

## **The Re-emergence of the Great Mother Goddess**

---

**Louis Laganà**, University of Malta, Malta

**Abstract:** Today, great interest in the Ancient Goddess cult is still being revived. With the way the Goddess manifests herself as symbolizing an earthly and cosmic source to the universe, some women have found refuge in the symbolical image of the Mother Goddess. The impetus towards the Goddess movement came from an archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas. With the return of the Goddess, the new power of the feminine is being expressed in all areas of life. Other major women writers and exponents of the Goddess religion expressed the self-transformation and empowerment and various aspects of feminist social vision of women in their work. In this paper I will also focus on the archetypal image of the Great Mother Goddess which is expressed in rituals, art, mythology and dreams. In Jungian parlance the Mother Archetype resides in every human psyche and is a symbol of protection and fertility and regeneration. This concept also belongs to the field of comparative religion and embraces widely varying types of the mother-goddess. The discussion of ‘Feminist Archetypal Psychology’ shows that the Great Mother Goddess archetype is activated and is returning to consciousness. The Great Mother Goddess archetype was very important in the Western world from the dawn of prehistory throughout the pre-Indo-European time periods, as it still is in many traditional cultures today.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, Art, Great Mother Goddess, Marija Gimbutas, C.G. Jung, Feminist Archetypal Psychology.

### **1.1 Introduction - Archaeological Representations of Gods and Goddesses**

In the ancient past, we find representations of Gods and Goddesses related to water, like the Bird and the Snake Goddess, i.e. Mistresses of Waters (Gimbutas, 1974). During the Neolithic period, with its wide expansion of vegetation symbolism, we discover gods and goddesses associated with the agricultural cycle and its seasonal progressions, manifesting the eternal archetype of death and rebirth. In Neolithic Malta the most interesting archaeological aspect is the great number of figurines and statues that were found in different temple sites on the archipelago. Many interpretations were given for these ‘goddesses’ and ‘gods’ and today a definite answer is still lacking for a clear interpretation. Surely, sculptural art was used to express religious conceptions and had also a psychological explanation for the first farmers living on the islands of Malta and Gozo. Here I want to point out that so far I am only looking at one side of certain interpretations of symbols as expressed by groups of archaeologists, historians,

mythologists and many feminist groups who are of the opinion that a Matriarchal past existed. Most of them are also attracted to and accept the idea of the existence of a Mother Goddess religion in the prehistoric past.

Today, great interest in the Ancient Goddess cult is still being revived. There are people, especially women, who have become interested in very old religions, myth, ancient art, archaeology and other subjects, which are related to the role of the female in past and present societies. This was partly triggered not only by the feminist movement in general – equal rights and the position of women in the private and public sector – but also by the urgent need to create awareness in the current ecological crises the world is passing through. With the way the Goddess manifests herself as symbolizing an earthly and cosmic source to the universe, some women found refuge in the symbolical image of the Mother Goddess. The impetus towards the Goddess movement came from an archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas. In the 1970's Gimbutas, in her works, focused on the prehistoric cultures of south-east Europe, and was an authority to the story of the goddess religion (Goodison, Lucy, and Morris, Christine, 1998). Elinor Gadon commented on this in her writing about the re-emergence of the Goddess:

In the late twentieth century there is a growing awareness that we are doomed as a species and planet unless we have a radical change of consciousness. The re-emergence of the Goddess is becoming the symbol and metaphor for this transformation of culture. With the return of the Goddess, the new power of the feminine is being expressed in all areas of life. There is a re-evaluation of the female principle in religion, in psychology, in the arts, and in the quality and relationship of humanity to the planet we live on. We are in the midst of a social evolution that will ultimately change how we see everything, as radically transformative as the smashing of the atom (1989, 229-230).

Major women writers and exponents of the Goddess religion expressed the self-transformation and empowerment and various aspects of feminist social vision of women in their work. These include among others Carol Christ, Charlene Spretnak, Mary Daly, Marija Gimbutas, Cristina Biaggi, Riane Eisler, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Christine Downing, and Starhawk. The Goddess became the centre of a new earth based spirituality invoking the full acceptance of the archetypal female in its positive and negative powers. For some modern women, a small minority, identification with the archetypal Goddess figures provides insight into inner conflicts and can be healing (1989, 229).

