

Session title: **AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF MOTHER EARTH SITES AND SANCTUARIES: RETHINKING SYMBOLS AND IMAGES, ART AND ARTEFACTS FROM HISTORY AND PREHISTORY**

Organizers: G. Terence Meaden, Oxford University Department of Continuing Education (Archaeology), Kellogg College, Oxford, UK

Nikos Chausidis, University of Skopje, Institute for History of Art and Archaeology, Macedonia.

Discussant: Kate Prendergast, University of Oxford, UK

Time: Thursday afternoon

Room:

Session abstract:

We view it as timely to visit anew this classical subject—to see how it can be freshly approached in the 21st century by archaeologists and anthropologists using the latest data and knowledge.

Mother Earth is a basic anthropological world view which reappears in time in different fields. In many Neolithic and later societies, as in the Mediterranean and other parts of the world including the contemporary lands of the Amerindians and Hindu Indians, Mother Earth sites and sanctuaries are known not only from prehistory but from historical times too. Additionally, there is material evidence from the nature of art and artefacts and there can be inferential evidence from the character of symbols and images. Some sanctuaries may be identifiable by their position and shape. At some sites, rocks or standing stones have inscribed images of anthropomorphic form, or megaliths are arranged, or tombs designed, in such a fashion as to imply that a culture of Earth Mother belief may be inferred if not already known. In other places, as with geometrized man-made objects such as settlements or necropolises, non-iconic patterns sometimes support the same symbolism. Although the concept of Mother Earth may seem to favour one gender, we are interested in the study of the anthropomorphization of the world, how geomorphology has sometimes supported projections of the human body, male and female.

It is proposed that papers in this session discuss the various forms of evidence not only from definite known sites but from others for which an expression of Earth Mother belief may be reasonably inferred as possible or likely, especially where the work is based on new discoveries.

Paper abstracts:

ANCIENT SYMBOLS AND NATURAL HOLY PLACES OF NEOLITHIC DATE IN CENTRAL SARDINIA

M. Giuseppina Gradoli, Valorizzazione Risorse Territoriali and ISSEP – Sardinia, Italy
G. Terence Meaden, Oxford University Department of Continuing Education (Archaeology) and Kellogg College, Oxford, UK

Certain kinds of symbolism are typical of the Neolithic not only for Europe and the Mediterranean and eastwards through to India but independently much farther away as in North and South America and Japan. Similarity of symbols may have arisen because of fundamentals in the psyche that are common to early farming communities everywhere through the people's need for fertility success in their fields, animals and women. These ideas led us to search for and identify possible sites in central Sardinia that could date to the Neolithic because of such deemed fertility associations having Mother Earth connotations. This approach included place-name studies. Subsequent investigation produced good evidence for an actual Neolithic presence at several of these natural sites, five of which are mentioned in this paper. One is a rock-shelter site, two are caves, another a rock tunnel, and a fifth a cascade with pool. At one of the caves, rock art and a human skull that was 'covered and anchored' in stalagmite were found—the skull dated to 4259-4042 BC (95.1% probability, OxA-X-2236-44). This is Early Neolithic and the oldest Neolithic human remains known for central and southern Sardinia.

'FEMALE' ASPECTS OF WINTER SOLSTICE RITUALS: EVIDENCE FROM PREHISTORY AND HISTORY

Kate Prendergast, University of Oxford, UK

The importance of seasonality in structuring ritual is a striking element of continuity in northern European societies, from the earliest modern human hunter-gatherers to occupy the region, to rituals practiced by historic and even contemporary societies. This paper introduces evidence for a ritual focus on the winter solstice at key Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites in northern Europe, at major British Neolithic monuments and in late classical Roman Europe. These 'snapshots' are used as a basis to explore why there might be such continuity in ritual practice. It is suggested that the kinds of symbolism and practices inferred or evoked at such sites and rituals indicate a 'female' set of concerns: the reproduction of social networks, gift giving and food sharing, death and re-birth, role reversal and gender ambiguity and the invocation of a collective—as opposed to a hierarchical—authority. It is argued that the relationship between the natural world—in this case, the winter solstice—and human social relationships—as evidenced in ritual—is in some sense constitutive. Therefore, such rituals explore and express 'female' concerns, because sharing, networking and collective authority are integral to our survival as cultural humans. It is concluded that,

even where there is clear evidence that male gods have usurped female goddesses in solstice-based rituals, similar themes continue to resurface.

