

The value of life in the images of Prehistory in Europe

Maternity is the power of giving birth, feeding and protecting life. It is an absolute value, asserted by logic and common sense, philosophy, myth and biology, and by the experience of man and nature. Maternity is the *sine qua non* of existence and is supported by Love, of which maternity is the most emblematic display.

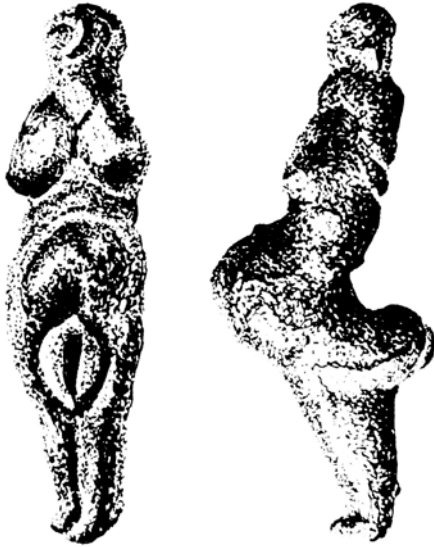
Writing on maternity could seem useless, as it is the most natural item and does not need any demonstration to enlighten its essence. This is true even during prehistory, and although for this extremely long period we have no certainties, we can surely see that maternity is a deeply rooted concept in the prehistoric and protohistoric art. We archaeologists, for once, can be sure of its meanings and can focus on the symbols related with maternity.

The Palaeolithic Archetype

Maternity's first images date up to the very beginning of art, which is strictly linked to the development of the abstract thought, the language, the *homo sapiens sapiens'* (our) psycho-physical faculties. This crucial process begun in Africa, 100.000 years BP at least, and is clearly visible from 40.000 years B.C. in Eurasia and Africa. During the Upper Palaeolithic, in a 30.000 years long period, we have some of the rock-art masterpieces: Lascaux, Chauvet, Altamira. The Cave itself, as is now commonly interpreted, is a sanctuary symbolically linked with the womb of the earth, and therefore with the sacred power of giving birth. The Maternity is rarely expressed in the pictures, but is more visible in the engravings and in the small statues: as the small steatopygous female idols, almost surely pregnant, carved with abnormal womb and breasts and never showing their face (as for a taboo). Among the many images that can be found between the Atlantic coast and the Siberian region, we want to recall three small statues from the French Midi, because

The Laussel Shelter (Dordogne, France), "Venus of Laussel": the left hand is on the womb and the right hand holds a gilt horn which has thirteen engravings. A great expression of maternity and fertility. Upper Palaeolithic, around 26.000 b.C.(CCSP survey).





Monparzier (Dordogne, France) Small limonite statue which has a gravid womb, marked buttocks and vulva. Upper Palaeolithic (from M.Gimbutas, 1989).

Langerie Basse (France), "La Femme au Renne", engraving which represents a pregnant woman lying under a reindeer. Upper Palaeolithic, around 12.000 b.C. (a survey by Stefania Sansoni, from H. Delporte, 1979).



of their emblematic value: the "*Mère de Monparzier*", the "*Femme au renne*" and the "*Venus from Laussel*". The first one, the "*Mère de Monparzier*", is a limonite statue of a pregnant woman, with an enormous vulva stressing the power of giving birth (maybe the pre-delivery swelling: many other statues describe the very position of birth); the second one, the "*Femme au renne*", is a fragment from a reindeer bone, carved with a pregnant woman in a praying attitude, laying between the hind legs and beneath the abdomen of a hoofed animal. This scene seems to be linking human pregnancy and the world of animals, indispensable for the surviving of the human communities (Leroy-Gouran named this age as "Rein Deer Age"). The third image, the "*Venus from Laussel*", is the most complete item of female figure, considering the complexity of all the related symbols. It shows the image of a woman in high-relief, with large belly, big breasts, unfinished face, holding a horn in her right hand and resting her left hand on her womb. She seems to be pregnant and her womb is the very focusing point of the image. We can see the horn as a symbol of the moon or of the cyclic seasonal growth (it bears 13 notches, maybe the lunations in a year); the

oversized breast could represent the fullness of feeding, given by nature to every creature. This image refers to earth's and nature's gifts, embodied by women: from this analogy the image of the "*Venus from Laussel*" receives its divine appearance.