## **1.2 The Archetype of the Great Mother Goddess**

From a Jungian point of view, the Goddess is an archetypal image at work within the human psyche and finds expression in ritual, mythology, art, and also in dreams (Jung, 1959, 9). Without doubt, one of the earliest scholars to work on the idea that the human psyche reveals archetypal patterns related to the Mother Goddess, is C.G. Jung. He stated:

The concept of the Great Mother belongs to the field of comparative religion and embraces widely varying types of mother-goddess. The concept itself is of no immediate concern to psychology, because the image of a Great Mother in this

form is rarely encountered in practice, and then only under very special conditions. The symbol is obviously a derivative of the *mother archetype* (1959, 9.) So Jung is of the opinion that the Great Mother Goddess is part of the 'mother archetype' that resides in every human being and like other archetypes this archetype appears in a variety of aspects. This archetype is also associated with fertility and productivity. Jung argues that the Mother Archetype is a symbol of protection and is associated with hollow objects such as ovens and cooking vessels and of course, the uterus, *yonis*, and anything of a like shape. Added to this list there are many animals, such as the cow, hare, and helpful animals in general (1959, 15).

Hence, the Mother Archetype further provides a better understanding of the Great Mother Goddess. The primordial human has a long history of venerated Goddesses from long before the appearance of Venus of Willendorf (Fig. 01) and the Maltese Mother Goddess (also known as the Fat Lady) (Fig. 02) carved out of limestone. This long history contains a vast library of rituals from which the modern individual can find out examples of how to directly engage the mother archetype.

Jungian, analytical psychologist Erich Neumann elaborated at length on the theme of the Great Mother. He published an exhaustive book on the subject and explained at length on how to understand this dominant archetypal symbol of the human psyche (1963). First he analysed the psychology of the feminine in general and then he formed the structural elements of the Great Mother archetype. He observed that the earliest form of creation in myths is that of the circle, the Great Round, or the sphere, the womb of the Great Mother goddess as the universal vessel of the world. This contains in itself the entire existence of early man and so becomes the Archetypal Feminine (1963, 42). Neumann refers to the feminine functions as powerful, protective sources to the human being.

Only when we have considered the whole scope of the basic feminine functions - the giving of life, nourishment, warmth, and protection - can we understand why the Feminine occupies so central a position in human symbolism and from the very beginning bears the character of "greatness." The Feminine appears as great because that which is contained, sheltered, nourished, is dependent on it and utterly at its mercy. Nowhere perhaps is it so evident that a human being must be experienced as "great" as in the case of the mother. A glance at the infant or child confirms her position as Great Mother (1963, 43).

Neumann continued to give more symbolic meaning to the importance of the feminine. He referred to the woman as the 'vessel' in which life forms. Her body is transformed into the safest place where the unborn child is sheltered. Her body is the vessel. He illustrated that if we combine this body-world equation of early man in its first unspecific form with the fundamental symbolic equation of the feminine: woman = body = vessel, we arrive at a universal symbolic formula for the early period of mankind (1963). Woman and earth both give forth life and as such are sacred. Their bodies contain new life inside. Both are vessels just as the earth contains new life that springs forth in the summer. The woman and the earth have the sole aim of creating new biological life. She is sacred; her body is sacred as well. They are not just myths or historical entities, "but

psychological realities whose fateful power is still alive in the psychic depths of present day man (1963, 44). Mircea Eliade elevates the sacredness of the body of the woman. He stated:

Woman, then, is mystically held to be one with the earth, childbearing is seen as a variant, on the human scale, of the telluric fertility. All religions experiences connected with fecundity and birth *have a cosmic structure*. The sacrality of woman depends on the holiness of the earth. Feminine fecundity has a cosmic model – that of Terra Mater, the universal Genetrix (1957, 144).

