

Journey into a Lost World: The Beginnings of Civilization

Preserved in a cave sanctuary for over twenty thousand years, a female figure speaks to us about the minds of our early Western ancestors. She is small and carved out of stone: one of the so-called Venus figurines found all over prehistoric Europe.

Unearthed in excavations over a wide geographical area—from the Balkans in eastern Europe to Lake Baikal in Siberia, all the way west to Willendorf near Vienna and the Grotte du Fauve in France—these figurines have been described by some scholars as expressions of male eroticism: that is, an ancient analogue for today's *Playboy* magazine. To other scholars they are only something used in primitive, and presumably obscene, fertility rites.

But what is the actual significance of these ancient sculptures? Can they really be dismissed as the "products of unregenerated male imagination"?¹ Is the term *Venus* even appropriate to describe these broad-hipped, sometimes pregnant, highly stylized, and often faceless figures? Or do these prehistoric sculptures tell us something important about ourselves, about how both women and men once venerated the life-giving powers of the universe?

The Paleolithic

Along with their wall paintings, cave sanctuaries, and burial sites, the female figurines of the peoples of the Paleolithic are important psychic records. They attest to our forebears' awe at both the mystery

of life and the mystery of death. They indicate that very early in human history the human will to live found expression and reassurance through a variety of rituals and myths that seem to have been associated with the still widely held belief that the dead can return to life through rebirth.

"In a great cavern sanctuary like Les Trois Frères, Niaux, Font de Gaume or Lascaux," writes the religious historian E. O. James, "the ceremonies must have involved an organized attempt on the part of the community . . . to control natural forces and processes by supernatural means directed to the common good. The sacred tradition, be it in relation to the food supply, the mystery of birth and propagation, or of death, arose and functioned, it would appear, in response to the will to live here and hereafter."²

This sacred tradition found expression in the remarkable art of the Paleolithic. And an integral component of this sacred tradition was the association of the powers that govern life and death with woman.

We can see this association of the feminine with the power to give life in Paleolithic burials. For example, in the rock shelter known as Cro-Magnon in Les Eyzies, France (where in 1868 the first skeletal remains of our Upper Paleolithic ancestors were found), around and on the corpses were carefully arranged cowrie shells. These shells, shaped in the form of what James discreetly calls "the portal through which a child enters the world," seem to have been associated with some kind of early worship of a female deity. As he writes, the cowrie was a life-giving agent. So also was red ocher, still in later traditions the surrogate of the life-giving or menstrual blood of woman.³

The main emphasis seems to have been on the association of woman with the giving and sustaining of life. But at the same time, death—or, more specifically, resurrection—also appears to have been a central religious theme. Both the ritualized placement of the vagina-shaped cowrie shells around and on the dead and the practice of coating these shells and/or the dead with red ocher pigment (symbolizing the vitalizing power of blood) appear to have been part of funerary rites intended to bring the deceased back through rebirth. Even more specifically, as James notes, they "point to mortuary rituals in the nature of a life-giving ritual closely connected with the female figurines and other symbols of the Goddess cult."⁴

In addition to this archaeological evidence of Paleolithic funerary rites, there is also evidence of rites seemingly designed to encourage the fecundity of the wild animals and plants that provided our forebears with life support. For example, in the gallery of the inaccessible

cavern of Tuc d'Audoubert in Ariège, on the soft clay floor underneath the wall painting of two bisons (a female followed by a male), we find impressions of human feet believed by scholars to have been made in ritual dances. Similarly, in the Cogul rock shelter in Catalonia, we find a scene of women, possibly priestesses, dancing around a smaller naked male figure in what seems to be a religious ceremony.

These cave sanctuaries, figurines, burials, and rites all seem to have been related to a belief that the same source from which human life springs is also the source of all vegetable and animal life—the great Mother Goddess or Giver of All we still find in later periods of Western civilization. They also suggest that our early ancestors recognized that we and our natural environment are integrally linked parts of the great mystery of life and death and that all nature must therefore be treated with respect. This consciousness—later emphasized in Goddess figurines either surrounded by natural symbols such as animals, water, and trees or themselves partly animal—evidently was central to our lost psychic heritage. Also central to that lost heritage is the apparent awe and wonder at the great miracle of our human condition: the miracle of birth incarnated in woman's body. Judging from these early psychic records, this was a central theme of prehistoric Western systems of belief.

