fragmented fashion, objects—of derision and hatred.

Neolithic Europeans and Indo-Europeans

In ancient Europe and parts of Asia, from at least *ca.* 6000 BCE to *ca.* 2000 BCE, according to iconographic evidence, society was goddess-centered.³ there is much evidence that the central deity was a female, and that religion was integral to the cultures. These peoples practiced horticulture (full-scale agriculture began to develop between the fourth and third millennia BCE), and they seem to have been peaceful, since there were no hill forts and little evidence of weaponry. By about 2000 BCE, throughout Europe and south to India and Iran, there is evidence of great change: male deities are now depicted in great abundance; major sites are heavily fortified; and weapons proliferate.⁴ From linguistic and archaeological studies we know that these changes are the results of invasions and incursions by the patriarchal, patrilinear, relatively militaristic, semi-nomadic Proto-Indo-Europeans.⁵ These peoples, who

became the ancestors of the East Indians, Iranians, Greeks, Romans, Balts, Slavs, Hittites, Tocharians, Irish, Welsh, British, and Germans, among others, often assimilated the ancient Europeans into their own cultures, and they assimilated the deities and iconography of the indigenous peoples as well. Thus, in these areas, there is a continuum of bird and snake iconography from some time before 6000 BCE through all of antiquity, and continuing until the modern era in many cultural areas.

Our survey of the iconographic and mythological evidence will be chronological, beginning with Neolithic iconography *ca.* 6000 BCE until the early historic period (*ca.* 3000 BCE in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and later in other areas). We shall examine bird and snake figures from the Near East, Greece and Rome, from the Balkans, and related Indo-European culture cultures. The Neolithic and Bronze Age bird and snake figures include birds and snakes with female attributes, and bird/ snake hybrids.

Indo-European does not make up part of the earliest Mesopotamian language record. For a broad perspective of the Indo-Europeans, and a search for Indo-European evidence in a Palaeolithic-Mesolithic-Neolithic continuum, and through a record of changing climatic conditions and adaptations to environment, see V. Thomas 1991: 12-37; for an analysis of the approaches to the problems of studying and identifying Proto-Indo-European cultures, and in particular, for the need to study continuity and discontinuity in prehistoric cultures, see V. Thomas 1987:145-164. Kortlandt (1990:131-140) and Anthony (1991:193-222) list the reasons why peoples migrate, and the conditions attendant upon migration. Zimmer (1990:141-155) believes that the Proto-Indo-Europeans may have been a heterogeneous group of peoples, a *colluvies gentium*, connected linguistically by a pidgin language (or languages) which then became a creole, and then finally a new natural language. One must, however, carefully observe the conditions under which languages change before it is possible to determine that pidgionization (and later creolization) has taken place: cf. Polomé 1980:185-202. In fact, it may have been small groups of Proto-Indo-Europeans (mostly men) who expanded (rather than migrated) out of the North Pontic Steppe area. For a discussion of Indo-European expansions, taking into consideration both mtDNA and Y-Chromosome DNA studies, see Dexter 2006.

³ See Gimbutas 1989 and 1991 for evidence and for extensive archaeological bibliography.

⁴ See Gimbutas 1977: 284; Dexter 1990a (*Whence the Goddesses*): 34-36.

⁵ On the varying theories regarding the point of origin of the Proto-Indo-European peoples, their migrations, and the North Pontic forested and grassy steppes, see Gimbutas 1977:277-78, 1982:18-19, 1985: *passim*, 1991: *passim*; and Mallory 1989:143-185. For differing theories, see D'Iakonov (1985:162) who proposes the Balkan-Carpathian area; and Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1985 a, b, c) who propose a Mesopotamian/Anatolian origin. Anthony (1991:197) counters the Mesopotamian/Anatolian origin theory of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, pointing out that, if the Proto-Indo-Europeans had originated in Mesopotamia/Anatolia, then it is odd that



Figure 1: *Marble pregnant figurine, Cycladic 2800-2300 BCE. British Museum no. GR 1932-10.181 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).*

Bird Iconography in Neolithic Europe

Neolithic and Bronze Age iconographic evidence points to bird and snake female figures: these include birds and snakes with female attributes, and hybrids of the two. We shall discuss the meaning of the bird and snake shortly, but we should note that the two are not a polarity (sky/under-world, birth/death, good/bad) but, on the contrary, both the bird and the snake represented aspects of birth, death, and rebirth.

Among the thousands of figures left to us from the Neolithic are many hybrid bird/snake/female figures. Just to cite a few, there is a bust of a bird with breasts,⁶ an anthropomorphic head with beaked “nose” and stylized hair,⁷ a beaked female figure inscribed with various signs,⁸ a bird-faced pot with breasts,⁹ and “stiff lady” figures from the Cyclades,¹⁰ Anatolia, and the Balkans. The Anatolian figures have wings instead of folded arms;¹¹ the Balkan figures are quite abstract, and are painted with spirals.¹²

⁶ Larisa, Thessaly, 6000 BCE; Gimbutas 1974: fig. 84.

⁷ Gimbutas, Shimabuka, and Winn 1989: figs. 7.78.1, 7.135, pl. 7.2 (catalogue no. 873): anthropomorphic head with beaked nose, round “coffee bean” eyes; hair parted in center with bun in back; Achilleion, Thessaly, Greece, ca. 5800 BCE.

⁸ Vinča site near Belgrade, Serbia, ca. 4000 BCE; Gimbutas 1974: fig. 120.

⁹ Greece, National Archaeological Museum; third to second millennia BCE (Early Bronze Age).

¹⁰ Cf. the marble Cycladic figurine, 2800-2300 BCE. (British Museum no. A17 1863.2-13.1).

¹¹ Cf. Gimbutas 1989: 203, fig. 321.

¹² Female figure, southern Romania, ca. 4500 BCE, with spiral eyes, large mouth; she holds her shriveled left hand to her lower lip or tongue (Gimbutas 1989: fig. 323). This figure is very evocative of the later Medusa heads. An even earlier Gorgon-figure exists: a Medusa-type head from the Sesklo culture of Neolithic Thessaly, dating to 6500-5500 BCE. This head has fangs, large round eyes, a large tongue, and a checkerboard design on its forehead (Gimbutas 1999: fig. 15). Some scholars have thought that the gorgoneia originated in Babylonia or Assyria (cf. Potts 1982: 30 ff), where such figures date to as early as 3000 BCE. But the Sesklo find confirms an earlier origin in southeastern Europe (see Dexter 2010). Indeed, many figure types and pottery types, containing both decoration

The latter figures represent the “bird of death” who guards the tomb. Some of the Cycladic figures are obviously pregnant,¹³ (Figure 1) and although this feature may seem at first to be anomalous, yet a pregnant death goddess is not surprising when we realize that the goddess of death was also the goddess of renewal, of life beyond death. In the Sumerian “Descent of Inanna,” Inanna, goddess of life and love, goes to the Underworld to visit her sister Ereshkigal, and Ereshkigal pronounces the curse of death upon her. While Inanna is hanging on a peg, as a slab of rotting meat, Ereshkigal, the goddess of death, is in the process of giving birth:

*The mother giving birth to infancy,
Ereshkigal . . .
She has hair on her head like leeks.
She says, “Ohhhhh! My insides!”¹⁴*

The little beings sent to rescue Inanna from death, the *kurgarra* and the *galatur*, find the Underworld and death goddess Ereshkigal in labor, about to give birth.