PROTO-SARDINIAN ICONOGRAPHY AND IDEOLOGY OF THE CULT OF THE MOTHER GODDESS

Giovanni Ugas, Dipartimento di Scienze Archeologiche, Università di Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy

Sardinia has preserved a huge amount of evidence of the religiosity of its ancient inhabitants from the Neolithic to the Nuragic age, through a remarkable series of sculptural production: reliefs and *graffiti* on the *domus de janas* and on menhirs, and also drawings on pottery. Evidence that is no less significant comes from altars, offerings and sacrifices which are well documented both at sacred sites and buildings.

In this context a place of absolute prominence is occupied by the cult of the Mother Goddess. She is portrayed in her wholesomeness, at the beginning with anthropomorphic features—in the buxom shape of the fertility goddess, then in the stylized forms of the little marble statues in Cycladic style and the Eneolithic menhirs—until she assumes an aniconic appearance in the Nuragic Bronze Age second half of the second millennium B.C.)

In contrast with the immortal Goddess as an expression of a matriarchal society, her companion—the son who dies—is initially portrayed just by his head, a zoomorphic mask. Then in the late Eneolithic (second half of the third millennium B.C.) he systematically appears in his fully anthropomorphic shape, ithyphallic in the world of the living and upside down in the world of the dead.

After the betyl-like aniconism linked to the Nuragic-castle kingdoms, the Mother reappears in anthropomorphic form, next to her son, at the dawn of the aristocratic communities of the Early Sardinian Iron Age.

STONEHENGE REVIEWED THROUGH EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY USING A REPLICA FULL-SIZE ALTAR STONE POSITIONED AT THE FOCUS OF THE MONUMENT—AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR INTERPRETING THE BASIC MEANING OF STONEHENGE

G. Terence Meaden, Oxford University, Department of Continuing Education (Archaeology), and Kellogg College, Oxford, UK

It is well-known that the axis of Stonehenge aligns to the midsummer sunrise and the opposing midwinter sunset. Their nature and relative importance have been debated in recent years. Both are discussed in this paper by undertaking a novel practical reconstruction that aids interpretation.

John North (1996, 458-9: *Stonehenge*) gives reasons to favour the alignment to the solstitial setting sun on the shortest day of the year. He also considers the motion

of the full moon as it sets in the south-western sky at the southern minor standstill. These matters are here tested photographically within a Stonehenge backdrop in which *a full-size replica of the Altar Stone was positioned axially at the focus of the monument*, one in which the megalith stood vertically to a height of 3 metres. Although the midwinter sun sets in the south-west along the axis—which may indeed be meaningful—the inclusion of the vertical Altar Stone wholly blocks the setting sun for Dr. North’s declared viewing position of an “observer stood just behind and to the right of the Heel Stone” and for all positions nearby too. Moreover, a study of the midsummer sunrise in the opposing north-east demonstrates—with photographic rigour—the latter’s intrinsic importance, and additionally explains the position and purpose of the Heel Stone.

It is shown that a few minutes after sunrise *the shadow* of the Heel Stone passes through the medial trilithon arch of the outer stone circle and reaches the standing Altar Stone. This visual union is readily explained on the basis that the stones of Stonehenge were planned to represent female ordering, such that the implied male-female union can be interpreted as testimony to a Neolithic belief in the Marriage of the Gods, between Sky Father and Earth Mother, as known for later classical times. This suggestion is supported by the author’s experiments at Avebury (28 km to the north) which proves that *the same annual sunrise and shadow-casting display took place at Avebury’s northern and southern stone circles*. Whether at Stonehenge or at Avebury such a spectacle could be watched by hundreds of viewers because no special location is demanded of them. As for Dr. North’s moonset proposal he assumes that a spectator has an eyelevel at around 1.65 m, and necessarily stands next to the Heel Stone for the rare occasions, at intervals of 19 years, that allow moonlight to pass (as claimed by a sketch) through a narrow slit. However, careful on-site photography does not find such a slit. To conclude, by the shadow-casting device treated in this paper the stone-circle planners of the third-millennium BC arranged for their community to witness a figurative, symbolic and moving presentation of the Sacred Marriage. The devotional fertility concept known by this name is widely found from historical sources for later societies of the Mediterranean region and elsewhere.

MYTHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MOTHER EARTH IN PICTORIAL MEDIA

Nikos Chausidis, University of Skopje, Institute for History of Art and Archaeology, FYROM

This paper has a purpose to sum our past researches of the pictorial representations of the Mother-Earth and the separation of its basic iconographical types. Generally, the paper is not geographically-cultural, nor chronologically limited. This would mean that we approach the phenomenon in its wider possible aspect, searching for its universal (transhistorical and transcultural) features. This is justified by the simple fact that even the phenomenon Mother-Earth itself possesses such character, universal for the bigger part of mankind. Yet, beside this principal openness, the focus of our researches is pointed toward the archaic cultures, i.e. those cultures that had never, or not in a sufficient degree, entered the spheres of the cultures that are today regarded as

civilizations. Here we have in mind the cultures of the Neolithic, the Age of Metals and the later centuries B.C. We have divided the corpus of the pictorial representations of Mother Earth into several categories based not so much on the appearance but on the basic semiotic concept that generated them: —A female figure in a determined posture—Reduction and partition of the female figure—Geometrisation of the female figure—Zoomorphisation of the female figure—Woman that appears from the earth.

TOWARDS THE INTERPRETATION OF NEOLITHIC CORPOREALITY: COMMITTING THE MOTHERS TO EARTH, i.e. 'EARTHLY THE MOTHERS'

Goce Naumov, University of Skopje, Institute for History of Art and Archaeology,
FYROM

Neolithic figurines are often the subject of sharp discussion and debate between the world's branches of speculative tradition and precise academism. The former tends towards seeing a deification of anthropomorphic figurines, while the latter prudently interpret these artefacts as mediators in social relations among individuals and communities. Thus, the first group of researchers exalted the figurines, whereas the others rendered profane what they interpreted as being their evident social function. Both sides use available arguments to confirm their own interpretations and theories, so that whereas traditional thinkers favour and deify the concept of fertility, more cautious thinkers use their own methods to negate, or at least trivialize, it.

This paper aims to take advantage of these opposing views and from them to develop multi-relational interpretations regarding the character of certain Neolithic figurines. In this context figurines from prehistoric settlements in the Republic of Macedonia will be used for further observation and comment. Their bodily features and parts thereof would be associated with a "committing to earth" or "earthling" of the previously "deified" figurine concepts, as well as with enriching a somewhat pallid hypothesis as to their social engagement. In addition, several ethnographic analogies will be applied regarding gender diversity in communal or domestic rites and transformation of social status due to a finalization of fertility functions.

STONES CALLED BABA AS A CONTINUOUS SYMBOL OF THE FEMALE DIVINE PRINCIPLE: FOLKLORE, MYTHOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Katya Hrobat, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of Ethnology and
Cultural Anthropology, Ljubljana, Slovenia

This contribution analyses anthropomorphic megaliths, rock cliffs and the toponyms called *Baba* (which means Hag, an elderly wise-woman) from the point of view of folklore, mythology and, where applicable, archaeology.

The image of *Baba* conceals a representation of an old woman, which is—in the case of Rodik (Slovenia)—manifested in natural stone as the image of a woman with

exaggerated attributes. That we are dealing with such a representation of a woman can be proven with an instance of Baba at Grobnik (Croatia) which is cut into the wall at the entrance to the town. In the vicinity of these so-called monoliths, rock cliffs or toponyms (place names), specific rituals were performed. *Baba* stones were in one way or the other connected with water. According to folklore across the Slavic world, Baba seems to be an omnipresent phenomenon, connected to atmospheric phenomena like precipitation (rain, snow, and hail), rain clouds, sudden frost, drought, celestial objects, days and periods, spinning etc.

Because of the large extent but also certain vagueness of the folkloric material on Baba, the contribution focuses on the spatial contexts of the Baba monoliths. What can be discerned is a simple repetition of the configuration of Baba connected with moisture, and cultic points linked to the notion of fire. The second starting point has its origins in an interesting custom from the Slovenian and Croatian coastal region—a threat made to children—that it is necessary to kiss the Baba and blow into her behind on the first visit to a certain town.

It is interesting to note that Babas are frequently positioned in the immediate vicinity of archaeological settlements, from prehistory onwards. Despite the fact that the tradition about Babas has a strong presence in the Slavic world, Babas—as anthropomorphic monoliths—are often found at those places which bear traces of even older traditions. Even the very stories about Babas can be linked with pre-Slavic traditions, among others Greek and Egyptian traditions also. One cannot overlook the impression that—due to their material stability—stone monoliths invite and attract the female divine principle, which in one way or the other is continuously preserved throughout all epochs up to the present day.

A CASE OF PREHISTORIC INCUBATIO: THE CULT SITE OF CIVITALUPARELLA (CHIETI, ITALY)

Tomaso di Fraia, Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

The recent find of the Ristretta-Pastine site, near the Civitaluparella township, promises to give us a very important prehistoric cult place or sanctuary. The elements already identified are the following: 1) a rock face painted with an anthropomorphic figure and three geometrical signs; 2) at the basis of this wall, a large stone slightly sloping with three engraved signs (two single crosses and a cross inside a circle) on the top surface; 3) another two crosses are engraved on the rock wall, close to the stone, in a little area strongly smoothed; 4) the part of the stone close to the wall is also smoothed for all the length. All these elements show that the large stone was used as a bed, in which a person lying down could touch with the right hand just the portion of wall with the two engraved crosses and simultaneously he could see the painted figures.