We can find other clues of maternity looking at the most frequent images of animal: bison or horses, depicted with very large womb and sometimes with foals, up to the final phases of Palaeolithic. The most magnificent examples are in the rock art from Africa (9th-8th mill. B.C): panels describing pachyderms, felines, giraffes, buffalos, crocodiles, every one with its pup; these images have a high value, noting that the wild fauna is almost the only pattern of rock art, in this phase. Considering all these examples, we can affirm the centrality of the maternal theme in the Palaeolithic symbolic world: a religious theme, that testifies without doubt a social and ritual role of the women. We can recognize a real cult for a Great Mother, who bears the power of giving birth, feeding, loving and protecting. A Mother that seems to have been hugging the hunters-gatherers humanity during the whole Palaeolithic age.

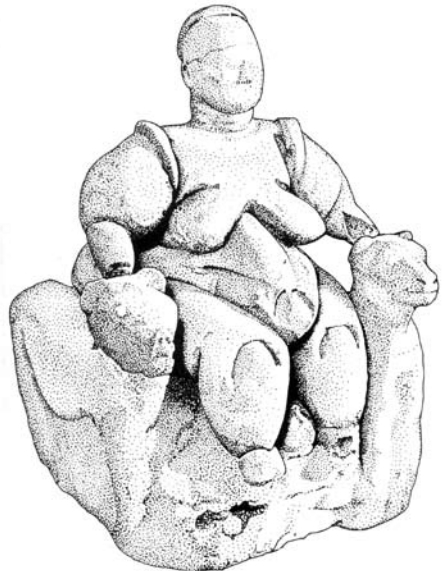


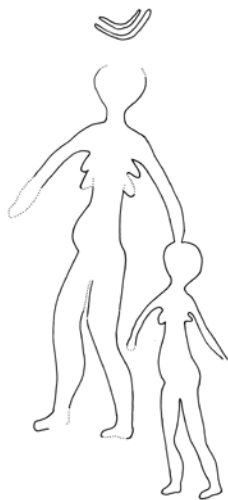
The Lascaux Cave (France), A painting which represents a pregnant mare. Upper Palaeolithic, around 18.000 b.C. (from N.Auyoulat, 2004).

The Neolithic Mother

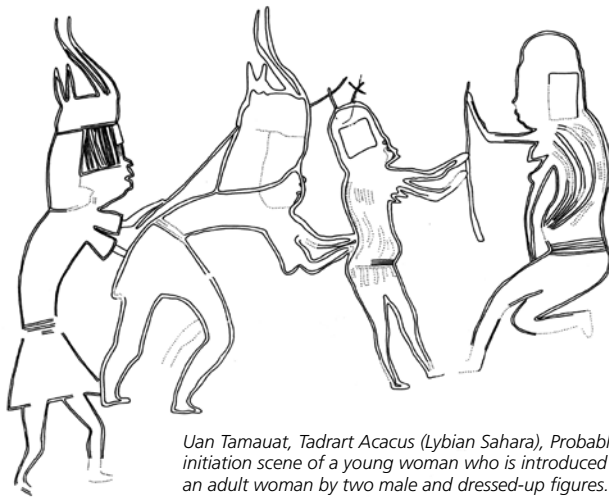
When time is ripe for great changes, when man becomes an agriculturist, a breeder, a ceramist, an ingenious and tough sedentary, the spiritual role of the Great Mother becomes clearer and enriches itself with new tones. She has the most important role in the Neolithic art in the Middle-East (from the 9th mill. B.C.), in the Balkans (from the 7th mill. B.C.), in Europe, Africa, Asia. We still find steatopygous or stereotyped images, sometimes pregnant or giving birth to a child (specially in the Balkans and the Anatolian region). We find also ritual vessels with breasts, vulvae; the shape itself of the megalithic tombs may represent an uterus, as to receive in a womb the corpses of the dead. During the Neolithic age we find the first images of a Goddess with a Child, the most significant of which are even breast-feeding their baby: small statues from Ur (4th mill. B.C.) and the acephalous ones from Rost (Romania) and Gradac (Serbia, 5ft

Catal Hüyük (Anatoly) A clay figure which represents the parturient "Goddess Mother" on the throne. Neolithic, 5.000 b.C. (from J. Hawkes, 1978).