From megalithic tombs we find tomb-slabs with spirals¹⁵ and capstones which include spirals and other sacred symbols.¹⁶ Such large-eyed and spiral-eyed figures probably represent the owl form of the bird-goddess in her dual role



Figure 2: Bird goddess with stump arms from Tiryns, ca. 1200 BCE. Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

and writing, which, before the advent of calibrated dating, were thought to be of Mesopotamian origin, are now found to have originated in southeastern Europe (see Marler and Dexter, eds. 2009).

¹³ Marble pregnant Cycladic figure, 2800-2300 BCE (British Museum no. GR 1932-10.181).

¹⁴ The translations for this and subsequent passages are my own. Sumerian Fragment. The Sumerian text is in Kramer, ed. 1963: 511, lines 227-228; 232-233:

*Ama-gan-a nam-dumu-ne-ne-še
ereš-ki-gal-la-ke₄ . . .
síg-ni-garaš^{sar}-gim
sag-gá-na mu-un-tuku-tuku
ù-u₈ a-ša-mu dug₄-ga-ni.*

¹⁵ Cf. Crawford 1991: Plate 10b, tomb-slab with spirals; Sicily, Syracuse Museum; 1850-1400 BCE.

¹⁶ Ibid.: plate 28, capstone over end chamber of Cairn T (The Hag’s Chamber), Lough Crew, Ireland.

as protectress of those dead who had returned to her womb, and as the cause of death itself. Her symbols, spiral eyes, are carved on orthostats, curbstones and capstones at megalithic grave sites throughout Western Europe. Again, in abstracted form, this is the same goddess who appears as the stiff, ritually posed figure which appears in Cycladic Greek graves, and those of Spain, Portugal, and Western Anatolia.

The bird represented life as well as death. There is much iconography representing the Neolithic bird of life. For example, there is a beaked female figure with open breasts for

pouring,¹⁷ a figure with upraised arms and birds in her crown,¹⁸ a bird-faced female figure,¹⁹ a bird-headed figure with stump arms (Figure 2),²⁰ and a gold Mycenaean woman with a bird,²¹ or birds²² surrounding her head. In the prehistoric era, the goddess was a bird and a multiplicity of birds, just as she was both goddess and goddesses. In later iconography, one finds a female figure accompanied by a bird. The bird in the historic eras thus represents an avatar of the goddess. The Mycenaean figures show a continuation of the Neolithic and Bronze Age iconography into the Indo-European Mycenaean era.

Snake Iconography in Neolithic Europe

There is also much prehistoric iconographic evidence for snake-worship; examples include an anthropomorphic seated female with arms ending in incised three-fingered “snaky” hands, from the Neolithic Greek site of Achilleion;²³ a Kourotrophos “serpent” figure from Thessaly;²⁴ a snake pot, the “goddess of Myrtos,” from Crete;²⁵ a Cretan bird-faced female figure with a

¹⁷ Heraklion, Crete, proto-palatial period (2700-1900 BCE).

¹⁸ Heraklion, Crete, post-palatial period (1700-1450 BCE). The bird probably symbolizes divinity or confers royalty or priestesshood.

¹⁹ Hagios Nikolaos, Crete (northeastern Crete): geometric deposit at Anavlochos, Vrachasi. Iron Age, *ca.* 1000 BCE. The head is moveable; the bell-shaped body is a survival of Minoan traits. There is a very similar figure from the early Vinča culture, 5200-5000 BCE. Cf. Gimbutas 1989: 169, fig. 266.

²⁰ Female Figure from Tiryns; Musée de Louvre, Paris, *ca.* 1200 BCE. Many similar, contemporaneous figures have been found in other parts of the Greek world; lines on the torso resemble feathers.

²¹ National Archaeological Museum, Athens (NM 27).

²² National Archaeological Museum, Athens (NM 28).

²³ See Gimbutas, Shimabuka, and Winn 1989: Plate 7.4, fig. 7.26 (cat. no 2366). The figure dates from *ca.* 6200–5800 BCE.

²⁴ Sesklo culture, Thessaly; National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece.

²⁵ Hagios Nikolaos, Crete, Early Minoan 2B, pre-palatial period, *ca.* 2500-2000 BCE (closer to 2500). Another possible explanation for the iconography of this pot is that

snake draped over her shoulders;²⁶ an Ugaritic seated female figure with snakes;²⁷ and Minoan Cretan snake vessels.²⁸

Mythological Evidence of the Bird and Snake Goddess

The bird and snake appear throughout historic European and related myth and iconography. Just as the prehistoric bird and snake often appear together on a single figure,²⁹ so they appear as complementary icons for numerous historic female figures, both goddesses and monsters, perhaps because their functions were similar.

Both the bird and the snake figures depicted a goddess of the life continuum, a goddess who was responsible for the fertility of womb and fruitfulness of earth, and, on the contrary, for the barrenness of animals and vegetation. She both gave and took life. Birds represented two phenomena: birds such as the dove, which were associated with powerful goddesses in historic mythologies, personified the breath of life and perhaps the soul. Even in modern Western cultures, the dove represents the soul, peace, and purity. On the other hand, the owl has personified night, and by extension death, for millennia. Raptors such as the vulture and the crow, too, were representatives of the death aspect, and often the martial aspect, of the goddess; the crow goddess, as we shall discuss below, often appears on the battlefield. Representations of the vulture are known from *ca.* 6100 BCE, from the Neolithic town of Çatalhöyük, in south-central Turkey. There, the excavator, James Mellaart, discovered wall paintings of vultures with huge wings, swooping

it represents a hermaphrodite.

²⁶ Heraklion Museum, Crete, pre-1700 BCE.

²⁷ Ivory Ugaritic figure, Ras Shamra, Syria, 19th-18th centuries BCE. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

²⁸ Heraklion Museum, Crete; Neopalatial period, 1700–1450 BCE.

²⁹ Cf. Gimbutas 1989: figures 28, 111, 189.



Figure 3: *Inanna*; gold, alabaster, and garnets, ca. 5th century BCE. Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

down upon headless bodies.³⁰ The cuckoo, which represents the season of spring, can also represent death. In some Baltic folksongs, the cuckoo is an incarnation of the dead mother.³¹

³⁰ Mellaart 1965: 98, 101, fig. 86. These representations were found on Level VII of the site.