Now what we have been developing to this point is still not the view of many scholars. Nor is it the view still taught in most survey classes about the origins of civilization. For here, as in most popularized writings on the subject, there still prevail the preconceptions of earlier scholars who saw Paleolithic art in terms of the conventional stereotype of "primitive man": bloodthirsty, warlike hunters, in fact very unlike some of the most primitive gathering-hunting societies discovered in modern times.⁵ Based on this interpretation of the very fragmentary materials available from Paleolithic times, male-centered theories of proto- and prehistoric social organization were constructed. And even when new discoveries were made, these too were usually interpreted by scholars so as to fit into the old theoretical molds.

One of the assumptions of these scholars was—as it still generally is—that only prehistoric *man* was responsible for Paleolithic art. This too was not based on any factual evidence. Rather, it was the result of scholarly preconceptions, which actually fly in the face of findings that, for example, among the contemporary Vedda in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) it is in fact the women, not the men, who do the rock painting.⁶

Basic to these preconceptions was the idea, as John Pfeiffer put it in *The Emergence of Man*, that "hunting dominated the attention and

imagination of prehistoric man" and that "if he was anything like modern man, he used ritual on numerous occasions to help replenish and increase his power."⁷ In keeping with this bias, Paleolithic wall paintings were interpreted as relating to hunting even when they showed women dancing. Similarly, as already noted, the evidence of a female-centered anthropomorphic form of worship—such as finds of broad-hipped and pregnant female representations—had to either be ignored or classified as merely male sex objects: obese erotic "Venuses" or "barbaric images of beauty."⁸

Although there have been exceptions, the evolutionary model of man the hunter-warrior has colored most interpretations of Paleolithic art. Only in later twentieth-century excavations in eastern and western Europe and Siberia has the interpretation of both new and old finds gradually begun to change. Some of the new researchers were women, who noted the female genital imagery and also leaned toward more complex religious rather than the "hunting magic" explanations of Paleolithic art.⁹ And as more scholars were secular scientists rather than monks like Abbé Breuil (whose "moral" interpretations of religious practices colored so much of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Paleolithic research), some of the men who reexamined the cave paintings, figurines, and other Paleolithic finds now also began to question tenets once accepted by the scholarly establishment.

An interesting example of this questioning relates to the stick and line forms painted on the walls of Paleolithic caves and engraved in bone or stone objects. To many scholars, it seemed obvious that they depict weapons: arrows, barbs, spears, harpoons. But as Alexander Marshack writes in *The Roots of Civilization*, one of the first works to frontally challenge this standard interpretation, these line paintings and engravings could just as easily be plants, trees, branches, reeds, and leaves.¹⁰ Moreover, this new interpretation would account for what would otherwise be a remarkable absence of pictures of such vegetation among a people who, like contemporary gatherer-hunter peoples, must have relied heavily on vegetation for food.

In *Paleolithic Cave Art*, Peter Ucko and Andrée Rosenfeld had also wondered about the peculiar absence of vegetation in Paleolithic art. They further noted another curious incongruity. All other evidence showed that a particular kind of harpoon called biserial didn't appear until the late Paleolithic or Magdalenian age—even though scholars kept "finding" them in "sticks" thousands of years earlier in the wall paintings of prehistoric caves. Moreover, why would Paleolithic artists

want to depict so many hunting *failures*? For if the sticks and lines were in fact weapons, the pictures had them chronically *missing* their targets.¹¹

To probe such mysteries, Marshack, who was not an archaeologist, hence not bound by earlier archeological conventions, thoroughly examined the engravings on a bone object that had been described as pictures of harpoons. Under a microscope he discovered that not only were the barbs of this supposed harpoon turned the wrong way but the points of the long shaft were also at the wrong end. But what did these engravings represent if they were not "wrong way" weapons? As it turned out, the lines easily conformed to the proper angle of branches growing at the top of a long stem. In other words, these and other engravings conventionally described as "barbed signs" or "masculine objects" were probably nothing more than stylized representations of trees, branches, and plants.¹²

So time and time again, under closer scrutiny, the traditional view of Paleolithic art as primarily primitive hunting magic can be seen as projection of stereotypes rather than logical interpretation of what is seen. And so also can the explanation of Paleolithic female figurines as either obscene male sex objects or expressions of a primitive fertility cult.