This context quite corresponds to the conditions we know for the ritual called *incubatio* by the Romans; this ritual required the permanence of a person on a rock bed to obtain some benefit (above all a recovery) from some supernatural power.

MEDIEVAL SIMULACRA OF THE MOTHER EARTH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

Orhideja Zorova, Institute for Archaeology and History of Art, Faculty of Skopje, FYROM

Keeping in mind that throughout the Medieval Period the Euro-Asian territory, i.e. the borders of the Christian cultural sphere, suffered numerous administrative and political changes (such as the forming of new states and the collapse of some old states), we cannot possibly account for and explain every different manifestation of the religious beliefs of medieval man. However, the ancient origins of Christianity maintained some universal elements concerning the representation of one primordial/prehistoric concept, where the divinity was transformed into a personification. The Mother Earth, once venerated as a primal, if not only, deity in the Medieval Period became just a remainder of one ancient magnificent goddess.

Henceforth, her existence remained on the margins of the official doctrine, or within the esoteric domains of what is known as mysticism in Christianity and in the superstitious behaviour of ordinary people.

The goal of this paper is to offer a list of testimonies concerning the existence of the Mother Earth's effigy or image through different Christian cultural and territorial contexts of the Medieval Period. Because this period is known by more than just archaeological evidence, we feel obliged to present its surviving clues in other media also, such as art, religious writings, and architectural and geomorphic forms in some way connected to the concept of Mother Earth. Thus in presenting as many examples as possible, the paper will nonetheless focus on those having a most provocative iconographic and religious manifestation. Emphasis will be given to examples of the material and pictorial sphere where the geo-anthropomorphic or the symbolical visualization of the Mother Earth is present.

The Medieval mundane view would be incomplete unless the two most important female characters of Christianity—Sophia and the Virgin—are mentioned. Beside their canonical identification and interpretation, the medieval sources offer yet another, apocryphal conception of these characters: Sophia as a “Mother of All Creation” (i.e. the material world) and the Virgin as a protector and benefactor of the deceased. In this way they become separate Christian hypostases of the functions once possessed by the Mother Earth.

We expect that through this paper some evidence concerning the transformation and demythologization of the deity will come to light, showing that the Mother Earth did not disappear through the Medieval Period. She simply accepted de-divinization, and continued her existence by way of simulacra.

DUST OF THE ANCESTORS: THE ESSENCE OF BEING AND THE DIVINITY OF THE EARTH

Roberta Robin Dods, Community, Culture and Global Studies Irving K. Barber School of Arts and Science, University of British Columbia, Okanagan, Canada

The place of humans in the 'natural' world has always caused comment and not just with the anthropologist or the human ecologist. As Von Maltzahn observes: "Humans do not have a world that is fixed for their kind; instead, there is a vital experience of space [...] The vital functions of a body subject are carried out within a vital space, which is not given as such but is shaped by that being's actions." (Von Maltzahn 1994:67) These actions are based in belief systems and what we, living in the Western Tradition, term the sentient world may be interpreted through sets of mythological and pragmatic constructs that give meaning to humans and those other than human as "[...] animate beings in motion against the backdrop of a terrain that [...] (is) [...] itself continually in process [...]" (Riddington 1982:473). This paper examines concepts of the sacred beingness of the earth with emphasis on ideas of the divine that are centred in concepts of the feminine. Examples will be introduced from indigenous religions of the Americas to illustrate specific ideas about our link to what some term Mother Earth. Such concepts lead us to a deeper understanding of landscape analysis as it can be applied to archaeological cultures of deep time.

References:

- Dods, R. Robin. 2003. Wondering the Wetland: archaeology through the lens of myth and metaphor in Northern Boreal Canada. *Journal of Wetland Archaeology* 3: 17-36.
- Dods, R. Robin. 2004. Knowing Ways/Ways of Knowing: Reconciling Science and Tradition. *World Archaeology* 36:4 (Dec.2004): 547-557.
- Riddington, R. 1982. Technology, World View, and Adaptive Strategy in a Northern Hunting Society. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol.19(4): 469-481.
- Von Maltzahn, K.E. 1994. *Nature as Landscape: dwelling and understanding*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.