³¹ Cf. Gimbutas 1989: 195.

Since poisonous snakes were a potent cause of death, snakes represented death as well.³²

On the other hand, the bird molts and then grows new feathers, while the snake sloughs its skin; both may have represented the possibilities of life, death, and rebirth to the prehistoric Europeans, as well as to early cultures worldwide. In fact, in 2004–2005, excavation of a Thracian tomb (the Golyama Kosmatka mound at Shipka) revealed that a Medusa-head was broken off from the door to the innermost chamber and set over a snake skin next to the built-in platform where the head of the deceased would have lain (this tomb was probably a cenotaph, so no body was found). Both the snaky-haired Medusa and the snake skin were potent representations of regeneration.

Birds mediate both heaven and earth, while snakes mediate earth and the underworld. Both have thus been seen as particularly numinous, and both are potent icons of life, death, and rebirth.

The Early Historic Era

Early historic mythological evidence points to goddesses who represented a continuum of the life force: birth, death, and rebirth;³³ the Sumerian *Inanna* (Figure 3) was a goddess of love but also a powerful martial goddess who destroyed her enemies.

³² Memories of the distant past filter through many modern mythologies. The Tibetan Naksi, for example, have a myth wherein, in the beginning, the world was once divided between humans and the Nagas, the snakes. Then the two became enemies, and the Nagas plagued humankind with many afflictions. The Shaman may only cure these afflictions by reciting the origin myth of the *bird*, Garuda, father of the Garuda-birds who defend mortals against naga-snakes. (*Nāga* is Sanskrit for snake, particularly the cobra, while Garuda is an Indic mythological bird, particularly the vulture; the origin of this myth may thus be Indic.) For the myth, see Eliade 1963: 26-27. This myth demonstrates not only the antiquity of the snake-deity; it also exemplifies the historic fragmentation of the bird/snake goddess.

³³ Marija Gimbutas' goddesses of regeneration; see Gimbutas 1974: *passim*.



Figure 4: “Durgā Dancing.” Courtesy of the British Museum, Oriental Antiquities, 1872.7-1.82 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

She flies about the battlefield:

*In the vanguard of the battle, everything is beset by you. / My Lady, [flying about] on your own wings, you feed on the carnage.*³⁴

Inanna was not just goddess of the life continuum. She also had charge over law and justice, judgment, wisdom and prophecy. But as we see, with the advance of time and more martial society, her warrior aspects became more pronounced.

Inanna (and her Akkadian counterpart, Ishtar) and the Indic “Great”-Goddess Devī³⁵

³⁴ The text dates to ca. 2500 BCE. See Hallo and Van Dijk 1968, lines 26-27: *igi-mè-ta / ni ma-ra-ta-si-ig / nin-mu á-ni-za / KA.KA i-durud_x-e.*

³⁵ All of the Devas gave energy to form the goddess Devī, so that she might rescue them from the Asuras. See the *Devīmāhātmyam* 2.10 ff.

are typical of this type of goddess, the goddess of nurturance and of war. This deity was not purely beneficent or purely maleficent; she gave life and took it away again. In her death aspect, Devī is represented by Kālī or Durgā³⁶ (Figure 4, Durgā Dancing). The ancient goddess represented (and as Devī, still represents) the entire life continuum of birth, death, and rebirth. The iconography of the Neolithic goddess was attached to Inanna/Ishtar, who was often represented with wings (Figure 5), and Anat, a martial and love goddess from the north Syrian culture of Ugarit (a Canaanite culture), who could change herself into a *bird* (Figure 6, winged Anat); she could cause wholesale carnage. In a text dating to 1300 BCE,

*Anat. . .violently slays the sons of two cities;
she hews the people of the sea-shore;
she destroys the people of the rising sun;
under her, heads [fly] like vultures;
over her, hands [fly] like locusts. . .
she attaches heads to her back;
she attaches hands onto her girdle;
she wades knee-deep in blood. . .
Anat exults.
Her liver is filled with laughter,
her heart with rejoicing.*³⁷

The Semites, just as the Indo-Europeans and the Sumerians, enjoyed vivid descriptions of bloodshed. The Sumerian Lil, a storm-demon³⁸ (she became Akkadian Lilītu, ‘female demon’,³⁹

³⁶ Cf. Guirand (1959): facing page 340, Durgā Pratyangira, seated on a jeweled lotus; painting, 19th century CE.

³⁷ Dietrich 1976, “Hymn to Anat,” *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit (KTU)* 1.3.ii.5-14; 24:

'nt ... /... b'mq . tḫšb . bn / qrytm tmḫš . lim . ḥp . y[m] / tšmt . adm . šat . špš / tḫh . kkdrt . ri[š] / 'lh . kirbym kp ... /'tk / rišt . lbmth . šnst . [] kpt . bhšh . brkm . tḡl[l] / bdm ... tḫšb . wḫdy . 'nt / tḡdd . kbdh . bšḥq . ymlu / lbh . / bšmḫt... /

³⁸ Cf. Delitzsch 1914: 171.

³⁹ Cf. Bauer 1953: 18.



Figure 5: Cylinder seal impression showing Inanna with wings, ca. 2300 BCE. Courtesy of British Museum, BM no. 89115, 91-5-9.2553 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Hebrew Lilith), was also depicted with wings.⁴⁰ Her Hebrew name means ‘a nocturnal spectre’, and it probably refers to the screech-owl.⁴¹ In the iconography, Lilith has bird feet, probably owl or vulture-feet,⁴² and she is accompanied by the owl; in reality, she *is* the owl as well. Lilith too was the bird of destruction, the bird of death. In the Sumerian poem, “The Huluppu Tree,” the Lil, the Anzu-bird, and a snake make their home in Inanna’s huluppu tree, and the goddess Inanna, who wishes to make a throne and a bed from the tree, laments that the three will not leave. Finally the hero Gilgamesh comes and smashes the snake, and the Anzu-bird and Lilith leave.⁴³ Thus, in Sumerian as well as Hebrew myth, the Lil, or Lilith, is monster rather than goddess.

The Egyptian goddess Isis too was represented with wings, which she held outspread to protect her charge, the dead soul.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Cf. the Mesopotamian clay plaque depicting the winged Lil (or the Underworld Goddess, Ereshkigal), 2000-1600 BCE; Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. AO6501.

⁴¹ Cf. Gesenius 1949: 438.

⁴² Several scholars have researched the “bird legs” of goddesses such as Lilith, the Sirens, Lauma and Baba Yaga. Some have seen them as the legs and claws of fowl. They are more likely the legs of raptors: owls or vultures; both birds have spurs on the backs of their claws, and both are scavengers, and they thus were easily assimilated to the death-aspect of the goddess. Further, Lilith in some iconography is surrounded by owls. Her name, iconography and function would seem to indicate that she is, indeed, the owl.