Because of the scarceness of their remains and the long time span between us and them, we probably never will be entirely certain of the specific meaning their paintings, figurines, and symbols had for our Paleolithic forebears. But, following the impact of the first publication of Paleolithic cave paintings in magnificent color plates, the evocative power of this art has become legendary. Some of the renditions of animals are as fine as the work of the best of modern artists and offer a fresh vision few moderns can recapture. Therefore there is one thing we can be certain of: Paleolithic art is far more than the crude scratching of undeveloped primitives. Rather, it bespeaks psychic traditions we must understand if we are to know not only what humans were and are but also what they can become.

As André Leroi-Gourhan, director of the Sorbonne's Center for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Studies, wrote in one of the most important recent studies of Paleolithic art, it is "unsatisfactory and ridiculous" to dismiss the belief system of the period as a "primitive fertility cult." We can, "without forcing the materials, take the whole of the figurative Paleolithic art as an expression of concepts about the natural and supernatural organization of the living world," he observed, adding that

the people of the Paleolithic "undoubtedly knew of the division of the animal and human world into confronted halves and conceived that the union of these two halves ruled the economy of living beings."¹³

Leroi-Gourhan's conclusion that Paleolithic art reflects the importance our early forebears attached to their observation that there are two sexes was based on analysis of thousands of paintings and objects in some sixty excavated Paleolithic caves. Even though he speaks in terms of sadomasochistic male-female stereotypes and in other respects follows earlier archaeological conventions, he verifies that Paleolithic art expressed some form of early religion in which feminine representations and symbols played a central part. In this connection, he makes two fascinating observations. Characteristically, the female figures and the symbols he interpreted as feminine were located in a central position in the excavated chambers. In contrast, the masculine symbols typically either occupied peripheral positions or were arranged around the female figures and symbols.¹⁴

Leroi-Gourhan's findings are in line with the view I proposed earlier: that the vagina-shaped cowrie shells, the red ocher in burials, the so-called Venus figurines, and the hybrid woman-animal figurines earlier writers dismissed as "monstrosities" all relate to an early form of worship in which the life-giving powers of woman played a major part. They were all expressions of our forebears' attempts to understand their world, attempts to answer such universal human questions as where we come from when we are born and where we go after we die. And they confirm what we would logically assume: along with the first awareness of self in relation to other humans, animals, and the rest of nature must have come awareness of the awesome mystery—and practical importance—of the fact that life emerges from the body of woman.

It would seem only logical that the visible dimorphism, or difference in form, between the two halves of humanity had a profound effect on Paleolithic systems of belief. And it would seem equally logical that the fact that both human and animal life is generated from the female body and that, like the seasons and the moon, woman's body also goes through cycles led our ancestors to see the life-giving and sustaining powers of the world in female, rather than male, form.

In sum, instead of being random and unconnected materials, the Paleolithic remains of female figurines, red ocher in burials, and vagina-shaped cowrie shells appear to be early manifestations of what was later to develop into a complex religion centering on the worship of a Mother Goddess as the source and regeneratrix of all forms of life.

This Goddess worship, as James and other scholars note, survived well into historic times "in the composite figure of the Magna Mater of the Near East and the Greco-Roman world."¹⁵ We clearly see this religious continuity in such well-known deities as Isis, Nut, and Maat in Egypt; Ishtar, Astarte, and Lilith in the Fertile Crescent; Demeter, Kore, and Hera in Greece; and Atargatis, Ceres, and Cybele in Rome. Even later, in our own Judeo-Christian heritage, we can still see it in the Queen of Heaven, whose groves are burned in the Bible, in the Shekhina of Hebrew kabalistic tradition, and in the Catholic Virgin Mary, the Holy Mother of God.

Again the question arises of why if these connections are so obvious they have for so long been downplayed, or simply ignored, in the conventional archaeological literature. One reason, already noted, is that they do not fit the proto- and prehistoric model of a male-centered and male-dominated form of social organization. But still another reason is that it was not until after World War II that some of the most important new evidence was unearthed of this religious tradition extending over thousands of years into the fascinating period that followed the Paleolithic. This was the long period in our cultural evolution that came between the first crucial developments for human culture during the Paleolithic and the later civilizations of the Bronze Age; the time when our forebears settled down in the first agrarian communities of the Neolithic.