Anshall, Tadrart Acacus (Lybian Sahara), A female and fantasy figure, with four breasts, which has next to it a little girl. Ceramic Mesolithic, VII-VI mill. (Survey from F. Mori, 1965).



Un Tamauat, Tadrart Acacus (Lybian Sahara), Probable initiation scene of a young woman who is introduced to an adult woman by two male and dressed-up figures. Ceramic Mesolithic, VII-VI mill. (Survey from F. Mori, 1965).

mill. B.C.) that bear ideograms engraved on their bodies. From Çatal Hüyük (Anatolia) is the imposing Goddess, sitting on her throne and in a delivering attitude, accompanied by felines as the Goddess of the Nature; in many different varying she is the fulcrum of the Neolithic pantheon.

The rock art corroborates this theory: it is a very rich expression, present in many regions as a sacred archive from the past. The rock art of Valcamonica shows many female images in schematic style, and some of them have a child besides them or in their arms (see Viviparchi 2007); some scenes represent the birth itself. The context of these images (dating to the 4th mill. B.C.) assigns a central role to the feminine: men's images are

In Tahrin, Tadrart Acacus (Lybian Sahara), She-goats or antilopes which are nursing (suckling) two cubs. The central figure looks pregnant. Ceramic Mesolithic, VII-VI mill. (Survey from F. Mori, 1965).





Iheren, Tassili n'Ajjer (Algerian Sahara), An image of a she-antelope with its cub. Neolithic, IV-III mill. (from U. Sansoni, 1994).

outnumbered by women's, who frequently are in the centre of the panels.

We can find a strong similarity between Valcamonica's rock art and the paintings under rock-shelters in central Sahara. During the phases between the 7th and the 3rd mill. B.C. women are represented in a large number of roles: as a Goddess with fantastic attributes, a member of the social community, having a ritual role, doing her daily duties. The Maternity is an important item; it is notable that, in the most ancient phase (Mesolithic), women and men seem to be divided in their supporting role during

the initiation rituals of, respectively, girls or boys: the woman-mother is painted near girls, while the man-father is near boys. In the painted rock art of Tassili n'Ajjer (Algeria), in Tadrart Acacus (Libia), in Tibesti (Chad), we can see scenes of mother and child, or scenes depicting highly detailed villages where women and children act between their huts, herds and domestic tools. Two panels show us a peculiar role of the feminine in the ancient societies: from Uan Tamuat (Acacus, 7th-6th mill. B.C.) and from Sefar (Tassili). In Uan Tamuat two masked men push a girl toward a woman who bears decorations on her body and is showing an authoritative attitude: this is an initiation scene or a high social investiture ritual. In Sefar, at the very focus point of a long procession of men and women ceremonially dressed appears a strange, pregnant, female image (a Goddess?) evoked by a horn-blower. The same attention is given to animals, both wild and domestic (from the late 6th mill. B.C). We can find beautiful panels, as in In Taharin (Acacus, 7th mill. B.C.): here a pregnant female and a suckling pup are painted above a line of caprines; in Iheren (Tassili, 3rd mill. B.C.) an antelope lowers its muzzle at its pup. We must eventually recall a scene that is highly clarifying the myths and the symbols underlying beneath the maternal link between human and animal being: in a panel from Wadi Tiduwa (Messak) we can see an

Wadi Tiduwa, Messak (Lybia), A laid-down bovid, which is enveloped in its umbilical cord. The umbilical cord ends in the placental sac in which appears an anthropomorphous figure. Neolithic, V-III mill. (from Y. e C. Gauthier, 1996).





Pescarzo di Cemmo (Valcamonica), Rock 20 (Redondo). A pregnant mare with horseman. Iron Age, V-IV century b.C. (from E. Marchi 1998).