⁴³ Cf. Wolkstein and Kramer 1983: 4-9.

⁴⁴ See Guirand 1959: 42, wall painting from the tomb of



Figure 6: Cylinder seal impression depicting the winged Anat, Ras Shamra, Syria, ca. 1300 BCE. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, no. AO17.242 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

In *The Book of the Dead* (1550-1080 BCE), she tells the deceased:

*I come
[so that] I might be
as a protection for you.*⁴⁵

Both the bird and the snake were integral to the iconography of ancient Egypt. The snake was so important in Egypt that it became the symbol of Lower (that is, Northern) Egypt, in the form of the *uraeus*, the serpent which bites its tail and thus, in circular form, represents the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; the vulture represented Upper, or Southern, Egypt.

It also seems significant that the Egyptian hieroglyphic determinative (that is, the figure which often precedes an Egyptian word, denoting a whole class) for the classifications of both ‘goddess’ and ‘priestess’ was a serpent. A common hieroglyph for the word ‘goddess’, *Netrit*, included the symbols for ‘deity’ and ‘serpent’. That is, the serpent represented the goddess *par excellence*; the two were identified not only mythologically but as an integral part of the Egyptian language as well.

Thus the Egyptian goddess Isis, just as the Sumerian Inanna and Ugaritic Anat, was

Seti I, 1375-1200 BCE, depicting Isis with outstretched wings. Many coffin covers depict Isis in this position. (For example, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art displays several.) Sometimes the goddess with outstretched wings is Ma’at; she can be recognized by the feather in her hair, whereas Isis often has her symbol, the throne, above her head.

⁴⁵ Budge, ed. 1895, 1962: *Egyptian Book of the Dead* CLI.1.1: i-â un-â em sa-k.



Figure 7: *Aphrodite and Eros riding a swan or goose. Terracotta figurine, Tarentum, Italy, ca. 380 BCE. Courtesy British Museum, no. 1308 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).*

represented as a bird of death; Isis was a goddess who both brought death and who protected the dead. Again, Isis is a goddess of both life and death, since she gives birth to Horus.⁴⁶ In fact, since Horus is conceived out of a phallus which Isis fashioned to replace the lost phallus of her dead husband, Osiris, Horus is *reborn* from Osiris. Isis is thus the goddess of life, death, and rebirth.

In India, both ancient and modern, a “Great”-Goddess Devī has been worshipped. She has had both bird and snake imagery. Yet even in the most ancient Indic texts, those of the

⁴⁶ Isis’ maternal qualities became dominant in the Hellenistic period, when Isis became closely identified, by the Greeks in Egypt, and by the Macedonian Ptolemies, with Demeter. See Solmsen 1979: 10, 24, 121-122, note 19.

Rigveda, there were snake-figures which were turned into monsters; the serpent-goddess Danu was the mother of the arch-withholder of the cosmic waters, Vṛtra, another serpent. The hero, Indra, joined Danu and her son in battle and he felled both mother and son. So there was ambivalence about the snake deities even in early cultures. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that the *Rigveda* is an Indo-European text, and thus a patriarchal one. So it was the early patriarchal cultures, particularly the Semitic and the Indo-European, which turned the Neolithic bird-and-snake goddess into a monster. The Semitic Yahweh battles Leviathan; the Hebrew Psalm 74 tells us that the deity

*broke to pieces the heads of the sea-monsters in the waters. . . dashed into pieces the heads of Leviathan.*⁴⁷

The Indo-European Zeus, too, was a killer of serpents, such as Typhon/Typhoeus, a winged serpent. Zeus is said to have killed this serpent, whom his wife, Hera, bore parthenogenically. Parthenogenetic birth is birth by a *parthenos*, a young woman, without help from a man. Zeus did not like this ‘stepson’ very much; he liked participating in the creation of as many deities and mortals as possible.

Thus the Hebrew Yahweh, Greek Zeus, and Indic Indra were patriarchal warrior-heroes who battled the pre-patriarchal serpent-goddess and, of course, emerged victorious.

Bird and snake iconography were attached to many Greco-Roman goddesses, and in Greece and Rome, as in the other Indo-European cultures, there was ambivalence about the descendants of the bird and snake goddesses.

The Greek love-goddess Aphrodite was

⁴⁷ Hebrew *Old Testament*, “Psalms” 74.13-14 (ca. 6th century BCE):

.. *Shībar'tā rā'she taninim al-hamāyim* . .
.. *ritsats'tā rā'she liv'yātān* . .



Figure 8: “Crouching Aphrodite.” Marble Roman copy, first century CE. Courtesy British Museum, no. 1963.10-29.1 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

shown on a clay drinking cup riding a goose,⁴⁸ and she was depicted with her young son Eros, riding a swan or goose (Figure 7). The “crouching Aphrodite,” sculpted by Diodalses of Bithynia about 250 BCE, represents the goddess with a snake coiled around her arm (Figure 8). In a Roman copy of the “crouching Aphrodite,” a fragmentary goose lies beneath the figure of the goddess.⁴⁹ Such scenes underscore the avian as well as the viperine accouterment of the goddess. Thus there is a complementary theme of snake and bird.

The Greek Athena was also imbued with the paraphernalia of the Neolithic European bird and snake goddess. Athena’s birdlike attributes are often manifested in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*:

⁴⁸ Clay drinking cup (*kylex*) from Rhodes, Attic, ca. 460 BCE (British Museum D2) perhaps a prototype for the nursery character, Mother Goose.

⁴⁹ J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (no. 55.AA.10); 1st-2nd cent. AD; Here, the snake is wound several times around her arm.



Figure 9: Bronze Athena, ca. 350 BCE. Courtesy of the Musée du Louvre, room 202, case III (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

...bright-eyed Athena departed,
having the appearance of a sea-eagle. . .⁵⁰

⁵⁰Homer, *Odyssey* III: 371-372. [Note: Texts in Greek are not included in this version of the article due to technical limitations.]



Figure 10: Athena from the pediment of the temple of the Peisistratidai, in the grouping from the Gigantomachy, ca. 520 BCE. Courtesy Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece, no. 631 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Athena was frequently represented with her special bird, the owl, in both figurative form (Figure 9) and on coins. On the latter, Athena occupied the obverse of the coins, while the owl occupied the reverse.⁵¹ The owl, which is active at night, the time of darkness, again, represents the ‘dark’ or death-aspect of the regenerative goddess. We may compare Athena, with her owl, to the winged Anat, who, as we discussed, was a young martial goddess similar in many ways to Athena. Thus the “bird of death” was sometimes translated into a goddess who could bring death on the battlefield. To Athena and Anat we may also compare the Germanic Valkyries, who were often represented iconographically as birds. They received half of the dead on the battlefield.