The Neolithic

At about the same time Leroi-Gourhan wrote of his findings, our knowledge of prehistory was immeasurably advanced by the exciting discovery and excavation of two new Neolithic sites: the towns of Catal Huyuk and Hacilar. They were found in what used to be called the plains of Anatolia, now modern Turkey. Of particular interest, according to the man who directed these excavations for the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, James Mellaart, was that the knowledge unearthed at these two sites showed a stability and continuity of growth over many thousands of years for progressively more advanced Goddess-worshipping cultures.

"A. Leroi-Gourhan's brilliant reassessment of Upper Paleolithic religion," wrote Mellaart, "has cleared away many misunderstandings. . . . The resulting interpretation of Upper Paleolithic art centered around the theme of complex and female symbolism (in the form of symbols and animals) shows strong similarities to the religious imagery

of Catal Huyuk." Moreover, there are also obvious Upper Paleolithic influences "in numerous cult-practices of which the red-ocher burials, red-stained floors, collections of stalactites, fossils, shells, are but a few examples."¹⁶

Mellaart further observed that as long as it was thought that the highly developed and stylized Upper Paleolithic art was nothing more than "an expression of hunting magic, a view borrowed from backward societies like Australian aborigines," there had been little hope of "establishing any link with the later fertility-cults of the Near East which center around the figure of the Great Goddess and her son, even if the presence of such a goddess in the Upper Paleolithic could hardly be denied, which it is not." But now, he stated, this position has "radically changed in light of the available data."¹⁷

In other words, the Neolithic culture of Catal Huyuk and Hacilar have provided extensive information about a long-missing piece of the puzzle of our past—the missing link between the Paleolithic Age and the later, more technologically advanced Chalcolithic, Copper, and Bronze Ages. As Mellaart writes, "Catal Huyuk and Hacilar have established a link between these two great schools of art. A continuity in religion can be demonstrated from Catal Huyuk to Hacilar and so on till the great 'Mother-Goddesses' of archaic and classical times."¹⁸

As in Paleolithic art, female figurines and symbols occupy a central position in the art of Catal Huyuk, where shrines to the Goddess and Goddess figurines are found everywhere. Moreover, Goddess figurines are characteristic of Neolithic art in other areas of the Near and Middle East. For example, in the Middle Eastern Neolithic site of Jericho (now in Israel), where back in 7000 B.C.E. people were already living in plastered brick houses—some with clay ovens with chimneys and even sockets for doorposts—clay Goddess figurines have been found.¹⁹ At Tell-es-Sawwan, a site on the banks of the Tigris distinguished by early irrigation farming and the striking geometrically decorated pottery known as Samarra, a variety of figurines; among them a cache of highly sophisticated painted female sculptures, have been unearthed. In Cayonu, a Neolithic site in northern Syria, where we find the earliest use of hammered native copper and the first use of clay bricks, similar female figurines have been excavated, some of them dating to the site's earliest levels. These small Goddess figurines have later parallels at Jarmo, and even as far west as Aceramic Sesklo, where they were manufactured even before ceramic pottery was introduced.²⁰

Although this too is not generally brought out, the numerous Neo-

lithic excavations that have yielded Goddess figurines and symbols span a wide geographical area going far beyond the Near and Middle East. As far east as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro in India, large numbers of terra-cotta female figurines had earlier been found. These, too, as Sir John Marshall wrote, probably represented a Goddess "with attributes very similar to those of the great Mother Goddess, the Lady of Heaven."²¹ Goddess figurines have also been found in European sites as far west as those of the so-called megalithic cultures who built the huge, carefully engineered stone monuments at Stonehenge and Avebury in England. And some of these megalithic cultures went as far south as the Mediterranean island of Malta, where a giant ossuary of seven thousand burial sites was apparently also an important sanctuary for oracular and initiary rites in which, as James writes, "the Mother-goddess probably played an important part."²²

Gradually a new picture of the origins and development of both civilization and religion is emerging. The Neolithic agrarian economy was the basis for the development of civilization leading over thousands of years into our own time. And almost universally, those places where the first great breakthroughs in material and social technology were made had one feature in common: the worship of the Goddess.