Foppe di Nadro (Valcamonica), Representation of hierogamy. Coupling with the fruit of the act: the woman is pregnant. The religious symbols around are the evidence of the rituality of the scene. Bronze Age, late II mill. (photo CCSP).

umbilical cord that, grafted to the abdomen of a bovine, winds round the animal ending in a placental bag that encloses a human being. Many images of cows bear humans in their wombs: this is probably the myth of the genesis as seen by shepherd people in the Sahara; the same as we find in more recent myths of their direct descendants, the Peuls from High Volta.

At the roots of the modern thought: the ouranic aegis

The central role of the Great Mother Goddess lasts for all the Neolithic age, slowly fading away only when the ages of metals begin. The new order becomes clearly visible only from the 3rd mill. B.C., when metallurgy, ploughing, wheels are discovered and used. The society becomes more complex: a hierarchic, military and trade society, in which the prominent role is held by men. For what concerns the religion, we can notice the fast emerging of an ouranic divinity, a male god,

wizard and warrior, often depicted as a sky-god, ruler of the thunder and the sun. As in the new pantheon, also among humans the male has the prominence and the family has become patriarchal (see Viviparchi 2007) instead of matriarchal as it probably was during the previous age: and the Goddess is subdued to the God just as the *domina* is subdued to the *dominus* inside the family.

Still we can read some signs of the feminine, especially in the Mediterranean area (in Anatolia for the East and in the Atlantic region for the West). Maternity is not a prevailing theme any more, but it maintains its universal characteristics in the many protohistorical images from Copper Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age. In the rock art from Copper Age we can still find a considerable amount of attention to the feminine: a sophisticated syntax of symbols develops in the anthropomorphic stelae in Europe, and the feminine is highly represented, although not in a central role: for example the stressing given to specific signs as breasts, vaulted



Egypt, Bronze and small statue which represents a mother with her son. Middle Kingdom (from M.C. Guidotti e V. Cortese 2002).



Urzulei (Sardinia), A bronze statue known as "The Dead's mother" ("La madre dell'ucciso) in which is represented a woman who holds up on her lap a dead warrior. Iron Age, VII century b.C. (from S. Moscati, 1991).

lines (as procreating uterus) or parallel lines. Principally is maintained the analogy with the earth, domestic earth, i.e. arable, in persevering dialectic with the ouranic symbols of the sun, the axes, the daggers, especially in the Alpine region. During the late 3rd mill. B.C. these elements and the images of male anthropomorphs become the nearly exclusive pattern. Such structure is being confirmed during the Bronze Age (2nd mill. B.C.) and eventually the Iron Age (1st mill. B.C.): the women's world is then expressed through different signs (in the rock art of Valcamonica: looms, "shovels", huts), yet the human image is seldom represented, if not in ritual pairing scenes, where the maternity is surely implied. The most clear panel shows a pregnant woman in a sexual scene (from Foppe di Nadro, late 2nd mill. B.C.); we can also mention sexual pairing during ploughing scenes: thus linking the sowing of mother

earth to human conception (from Seradina, middle of the 1st mill. B.C.). More clear references to maternity during the Iron Age come from the scenes with animals: in the rock art of Valcamonica we find three scenes of suckling (with a doe, a mare, a goat) and one pregnant mare (from Redondo). Other exempla come from different regions of Italy, both from rock art and on objects: as in the "situlae" art (6th-5th century B.C.) or in the sheath from Pontecagnano (8th cent. B.C.).

Considering the myths, we must notice the stressing on maternity in the Roman and Latin mythology: the Roman myth of the origins tells of a she-wolf feeding the twins, who will later be the founders of Rome; the Latin myth tells of a sow with 30 "populi latini" (Latin peoples) as piglets. It's the mother-earth, the everlasting divine feminine, more in the symbolic shape of an animal than of



Rome, Ara Pacis, Allegorical panel in which is represented "Generating Venus (Venere genitrice)" or the personification of Rome and Italy, which symbolize "la Pax" or "the Prosperity". 1 century a.C.