Athena was often depicted with the other dark aspect of the regenerative goddess, the snake. The figure of Athena represented on the pediment of the temple of the Peisis-tratidai, in the grouping from the Gigantomachy, wears a cloak bordered by snakes⁵² (Figure 10).

⁵¹ British Museum, Department of Coins and Medals; 5th century BCE.

⁵² Snakes wind around the arms of the Knossos snake-

On the chryselephantine statue sculpted by Pheidias, the Athena Parthenos from the Parthenon, a large snake was concealed under Athena’s shield. The Athena Parthenos is no longer extant, but there is a small copy of the “Varvakeion Athena” in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. The figurine represents the goddess standing, fully armed, wearing an Attic gown girded with a serpent, holding a staff with the winged Nike, “Victory,” in her right hand and her shield in the left.⁵³ Athena holds Nike, in a manner evocative of the way she holds the owl. Both are thus depicted as attributes of the goddess.

Nike, who represented victory in contests as well as in war, was a natural concomitant of Athena in her warrior aspect. Inside Athena’s shield coils the sacred serpent Erichthonius, the guardian of the Acropolis. Her chest is covered by an aegis, a breastplate or shield bordered with coiled serpents, in the middle of which resides the head of the snaky-haired⁵⁴ winged

goddess (or priestess).

⁵³ A copy of Pheidias’ statue of Athena Parthenos, the “Varvakeion Athena,” ca. 400 BCE, is in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece; N.M. 129.

⁵⁴ These snakes relate Medusa to the Neolithic European bird and snake goddess; a rather different interpretation of snaky locks has been proposed by Obeyesekere (1981). He believes that the matted locks of ecstasies in Sri Lanka are indeed snaky, but his interpretation goes back to the Freudian belief that snakes are male phallic symbols (ibid.: 6-7). The fear of Medusa is thus connected to the fear of castration. Obeyesekere admits that there might be personal bias in the view of the anthropologist (p. 7 ff.), but he believes that his personal projections may be the same as those of his informants. Thus the root meaning of the snakes would remain the same. To this end, he argues that at least one ascetic saw her own hair as cobra-like (Introduction, *passim*). However, he cannot claim that his informants viewed their hair as *penis*-like. He believes that the matted hair grows as a result of sexual denial (p. 33 ff.), and that the “penis-shaped hair” is thus a sexual substitute for the husband. But male ascetics as well as female have matted hair, and there is no corresponding wife-substitute. Obeyesekere argues that the hair, described by various informants as “buds of flesh” and “tender fleshy growths” (p. 35), is the penile substitute of the husband-substitute: the god who has granted the matted locks to the ecstatic. This might be a

Gorgon, Medusa.⁵⁵ Athena was frequently depicted with the Gorgon's head, which she inserted into the middle of her aegis after Medusa was slain by Perseus.⁵⁶ Athena was described in Apollodorus' *Bibliothecae* (*The Library*) as Medusa's enemy:

*It is said by some / that Medusa was
beheaded because of Athena;
They say that, in fact,
the Gorgon wished to compare herself to
her [Athena] in [regard to] beauty.⁵⁷*

However, it is clear that, in the Classical age, the snaky-haired Medusa is another manifestation of the serpent-aspect of the same goddess whom Athena represents in a more exalted manner, and that Medusa's origins are the same as Athena's.⁵⁸ Both Athena and Medusa are manifestations of the early Neolithic goddess of birth, death, and rebirth. Athena, by wearing Medusa's head in her aegis, is subsuming Medusa. We will discuss Medusa again shortly.

Athena, unlike Medusa, was not metamorphosed into a monster, perhaps because, although a goddess of death as well as

possibility for the gods Huniyan and Kataragama (p. 6 *et passim*), but what of the goddess Kālī? Would not her devotees, particularly her female devotees, then sprout vulvas rather than penises? Finally, he describes the fear of castration as though it were a universal phenomenon, but it is a rare woman who is afraid of castration, at least the penile sort.

⁵⁵ On Medusa, see Dexter 1997 and 2010.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hibbard 1980: fig. 70b, depicting Perseus with the head of Medusa.

⁵⁷ Apollodorus, *Atheniensis Bibliothecae* II.iv.3.

⁵⁸ However, this does not preclude the fact that Medusa and Athena have different functions in Classical antiquity. Medusa's function is not completely negative, despite her rather unpleasant publicity: a Medusa-head was often placed over the doorway of a room, as an *apotropaic* device similar to that of placing the Medusa-head on a shield or on other warrior accoutrement. And further, although blood from her left side is poisonous, that from her left is healing. (For texts, see Dexter 2010; Dexter and Mair 2010). Medusa was a protectress against negative entities. Were she as negative as she is depicted by some Classical authors, she would gather the forces of evil, instead of protecting against them.

life, she helped the Athenians to win wars. As a battlefield goddess, she was an acceptable member of the Olympian pantheon.

Although Erichthonius, depicted with the Varvakeion Athena, was a *guardian* serpent, the goddess, as an assimilated member of the Greek warrior folk, was famous for battling against 'destructive' serpents. Athena killed the snake-footed giant Enceladus.⁵⁹ Athena therefore battles the serpent who threatens the male-dominated society, the status quo, but the serpent who guards that society is her companion, just as the snake may have been the companion of the prehistoric goddess of the life continuum, as well as the goddess herself.

The consort-goddess Hera, too, was possessed of bird and snake iconography, and she too was a recipient of Homer's avian similes:

*Then the two [Athena and Hera] went
forth with steps resembling [those] of shy
doves.⁶⁰*

Hera was also associated with the serpent, in her iconography, for in her sanctuaries have been found votive offerings which include terracotta snakes.⁶¹

The grain-goddess Demeter had a chthonian character, which is underscored both by the serpent who draws Triptolemus' chariot in the Eleusinian mysteries, and by the snakes which are depicted along with her other attributes, sheaves of corn and poppies.⁶² She is also represented seated on a panther, with a snake encircling her shoulders⁶³ (Figure 11).

⁵⁹ See the bronze hydria in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, ca. 350-325 BCE; Athena is depicted under the handle slaying the giant; No. 73. AC.15.

⁶⁰ Homer, *Iliad* V.778.

⁶¹ See Gimbutas (1974): 149-150.

⁶² See also the terracotta figurine of Demeter with sheaves of corn, poppies, and snakes; Terme Museum, Rome; cf. Guirand (1959): 148.

⁶³ Note the snake-encircled goddesses cited above; to these we may compare the Roman goddess of healing,



Figure 11: Terracotta relief of Demeter seated on a panther, with a snake around her shoulders, Thebes. ca. 350 BCE. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, no. CA 1447-9830743 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Another Greek goddess, *Artemis*, was in origin a mistress of animals, a huntress, at least, according to Classical authors. However, Artemis was not as removed from the unified Neolithic goddess as mythologists might claim: she was responsible for human, as well as animal, life and death. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope, in her longing for her long-absent husband Odysseus, cried out to the goddess:

*Artemis, August goddess, / daughter of Zeus, / if only now you would cast your arrow in my breast and take away my life at once!*⁶⁴

Hygieia. In Campbell 1974: 262, Hygieia is represented with a snake around her shoulders, and with the snake-entwined caduceus as well. The snake is associated with healing and it is thus appropriately associated with Hygieia (as well as the god of medicine, Asclepius).