What are the implications of these findings for our present and future? And why should we believe this new view of our cultural development instead of the old sanctified androcentric lore of so many beautifully illustrated books of bedtime and coffee table archaeology?

One reason is that the finds of female figurines and other archaeological records attesting to a gynocentric (or Goddess-based) religion in Neolithic times are so numerous that just cataloging them would fill several volumes. But the main reason is that this new view of prehistory is the result of a profound change in both methods and emphasis for archaeological investigation.

Digging up the buried treasure of antiquity is as old as the grave robbers who plundered the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs. But archaeology as a science dates back only to the late 1800s. Even then, the earliest archaeological excavations, though also motivated by intellectual curiosity about our past, primarily served a purpose akin to that of grave robbing: the acquisition of striking antiquities by museums in England, France, and other colonial nations. The idea of archaeological excavation as a way to extract the maximum information from a site—whether or not it contained archaeological treasures—took hold only much later. In fact, it was not until after World War II that

archaeology as a systematic inquiry into the life, thought, technology, and social organization of our forebears truly began to come into its own.

New excavations are increasingly conducted not by the lone scholar or explorer of earlier days but by teams of scientists—zoologists, botanists, climatologists, anthropologists, paleontologists, as well as archaeologists. This interdisciplinary approach characterizing more recent digs like Mellaart's at Catal Huyuk is yielding much more accurate understanding of our prehistory.

But perhaps most important is that a number of remarkable technological breakthroughs, such as the Nobel Prize winner Willard Libby's dating by means of radiocarbon, or C-14, and the dendrochronological methods of dating by the girth of trees, have vastly increased archaeology's grasp of the past. Formerly dates were largely a matter of conjecture—of comparisons of objects estimated to be less, equally, or more "advanced" than one another. But as dating became a function of repeatable and verifiable techniques, one could no longer get away with saying that if an artifact was more artistically or technologically developed, it must date to a later and thus presumably more civilized time.

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As a consequence, there has been a dramatic reassessment of time sequences, which in turn has radically changed earlier views about prehistory. We now know that agriculture—the domestication of wild plants as well as animals—dates back much earlier than previously believed. In fact, the first signs of what archaeologists call the Neolithic or agricultural revolution begin to appear as far back as 9000 to 8000 B.C.E.—that is, more than ten thousand years ago.

The agricultural revolution was the single most important breakthrough in the material technology of our species. Accordingly, the beginnings of what we call Western civilization are also much earlier than was previously thought.

With a regular, and sometimes even surplus, food supply came an increase in population and the first sizable towns. Here hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people lived and worked, tilling and in many places also irrigating the land. Technological specialization as well as trade accelerated in the Neolithic. And, as agriculture freed human energy and imagination, such crafts as pottery and basket-making, textile weaving and leather crafting, jewelry making and wood carving and such arts as painting, clay modeling, and stone carving flourished.

At the same time, the evolution of human spiritual consciousness continued. The first anthropomorphic religion, focusing on the worship

of the Goddess, now evolved into a complex system of symbols, rituals, and divine commands and prohibitions, all of which found expression in the rich art of the Neolithic period.

Some of the most vivid evidence of this gynocentric artistic tradition comes to us from Mellaart's excavation of Catal Huyuk. Here, at the largest known Neolithic site in the Near East, there are thirty-two acres of archaeological remains. Only one twentieth of the mound has been excavated, but this digging alone uncovered a period spanning approximately eight hundred years, from about 6500 to about 5700 B.C.E. And what we find here is a remarkably advanced center of art, with wall paintings, plaster reliefs, stone sculptures, and large quantities of Goddess figurines made of clay, all focusing on the worship of a female deity.