So the female body is being acknowledged and revered as the holy alchemical vessel of creation and transformation. The body of the woman becomes as a sacred metaphor of the earth. Lippard wrote: “Women can, and do, identify the forms of our bodies with the undulations of the earth – hills and sacred mountains which were the first gardens and the first temples” (1983, 42). That is why this strengthens the hypothesis that the Maltese prehistoric temples (and other temples around the world) were built in the shape of a woman (the goddess).

The female archetype as expressed in a symbolical way by Neumann, shows its importance and why the early humans depended on the earth for all things, food, shelter, and life itself. They noticed that all life was created within the bodies of females and so it was natural for them to see an all-powerful creator as female too. The result was that for thousands of years, the majority of our ancestors worshipped a Divine and powerful Mother-Goddess. She was honoured as the Mother of all life. Neumann developed the argument of the Great Mother Goddess into an elaborate theory of human spiritual development, in which the goddess stood for “the archetypal unity and multiplicity of the feminine nature” and even now determines “the psychic history of modern man and of modern woman” (1963, 336). Apart from using a psychological standpoint, he also based most of his arguments on the data assembled by archaeologists who had developed the notion of the Great Goddess.

### **1.3 Feminist Archetypal Psychology**

Danica Anderson who is a certified clinical criminal justice specialist and also a psychotherapist, who practises archetypal psychology, uses ‘the Goddess’ as a source and guide to psychological healing. In her interview with me in the year 2000, she maintained that:

As a therapist practising feminist archetypal psychology, I encourage a relationship with the past rather than to beat oneself with 20/20 hindsight vision but to gain a profit from what did occur in the past. So, the interest in the Maltese Neolithic Goddesses is their largesse, the giantess, to remind us of the past when peace reigned and no gender wars were played out. The Maltese Giantess (I refuse to call them ‘fat ladies’ as it is disrespectful and patriarchal-labelled) stands there much like our dreams to scream important messages into our consciousness (2000).

Feminist Archetypal Psychology (2001) is achieved by incorporating the silent influences of remembering and reflecting the lives of women, through women’s visual art, poetry,

stories, music, and the raising of children or their purpose in life. We know that archetypes help to describe the whole aspect of life; stories that tell of life and peace but not of death and strife without resurrection. Archetypes and symbols have the capacity to convey immediate knowing and understanding without a single word being uttered or written. All our recurring stories stage archetypes. These powerful archetypes and symbols have a conscious and unconscious life. “The curious aspect of archetypes is that they can activate a meaning, which sometimes is normal but sometimes abnormal” (Anderson, 2001). Thus the Great Mother Goddess archetype is activated whenever this archetype is repressed. The Great Mother Goddess archetype was very important in the Western world from the dawn of prehistory throughout the pre-Indo-European time periods, as it still is in many traditional cultures today. But this archetype has been violently repressed in the West for at least 5,000 years starting with the Indo-European invasions – reinforced as some authors maintain, by the anti-Goddess view of Judeo-Christianity, culminating with three centuries of witch hunts - all the way to the Victorian era and later.

We have agreed up till now that the Great Mother Goddess is represented in its human and divine aspects and that ‘She’ also symbolizes the planet Earth - fertility, nature, and the flow of abundance in all aspects of life. If we look at what is happening to the Earth and why environmentalists are so much concerned with what is happening in our ecosystem, we quickly understand that the Earth is being ecologically repressed. On the other hand, as from ancient times we find that women for a very long time were repressed and in some countries many are still under such repression. All this resulted in the re-emergence of ‘The Great Mother Goddess’. Danica Anderson gave me an interesting explanation why today there is a growing interest in the Mother Goddess culture, and especially in Malta’s Neolithic goddesses:

The re-emergence comes from the suppression and repression of all feminine sources. Despite the murder of 9 million women during the Middle Ages as witches and the genocide (mass murder of women) in Afghanistan and by the Taliban, in Bosnia, Armenia, and African nations the divine feminine cannot be subdued or suppressed. Much like Quantum Physics, best described by Ken Wilbur, in his book *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, ‘as a kind of Ariadne’s thread to lead us out of the maze of duality and back to Mind-only,’ the past is woven with the future expectations into this moment right now (2001).