⁶⁴ Homer, *Odyssey* XX.61-63.



Figure 12: Winged Artemis with lions, Magna Graeca relief, ca. 550 BCE. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. CA 1810 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Artemis was also responsible for human childbirth, as Artemis Eleithyia. The philosopher Plato describes her:

*... Artemis. . . although unwedded [literally 'unbedded'] has been allotted [the sphere of] childbirth.*⁶⁵

Thus, Artemis had charge over both birth and death. There is iconographic as well as mythological evidence of Artemis' connection with the Neolithic goddess of the life continuum: she has been represented as winged (Figure 12), and in Arcadia, she was associated with snakes. The Greek traveler Pausanias, referring to Arcadia, tells us:

⁶⁵ Plato, *Theaetetus* 149B.

... *Artemis stands,
clothed in the skin of a deer,
and carrying a quiver on her shoulders;
in one of her hands she holds a torch,
in the other two serpents.*⁶⁶



Figure 13: *Perseus slaying Medusa.* Melos, ca. 450 BCE; Courtesy British Museum (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Pausanias refers here to a work by Damophon.⁶⁷ We are reminded of the famous Knossos figurines,⁶⁸ the priestesses or goddesses who hold two snakes in their outstretched arms; on the head of one of the figurines there is a leopard, and on the head of the other there may reside a bird.⁶⁹ We are also reminded of the figure of Athena from the Acropolis, around whose cloak a snake winds, eventually extending out from Athena's hand. Athena here has literally inherited the mantle of the Minoan pre-patriarchal goddess.

In classical myth and iconography, there were several female figures which were closely

linked with birds and snakes. These were monstrous maiden–animal hybrids, hybrids of bird/woman and snake/woman, and sometimes bird/snake/woman. The Greek Gorgons retained the ancient European snake symbols, but their “snaky hair” was viewed as a negative, rather than a positive, attribute. These women were represented as monsters who had hideous faces; their eyes turned to stone anyone who met their gaze. Medusa was the most famous of the Gorgons, and the only mortal among them. The hero Perseus cut off her head, and the winged horse Pegasus sprang forth from the wound.⁷⁰ The snaky-haired goddess was thus destroyed, and from her body came the winged horse. This avian/viperine complementarity is not only achieved by means of the horse; in some depictions, the wings belong to Medusa rather than to her hippomorphic offspring (Figure 13).⁷¹

The Furies or Erinyes were snaky virgin goddesses who brought punishment for those who deserved it, especially those who committed murder of kin. The Roman poet Vergil describes one of the Furies, *Tisiphone*:

*At once avenging Tisiphone,
equipped with a whip,
leaping on the guilty, harasses them,
and, her left hand brandishing her
fierce snakes,
she calls on her raging band of sisters.*⁷²

⁷⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony* 276 ff. In Thracian iconography, not only horses but even horse/man hybrids, that is, centaurs, were provided with wings. See Marazov 2005: 22-24, including illustrations.

⁷¹ In this figure, Medusa has snaky hair and wings. The bird and snake are again both complementary to the goddess. Further, it is quite appropriate that Medusa gave birth to a horse. Her story is related to the Indo-European myth and ritual of the horse-sacrifice (see Dexter 1990b: 4-5; 9-11).

⁷² Vergil, *Aeneid* VI.570-572:
*continuo sontis ultrix accincta flagello
Tisiphone quatit insultans,
torvosque sinistra
intentans anguis vocat agmina saeva sororum.*

⁶⁶ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* VIII.37.4.

⁶⁷ Cf. Wissowa 1894, III: 1439.

⁶⁸ Heraklion Museum, Crete; Neopalatial Period, ca. 1700-1450 BCE.

⁶⁹ However, this may have been a reconstruction by Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos.



Figure 14: Terracotta scent bottle shaped as a Siren; made in Sicily, ca. 500 BCE. Courtesy British Museum no. 1846.5-12.14 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Another Fury, Allecto, set people on fire. She was “infected with Gorgon’s venom”⁷³ and her

*heart [loves] sad wars,
rages, plots, and noxious crimes. . .
she changes herself into so many forms,
such fierce shapes;
so many black serpents / sprout up.*⁷⁴

All of the Furies had viper-like hair. They thus not only brandished snakes; they assimilated the snake into their personas.

Other female monsters were, like the Furies and Gorgons, associated with snakes. The Dirae were dread creatures, endowed with “snaky coils” and clothed with “windy wings” as well: that is, they were descended from the totality of the European Neolithic bird and snake goddess. According to Vergil,

⁷³ Ibid., VII.341:
...Gorgoneis. . . infecta venenis. . .

⁷⁴ Ibid., VII.324-329:
...Allecto. . . / . . . cui tristia bella
iraeque insidiaeque et crimina noxia cordi. . .
. . . tot sese vertit in ora, / tam saevae facies,
tot pullulat atra colubris.

*They say that there are twin plagues,
named the Dirae,
whom timeless Night bore with Tartarean
Megaera in one and the same birth;
they fastened the coils of a snake
around both of them,
and added windy wings.*⁷⁵

The Harpies also embodied characteristics of the bird-goddess. They were Greco-Roman female demons who brought doubt and destroyed hope, and they darted out from blind shadows.⁷⁶ Like many other female monsters, they were both human and beast in appearance:

*These birds have the faces of young
women; the filthiest refuse [comes] from
their belly; they have clawed hands,
and their faces are always pale with
hunger.*⁷⁷

The Sirens were bird-woman hybrids, similar to the Harpies in form⁷⁸ (Figure 14). They lived on rocky islands, and with their songs they enticed passing sailors to their destruction. Odysseus was warned:

*Whoever approaches the Sirens
in ignorance,
and hears their song,
he never returns home. . .
but the Sirens enchant him*

⁷⁵ Ibid XII.845-848:
*Dicuntur geminae pestes cognomine Dirae,
quas et Tartaream Nox intempesta Megaeram
uno eodemque tulit partu,
paribusque revinxit
serpentum spiris
ventosasque addidit alas.*

⁷⁶ Ibid III.232:
. . . caecisque latebris.

⁷⁷ Ibid III.216-218:
*Virginei volucrum voltus, / foedissima ventris
proluviis, uncaeque manus,
et pallida semper / ora fame.*

⁷⁸ There are life-sized Siren figures in the John Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Terracotta vessels shaped like Sirens abound. (On their bird-legs, see above.) A Siren with human face and avian body is to be found at the Sozopol museum in eastern Bulgaria.