The Scrovegni Chapel (Padua), Giotto, "Nativity and the announcement to the shepherds", detail, 1303-1305.



Chianciano, Cinerary statue which represents "Mater Familias" with child. Statue known as "Mater Matuta", late V century a.C. (from M.Torelli editor, 2000).



Maria Capua Vetere, Votive statue which represents a mother with her son. III century b.C. Capua, Museo Campano.

a woman, and thus is generally represented in the most ancient iconography; when we come to historic evidences, in Greece and in Rome, the traditional images of the maternal role emerge again in the masterpieces of the classic art. Except a very few cases, women actually have a subordinate role in the societies of this age, and so the maternal power need to be controlled by men: just as the ouranic gods Zeus-Jupiter, Ares-Mars, Phoebus-Apollo control the cosmos.

Keeping these new concepts in mind, we can find many evidences of the Mother-Goddess, ruling the birth of a child, the familiar order, the nourishment, the health: in the Greek pantheon we have Artemis, the virgin goddess who rules the wilderness *and* the birth of children; Demeter rules the domestic environment, Hera rules the family order, and there are many other minor goddesses

and heroines. Yet ancient Greece is surely influenced by old Minoic or Mycenaean traditions, and by traditions coming from the Middle East (especially from the Syrian and Anatolian areas): in those regions the cult for the Great Goddess flourished, even against the developing Indo-European culture. There we find Goddesses who evolved from very ancient – almost Neolithic – roots, and whose maternal attitude is very strong, as the *Megale Meter Theon te Andron te*, the "Great Mother of Gods and Heroes" in Homerus, Lady of giving birth and of fecundity: Nammu-Ninhursag in the Sumeric-Accadic pantheon, Isis among the Egyptians, Kupapas-Cibele in Anatolia, up to Artemis from Ephesus, whose cult will be transferred into Roman religious traditions.

The influence from the Middle East spreads to the Etruscan region in Italy and eventually in Southern Italy we can find a strong influence from Greece; here these influences find a substrate where the maternity is already highly considered, as we can see more from the mythology than from the iconography. Among the most ancient examples we can recall the trolley from Bisenzio

(a family scene from the 8th century B.C., see Viviparchi 2007) and the “Mothers” from Capua (small tufa statues representing enthroned women holding one or more babies in their arms, dated from the 6th to the 2nd century B.C.). These are votive offerings to an unknown Goddess, probably the *Mater Matuta*, Goddess of the women in labour, or Cerere, who ruled over growth and harvest. Similar small statues were found in a temple in *Satricum* consecrated to *Mater Matuta* (to whom were devoted the *Matralia* feasts in Rome); from Chianciano comes a masterpiece, a cinerary statue representing a dead woman with her child, clearly influenced by Greek style (5th cent. B.C.). From Sardinia are other small statues in bronze, some of which are representing mothers with child and one shows a dying warrior hold in his mother’s - or a Goddess’ – arms.

During the Roman age we can find many examples dating to the late republican period or the imperial age, when new cults from the Middle East are added to the Hellenistic refinements: Maternity is then depicted in such masterpieces as the “*Venus-Roma genitrix*”, the *Ara pacis*, the statue of Artemis in Ephesus, the *Isis lactans* (breast-feeding) that is the last issue of the many thousands years old Egyptian iconography.

So, very shortly, this is the millenary, pre-Christian itinerary of an ever topical item. Maternity had intense expressions of the same age all over the world and it ends eventually on a historic iconography deeply linked to our common religious sense: the image of the Madonna. The Holy Mother of God, through thousands of images widespread over all the Christian world, suggests a concept that could be understood even by a Palaeolithic man: the Mother, holding her Child in her arms, *lactans*, sitting on a throne, is the last high representation of the Great Mother in the history of our culture.

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Reworking of the article “Immagini di maternità dall’età preistorica”, which is going to be

present in the forthcoming publication “Viviparchi. Sorpresi dalla meraviglia”. Desenzano del Garda, 2009. www.viviparchi.eu

Translation of the article made by Silvana Gavaldo.

Aid to the research made by Marta Ghirardelli.

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