"Its numerous sanctuaries," wrote Mellaart about Catal Huyuk in summarizing his first three seasons of work (1961 through 1963), "testify to an advanced religion, complete with symbolism and mythology; its buildings to the birth of architecture and conscious planning; its economy to advanced practices in agriculture and stockbreeding; and its numerous imports to a flourishing trade in raw materials."²³

But while the excavations carried out at Catal Huyuk, as well as at nearby Hacilar (inhabited from approximately 5700 to 5000 B.C.E.), have yielded some of the richest data about this early civilization, the southern Anatolian plain is only one of several areas where settled agricultural societies worshipping the Goddess have been archaeologically documented. In fact, by circa 6000 B.C.E., not only was the agricultural revolution an established fact, but—to quote Mellaart—"fully agricultural societies began expanding into hitherto marginal territories such as the alluvial plains of Mesopotamia, Transcaucasia and Transcaspiia on the one hand, and into southeastern Europe on the other." Moreover, "some of this contact, as in Crete and Cyprus, definitely went by sea," and in each case "the newcomers arrived with a fully fledged Neolithic economy."²⁴

In short, though only twenty-five years earlier archaeologists were still talking of Sumer as the "cradle of civilization" (and though this is still the prevailing impression among the general public), we now know there was not one cradle of civilization but several, all of them dating back millennia earlier than was previously known—to the Neolithic. As Mellaart wrote in his 1975 work *The Neolithic of the Near East*, "urban civilization, long thought to be a Mesopotamian invention, has predecessors at sites like Jericho or Catal Huyuk, in Palestine and Anatolia, long regarded as backwaters."²⁵ Moreover, we now also know some-

thing else of great significance for the original development of our cultural evolution. This is that in all these places where the first great breakthroughs in our material and social technology were made—to use the phrase Merlin Stone immortalized as a book title—God was a woman.

The new knowledge that civilization is much older and more widespread than was previously believed is understandably producing much new scholarly writings, with massive reassessment of earlier archaeological theories. But the centrally striking fact that in these first civilizations ideology was gynocentric has not, except among feminist scholars, generated much interest. If mentioned by nonfeminist scholars, it is usually in passing. Even those who, like Mellaart, do mention it, generally do so only as a matter of purely artistic and religious significance, without probing its social and cultural implications:

Indeed, the prevailing view is still that male dominance, along with private property and slavery, were all by-products of the agrarian revolution. And this view maintains its hold despite the evidence that, on the contrary, equality between the sexes—and among all people—was the general norm in the Neolithic.

We will pursue this fascinating evidence in the chapters that follow. But first we turn to another important area where old archaeological notions are currently being demolished by new findings.

Old Europe

Some of the most revealing evidence of what life was like during thousands of previously unknown years of human culture has come to us from what was a totally unexpected place. In line with the long-accepted theory that the Fertile Crescent of the Mediterranean was the cradle of civilization, ancient Europe was long considered to be only a cultural backwater that later flowered briefly into the Minoan and Greek civilizations, and then only as a result of influences from the East. But the picture now emerging is very different.

"A new designation, *Civilization of Old Europe*, is introduced here in recognition of the collective identity and achievement of the different cultural groups in Neolithic-Chalcolithic southeastern Europe," writes the University of California archaeologist Marija Gimbutas in *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. This ground-breaking work catalogs and analyzes hundreds of archaeological finds in an area extending roughly northward from the Aegean and Adriatic (including the islands) all the

way up into Czechoslovakia, southern Poland, and the western Ukraine.²⁶

The inhabitants of southeastern Europe seven thousand years ago were hardly primitive villagers. "During two millennia of agricultural stability their material welfare had been persistently improved by the increasingly efficient exploitation of the fertile river valleys," reports Gimbutas. "Wheat, barley, vetch, peas, and other legumes were cultivated, and all the domesticated animals present in the Balkans today, except for the horse, were bred. Pottery technology and bone- and stone-working techniques had advanced, and copper metallurgy was introduced into east central Europe by 5500 B.C.E. Trade and communications, which had expanded through the millennia, must have provided a tremendous cross-fertilizing impetus to cultural growth. . . . The use of sailing-boats is attested from the sixth millennia onwards by their incised depictions on ceramics."²⁷

Between circa 7000 and 3500 B.C.E. these early Europeans developed a complex social organization involving craft specialization. They created complex religious and governmental institutions. They used metals such as copper and gold for ornaments and tools. They even evolved what appears to be a rudimentary script. In Gimbutas's words, "If one defines civilization as the ability of a given people to adjust to its environment and to develop adequate arts, technology, script, and social relationships it is evident that Old Europe achieved a marked degree of success."²⁸