*with their clear-toned song,
as they sit in a meadow,
and about them is a large pile of bones of
rotting men. . .
but you, row past them,
and put honey-sweet wax,
which you have softened,
in your companions' ears. . .*⁷⁹

These monstrous female figures had the attributes of birds or snakes. Although they continued the personification of Neolithic European bird and snake goddesses, they were reduced to dire monsters rather than powerful goddesses who ruled life and death. Under Greek and Roman sway, the potency of these once-potent goddesses was held in check.

Thus the prehistoric goddesses were transmuted to various sorts of Classical-age witches and monsters. Although these witches and monsters were powerful, they lacked the power, and particularly the veneration, of the earlier goddesses. The omnipotence of the prehistoric goddess was reflected in the herbal magic of the early historic witch. Respect and awe were transformed to fear and loathing for these women who had knowledge of herbs and of magic, and who could use that knowledge and power not only to nurture but also to manipulate men.

Although we have been discussing, at length, Greco-Roman goddesses and witches, this metamorphosing process took place, to some extent, in many related Indo-European cultures.

Irish Bird Goddesses

In Ireland, several powerful female figures were depicted as birds. The Irish *Badb* was a crow-goddess⁸⁰ who brought death. She may have been synonymous with the *Morrígan*, another

⁷⁹ Homer, *Odyssey* XII.41-48. These are the words of the goddess Circe to Odysseus, after she has been overcome by the hero's masculine charms.

⁸⁰ Dineen (1927): 68.



Figure 14: Terracotta scent bottle shaped as a Siren; made in Sicily, ca. 500 BCE. Courtesy British Museum no. 1846.5-12.14 (photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Irish bird-goddess who could bring death on the battlefield, as well as victory. Just as the *Morrígan*, *Badb* haunted battlefields, and she predicted death in battle. In the *Táin*, it is written, “*The Badb will shriek at the ford. . .*”⁸¹ She prophesies death with a shriek; she is also called the “blood-red-mouthed,” personifying both the blood spilled in battle and the red of the Indo-European warrior-class.⁸²

Germanic Bird-Goddesses

The Germanic goddess of love and beauty, *Freyja*, also degenerated into a witch, and she is depicted with familiar iconography: she rides through the air on a large feline, the ancestor of

⁸¹ *Táin Bó Cuailnge* 2808:

áth fors ngréra in Badb.

⁸² The Indic goddess *Devī*, too, is called the “red-toothed” (*raktā dantā*), *Devīmāhātmyam* XI, 44-45. Many Indo-European warrior-goddesses were associated with the color red: cf. Dexter 1990a: 152-157. See Jones-Bley 1997 for the theory that red particularly connotes metamorphosis and magic, bringing ‘life’ to the dead.

the witch's cat.⁸³

Indic Nirṛti: Bird and Snake Goddess

A similar goddess was the Indic crow-goddess Nirṛti, into whose "lap" one went at death:

*Those who wound, as is their custom,
the one who speaks artlessly,
or those who, by custom,
violate the shining one,
may Soma either deliver them
to the serpent
or place them into the lap of Nirṛti.*⁸⁴

Further, Nirṛti was known as 'sarparajñī', "Queen of the Snakes" (*Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* iv.6.9.17), so she was the bird/snake goddess in complementarity.

Eastern European Bird-Goddesses

Scythian Tabiti

The Greek historian Herodotus reported that the hero Herakles came to the land of the Scythians; since it was very cold, he drew his lion's skin about him and fell asleep. While he slept, his mares were spirited away.

*After he woke up, Herakles searched,
traversing the whole land; at last, he
came to a land called Hylaia. There, in
a cave, he found a half-woman, a viper*

⁸³ See Grimal 1965:374; *Ibid.*, Freyja riding a broom; 12th century wall-paintings in Schlieswig cathedral. Freyja was battle-goddess as well as love-goddess; she received half of the warriors slain in battle, while Oðinn received the other half (Cf. Snorri, *Eddas*, "Gylfaginning" 24.) She was thus the first of the Valkyries; in the former figure she holds the Valkyries' horn. Freyja was also portrayed as a bird (she had a "feather garment," *Poetic Edda*, "Þrymskviða" 3), and it is thus appropriate that she would be airborne.

⁸⁴ *Rigveda* VII.104.9:

*yo pākaśansam viharanta [=viharante] evair
ye vā bhadram dūśayanti svadhābhiḥ
ahaye vā tān pradad ātu soma
ā vā dadhātu nirṛter upasthe.*

*of double form; above the buttocks she
was a woman, below them a snake.
Seeing her and marveling, he asked her
if she had seen the horses wandering
anywhere. She says that they belong to
her and that she will not give them back
to him until she has intercourse with
him. Herakles slept [with her] for this
reward.*⁸⁵

The snaky-footed creature was the goddess Tabiti (identified with the Greek hearth goddess, Hestia), the "Great"-Goddess of the Scythians. She kept Herakles with her for a while, until she gave birth to three sons by him. The youngest, Scythes, became the eponymous progenitor of the Scythian race (Herodotus IV.10).

Among the Slavs, *Vyed'ma* means the 'knowing woman'.⁸⁶ She was originally an old woman wise in herbal magic, but, by the time the Slavic folk-tales were recorded, the *Vyed'ma* had become a rapacious female fiend.⁸⁷ She was a "winged old woman" who "spread her wings, flying in the air."⁸⁸

The *Vyed'ma* could be born of mortal parents. On the other hand, *Baba*⁸⁹ *Yaga*, another Slavic witch, was of more supernatural descent.⁹⁰ She was often portrayed as either bird or snake.⁹¹ She was an old woman who often lived in the woods, similar to the witch who tried to eat Hansel and Gretel. She devoured any mortals who happened to stray too close to her.⁹² Her hut stood "on fowls' legs";⁹³ since the goddess was the descendent of the

⁸⁵ Herodotus IV.9 (text is in Hude 1908). I thank Ivan Marazov for bringing the tale of Herakles and Tabiti to my attention (pers. comm. June, 2004). See also Dexter 2002: 6, 13, note 31; Marazov 2005: 39.

⁸⁶ Cf. Russian *vyedat* 'to know'.

⁸⁷ Ralston 1872: 168.

⁸⁸ Curčija-Prodanović 1957: 97-98.

⁸⁹ Cf. Lithuanian *boba* 'old woman', *baubas* 'one who frightens children'.

⁹⁰ Ralston 1872: 170.

⁹¹ Gimbutas 1989: 210.

⁹² Downing 1956: 177.

⁹³ Regarding her bird-legs, see above.

Neolithic European bird and snake goddess, the bird's legs were her own; she was the hut on birds' legs.