The repression of women did not actually happen in our times only. It goes back to the time of the Indo-European invasions from the late fifth to the early third millennia B.C., and the great civilizations and religions (Gimbutas, 1999, 52). All this contributed to the collective repression of the feminine in general and the Great Mother archetype.

Anderson continues to explain:

More so with Jung’s “collective unconscious” where we are all born genetically encoded with all the thousands of generations before us we are then deemed to remember the Goddess due to mass genocide, and murder of anything feminine. It has been shown even in my client’s dreams, images of the Goddess where the client had not ever researched the Neolithic, seen the Maltese Giantess but yet draws an exact replica of Her on paper in my office in Washington state, USA.

Psychologically, what you suppress or repress always gets expressed (2001). This great interest in the Great Mother Goddess could be seen in a number of seminars and conferences held in many parts of the world, women studies, courses in different universities, the female in divinity, the publishing of hundreds of books and journals on the subject, as well various sites on the internet and organized tours (Sacred Journeys for Women) to ancient sites. Today Goddess literature describes Malta as one of the most important ancient sites in the Mediterranean. This attracted many people especially Goddess feminists to visit these ancient sites.

Willow La Monte, a lecturer and ritual facilitator, is a Sicilian-American researcher on Goddess studies and editor of a newspaper called *Goddessing Regenerated* (La Monte, 2001). La Monte lives in Florida, and comes to Malta frequently. She explains more about the interest in ancient goddesses and the reason why people today have this awareness of the goddess. When I interviewed her she stated:

In parts of Asia and Africa there are still indigenous cultures that still have these nature goddess traditions. This goddess spirituality was of service to the entire community, the women, as well as the men and the children, and it served those rituals of life, death and regeneration to the entire community. The basic form is always the cycles of nature, and how that is seen as it is connected to various functions of different goddesses (2001).

La Monte also refers to Malta as a very important, prominent place, where the Great Mother Goddess was venerated. She hypothesizes that, in Malta, the goddess had numerous kinds of functions. For example, the figurines of the 'fat ladies' found in some temples show that obesity was also recognised as something positive. It's not only in Malta that we find such representation, but "throughout the Neolithic period not only in Europe but in many parts of the world you have these very large female forms that are connected a lot with abundance, and the functions of the earth (2001). To give an example, a similar obese, seated figurine, which could be compared with the Maltese 'fat ladies' (Fig. 03), is the one found in Neolithic Anatolia, Çatal Hüyük, in Turkey (Fig. 04). As stated earlier the images of female, obese statuettes found in some burial sites are also connected with the goddess of death and regeneration. According to La Monte, 'obesity' was a significant aspect in the life of Neolithic people. It was a 'cultural' symbol of the time. She argues:

Our contemporary western culture lacks the variety of female images. We have the models and the actresses who only seem to have one body type. In modern iconography, on television and media you don't see older women age gracefully and powerfully, like you do in the ancient goddess culture where the aging cycle is honoured just as much as the young throughout the cycle. We also see a number of body types that women lack in contemporary images (2001).

Here, La Monte is saying that women in contemporary society lost the symbolic significance attributed to 'obesity'. This can be regarded as the unconscious means to resist the present dominant ideology in which the concept of the woman is different than that of ancient times. Women were considered closer to nature and therefore in prehistoric iconography, the female deity was represented in all the aspects of fertility and abundance. Unfortunately the temple culture in Malta came to an end during the

middle of the second millennium B.C.E. The colossal goddess figure found at *Tarxien* temples (Fig. 02) seemed to be last icon that represented the success of the agricultural society during prehistory. There are various theories about how such civilisation vanished. One is that the first Maltese settlers were invaded from the European mainland by warlike people who had formidable weapons (Gadon, 1989, 68). The other probable hypothesis is “a combination of over-population, over-cultivation of the land, erosion by deforestation and a climatic change that can be traced for the whole southern Mediterranean” (Veen, 1992, 54). British archaeologist David Trump also suggested: “Improbable though it may seem, it is as if the islands were abandoned utterly, and stood empty as when the first intrepid seafarers came ashore 2,500 years earlier” (2002, 245).