The image of the Old European most of us carry within us today is of those frightfully barbaric tribesmen who kept pushing southward and finally outdid even the Romans in butchery by sacking Rome. For this reason one of the most remarkable and thought-provoking features of Old European society revealed by the archaeological spade is its essentially *peaceful* character. "Old Europeans never tried to live in inconvenient places such as high, steep hills, as did the later Indo-Europeans who built hill forts in inaccessible places and frequently surrounded their hill sites with cyclopean stone walls," reports Gimbutas. "Old European locations were chosen for their beautiful setting, good water and soil, and availability of animal pastures. Vinca, Butmir, Petresti, and Cucuteni settlement areas are remarkable for their excellent views of the environs, but not for their defensive value. The characteristic absence of heavy fortifications and of thrusting weapons speaks for the peaceful character of most of these art-loving peoples."²⁹

Moreover, here, as in Catal Huyuk and Hacilar—which show no signs of damage through warfare for a time span of over fifteen

hundred years³⁰—the archaeological evidence indicates that male dominance was *not* the norm. "A division of labor between the sexes is indicated, but not a superiority of either," writes Gimbutas. "In the 53-grave cemetery of Vinca, hardly any difference in wealth of equipment was discernible between male and female graves. . . . In respect to the role of women in the society, the Vinca evidence suggests an equalitarian and clearly non-patriarchal society. The same can be adduced of the Varna society: I can see there no ranking along a patriarchal masculine-feminine value scale."³¹

In sum, here, as in Catal Huyuk, the evidence indicates a generally unstratified and basically equalitarian society with no marked distinctions based on either class or sex. But the difference is that in Gimbutas's work this is not simply noted in passing. It is brought to our attention time and time again by this remarkable archaeological pioneer, who has had the courage to stress what so many others prefer to ignore: that in these societies we see no signs of the sexual inequality we have all been taught is only "human nature."

"An equalitarian male-female society is demonstrated by the grave equipment in practically all the known cemeteries of Old Europe," writes Gimbutas. She also notes numerous indicators that this was a matrilinear society—that is, one in which descent and inheritance is traced through the mother.³² Moreover, she points out that the archaeological evidence leaves little doubt that women played key roles in all aspects of Old European life.

"In the models of house-shrines and temples, and in actual temple remains," writes Gimbutas, "females are shown supervising the preparation and performance of rituals dedicated to the various aspects and functions of the Goddess. Enormous energy was expended in the production of cult equipment and votive gifts. Temple models show the grinding of grain and the baking of sacred bread. . . . In the temple workshops which usually constitute half the building or occupy the floor below the temple proper, females made and decorated quantities of various pots appropriate to different rites. Next to the altar of the temple stood a vertical loom on which were probably woven the sacred garments and temple appurtenances. The most sophisticated creations of Old Europe—the most exquisite vases, sculptures, etc. now extant—were woman's work."³³

The artistic heritage left us by these ancient communities—where the worship of the Goddess was central to all aspects of life—is still being unearthed by the archaeological spade. By 1974, when Gimbutas first published a compendium of findings from her own excavations

and from over three thousand other sites, no less than thirty thousand miniature sculptures of clay, marble, bone, copper, and gold had been uncovered, in addition to enormous quantities of ritual vessels, altars, temples, and paintings on both vases and the walls of shrines.³⁴

Of these finds, the most eloquent vestiges of this European Neolithic culture are the sculptures. They provide information on facets of life otherwise inaccessible to the archaeologist: fashions of dress and even hairstyles. They give us a firsthand view into the mythical images of the period's religious rites. And what these sculptures show, as was the case in the caves of the Paleolithic and later on in the open plains of Anatolia and other Near Eastern and Middle Eastern Neolithic sites, is that here too feminine figures and symbols occupied the central place.

Even beyond this, they provide arresting evidence pointing to the next step in the aesthetic and social evolution of this lost earlier civilization. For both in style and theme, many of these female figurines and symbols are strikingly similar to those of a place that is still visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists today with practically no knowledge of what they are really looking at: the Bronze Age civilization that later flourished on the fabled island of Crete.

Before we look at Crete—the only known “high” civilization where the worship of the Goddess survived into historical times—let us first more closely examine what we can infer from the archaeological remains of the Neolithic Age about the early direction of Western cultural evolution—and its relevance to our own present and future.