Romanian Folklore

In Romanian folklore a similar female figure exists: in Moldavia, "one of the scare-child imaginary beings was Baba Cloanța (Slavic and Romanian *baba*, 'old lady' + *clonț*, 'beak' (especially of a bird of prey). A synonymous designation of the same personage is Baba Cioaca (Rom. *cioc* 'beak')."94

Baltic Bird Goddesses

The woman-bird hybrid was a symbol of the chthonic goddess-turned-witch throughout Eastern Europe. The Lithuanian chthonic fairies, the *Laumas*, also have bird legs.⁹⁵ They are similar to witches. To these Balto-Slavic goddesses with bird legs we may compare the Greco-Roman Sirens.

Baltic witches, *raganas*, were often depicted as old, evil women, although they could at times be beautiful and young as well, similar to the Greek Circe, the Greek goddess-turned-witch who turned Odysseus' men into pigs and other barnyard animals.⁹⁶ In a Lithuanian folk-tale, a king's mother hated her daughter-in-law, and, as her two grandchildren were born, she substituted a cat for each of them. She was called, in the tale, "the old witch" and "the old worn-out woman."

A *ragana* was

*A flying witch,
who changes herself into a cat. . .*

⁹⁴ Adrian Poruciuc, personal communication, September, 2005.

⁹⁵ Gimbutas 1989: 244; on Lithuanian witches and fairies see Gimbutas 1984.

⁹⁶ Vergil, in his *Eclogues*, VIII.70, says that Circe transformed men by means of *songs* [*carminibus*]; thus she was Siren-like, and, like the Sirens, Circe too was descended from the Old European bird-goddess.

*and rides through the air on a ram.*⁹⁷

We see that the *ragana*, according to the Balts, was a cat; other folk-beliefs have deemed the cat her companion. The cat was the diminutive descendant of the prehistoric lion, epiphany of the goddess⁹⁸ and consort of the "Mistress of Animals," just as the witch was the descendant of the mortal form of the goddess.

Who became a *ragana*? People began to believe that "Corrupt old people become witches. . .having come from among common people, especially from among women."⁹⁹

Thus, many autonomous goddesses, in their dark aspects, were transmuted to witches and monsters. Although in antiquity an Anat or an Athena, in her death-bringing form, could be worshipped as a powerful martial goddess, in the Judeo-Christian Western tradition the goddess in her death-aspect has been debased to a witch. Although these witches have been considered powerful, they have lacked the true power and the reverence of the earlier goddesses.

Continuation of "Great" Goddess Worship into the Present

Some cultures continued to worship the "Great" Goddess of life and death. Even today the goddess Devī, in all of her manifestations, is a very important force in Indic religion. Although Devī has multiple manifestations: as the beneficent Parvatī and Umā, and as the ferocious Durgā and Kālī, among many others, in several texts she is perceived as one goddess, as well. The Indic goddess Devī, in assuming the aspects and functions of other Indic goddesses, also became associated with the epiphanies of the Neolithic bird and snake

⁹⁷ Mannhardt 1936: 628.

⁹⁸ See Dexter 2009, on goddesses and felines.

⁹⁹ Basanavičius 1902 146:

*Senovės gadynėje buvo raganos
susidedančios iš paprastų žmonių,
daugiaus iš moterų.*

goddess. She rode “*in a chariot yoked with swans . . .*”¹⁰⁰ and she carried “*the trident, the moon, and the snake.*”¹⁰¹

One might recall also that as Shakti, the goddess represented the particular energy which is coiled at the base of the spine, the *Kuṇḍalinī*, which is depicted as a snake.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the witch and the beneficent and monstrous goddesses were transmutations of the Neolithic European goddess of life and death. Whereas the powers over both life and death were natural to the *prehistoric* goddess, her powers over death were feared by many of the assimilating *historical* cultures. The new patriarchal peoples, because of their fear of the life continuum of birth, death, and rebirth, were taught to fear and dishonor the death aspects of the goddesses instead of worshiping them as totalities. The unified goddess became fragmented. Later, when in Western culture the

religion of the goddess, and of gods and goddesses, was replaced with male-centered Judeo-Christian religion, and spirit became honored over matter, the deity became removed, distant from mortals. The mortal could no longer directly partake of the divine.

Why do I think all of this is important? I believe that the Western notion of a transcendent deity, envisaged as male, who exists separately from and split off from mortals, has led to a universal feeling of separateness. Thus, since we are not part of the deity, we are also not part of one another. The opposite notion, that we are all part of a divine whole, and divine ourselves, leads to a feeling of interconnectedness. Finally, such interconnectedness leads us to the realization that, since we are all linked, all parts of a divine whole, then we cannot claim anyone else as the “other.” Suffering felt by “others” is, truly, our own suffering. In fact, humans, animals, and the land are all interconnected. If our neighbors are devastated, if our cities are devastated, if our planet is devastated, so each of us is ravaged as well. We are all parts of the same body. I live in Los Angeles, the city of the Angels, which is an apt metaphor for what I have been attempting to discuss in this paper, for the angels too are metamorphosed bird-goddesses. Twice in my memory, my city has had terrible race riots, symptomatic of our isolation from one another. Indeed, out of this rage and destruction, we must reconstruct a new larger society, built upon the foundation of the ancient principles of divine immanence and mutual responsibility which the *angel* represents. If we can only recognize the unity of the goddess, and of all life, and realize that we are all connected with one another, and with our planet, then, through this holistic, harmonious view of our society and our universe we may be *empowered*, in the etymological sense of building our power from *within*, and having the power to effect the changes which will enable us to restore our lives and our environment to harmony and wholeness.

¹⁰⁰ *Devīmāhātmyam* XI.13: “*haṅsāyukta vimānasthe brahmāṇī. . .*” Here the goddess is greeted as Brahmāṇī (who is another form of the river-goddess Sarasvatī), the consort of Brahmā. The swan is customarily the vehicle of Brahmā. It has been argued that, since the goddess is here only the female aspect of the god, therefore the bird (and also the snake) is not truly associated with the “goddess,” Devī. The goddesses, however, have undergone gender-skewing and shape-changing in many Indo-European cultures; thus, the Germanic Oðinn and Greek Zeus, Indo-European thunder-gods, have accrued the Neolithic European bird-goddess to their iconography; they have assimilated the bird-goddess into their own *personas*. Oðinn has the raven (who is still the goddess in Ireland, as Badb and the Morrigan, and Nirṛti in India), and Zeus changes into a cuckoo before attempting to seduce/rape the young Hera (*Scholia on Theocritus* XV.64; see Dexter, 1990a: 121-122). This shape-changing and gender skewing does not alter the fact that the bird and snake are aspects of prehistoric female figures.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* XI.14: “. . . *triśūlacandrāhidhare. . .*” Devī is greeted here as Māheśvarī, the consort/shakti of Maheśvara. The snake and the swan have been subsumed as icons by the great-goddess, Devī. The snake-goddess Manasā, sister of the serpent-king Ananta, protects mortals from the venom of serpents.

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