Today, we can understand why the Great Mother Goddess is returning to consciousness. The result is the inspiration to many in a variety of forms. This discovery is felt by many artists in many countries, both in the visual arts as well as literary arts. Neolithic Goddesses imagery created immense attraction to female as well as to male artists.

Today, there is an enormous outpouring of creativity around the world based on these goddess images and Neolithic symbolism. A lot of women are becoming more exposed to these images and the artist's role is like that of a healer, a shaman, showing us that throughout the world and time, we now recognize that the universe is alive, conscious, and filled with spiritual power. It is very inspiring and empowering.

So we see that Great Goddesses are the most ‘primitive’ manifestations of archetypal feminine symbolism; they present matriarchal symbolism in an incomparable form. Great Goddesses have transformative elements: positive and negative ones. As symbols of the overwhelming power of the forces of nature and the unconscious, these goddesses embodied fertility and sexuality, both life and death. The Mother Goddess is the goddess of life and death at the same time - the Feminine contains opposites, and the world actually lives because it combines earth and heaven, night and day, death and life. Human beings lived for thousands of years within this psychophysical space in which outside and inside, world and man, powers and things, are bound together in an indissoluble unity (Veen, 1992, 45).

The birth of this female archetype in contemporary humans shows the development of the growing consciousness that brings together humans and the Earth. It is an emerging archetype that compensates for the crisis of our Patriarchal oriented culture. The example which I already hinted at earlier is the start of the ‘Feminist Movement’, which started as a political movement to bring women's equality with that of men. Later, in the 1970s, emerged the Goddess Movement where the subject of the divine feminine became a central point in spirituality and a strong manifestation of what today, in the western world, we call the New Age Movement.

The acceptance of the existence of a mother-goddess religion in the remote past is still a controversial issue to many archaeologists and a very cogent tool in the hands of many mythologists, artists, those who study religions, and psychologists. The Mother Archetype is also reflected in the works of some contemporary artists, who consciously or unconsciously use this archetype symbolically as their main message in their work.

## References

Anderson, Danica, Case Study interview and personal communication with Louis Laganà, 2000.

Anderson, Danica, personal communication by email, 6 January 2001.

Definition of Feminist Archetypal Psychology by Danica Anderson,  
<http://www.kolocollaboration.org/?item=15560>

Eliade, Mircea, (1957), *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture* (1961), translated from the French by William R. Trask, (first published in German as *Das Heilige und das Profane*).

Gimbutas, Marija, (1974), *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe – Myths and Cult Images*, Thames and Hudson.

Goodison, Lucy, and Morris, Christine, edits., (1998), *Ancient Goddesses*, British Museum Press.

Gadon, Elinor, (1989), *The Once And Future Goddess*, Harper Collins.

Jung, C.G., (1959), *Four Archetypes, Mother/Rebirth/Spirit/Trickster*, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press.

Laganà, Louis, *Maltese Neolithic Art and its influence on Contemporary Artists – interview with Willow La Monte*, broadcast by the Voice of the Mediterranean radio station Malta on the 17<sup>th</sup> January 2001.

Lippard, Lucy, (1983), *Overlay – Contemporary art and the art of prehistory*, Veen, Veronica, (1992), *The Goddess Of Malta – The Lady of the Waters and the Earth*, Inanna Publishers.

Neumann, Erich, (1963), *The Great Mother*, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press.

Trump, David, (text), Cilia, Daniel, (photography), (2002), *MALTA – Prehistory and Temples*, Midsea Books.





Fig. 01, The Earth Mother of Willendorf – ca. 30,000 -25,000 B.C.E



Fig. 02, The Goddess of Fertility or 'Fat Lady', Tarxien, Malta, c.3500-2500 B.C.E.



Fig. 03, Seated Goddess, Hagar Qim, Malta, c.3500-2500 B.C.E.



Fig. 04, Seated Goddess giving Birth, Çatal Hüyük, Turkey, c.7250-6700 B.C.E.