

# Daedala's Dancing Ground

Creative answers to the question: What myth is living me?

Posted by: **daedala** | May 31, 2011

## the goddess bites

*non-definitive reflections on Chauvet Cave*



(<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chauvet/en/>)

The Chauvet Venus

Chauvet Cave, hidden in limestone cliffs near Pont d'Arc, the dramatic natural bridge spanning the Ardèche river in

southern France, contains a wealth of neolithic cave drawings that is **overwhelming in density, humbling in sophistication, and awe-inspiring in sheer beauty**. The drawings are made of charcoal, and in some cases, earth colors like ochre. The oldest are carbon-dated to 32,000 years before the present. One reviewer of a book on the drawings could not resist the snarky jab at Bible-literalist Christians, that this is 26,000 years before the date Bishop James Ussher calculated that God created the earth. The cave was sealed by rockslide in a long-forgotten geologic incident, 28,000 years ago, long, long, very long before historical creation-daters who've since gone over the Styx – Hindu, Egyptian, Chinese, Mayan among them – were born.

Among all the animals depicted: aurochs, bison, mammoth, lovely horses, rhinoceros, lions, and more, there is only one human figure. It is on a massive tooth-like formation pendent from the cave ceiling – drawings are tucked into myriad puzzling spots and flow over and around curves and bulges in the cave walls, virtually none are made on an uncurved surface. The cave's small cadre of scientists and guardians are well-familiar with it, but we have not really seen it before now, in Werner Herzog's extraordinary, 3-D documentary, "Cave of Forgotten Dreams

(<http://www.wernerherzog.com/index.php?id=64>),” for which a camera was hung on a pole, above a strictly protected portion of cave floor, to see the side of the formation usually hidden even from the very few permitted inside.



The

(<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chauvet/en/>)  
Isolated sketch of Chauvet Venus

identification of the figure is tricky. Like so many of the animal figures, the supposed human one is overlapped with another figure or figures, notably the recognizable head and back of a bull. The human figure is partial, presumably seen from the front: really only two oddly curving legs bent at the knee, and an exaggerated triangle of Venus between the legs, with the distinct labial cleft characteristic of so many neolithic statuettes. Some closest to the cave and its images are quick to point out the connections between woman and bull so familiar from mythology: Pasiphae mating with the sacrificial bull of Poseidon to produce the bull-headed Minotaur, Zeus in the form of a bull carrying off the maiden who will give her name to Europa, the continent which is home to this **miraculous** art. As old as we thought it was, the story is perhaps far older. We also assume that, among the careful and thorough study of the drawings made since the cave was discovered in 1991, it can be demonstrated that no similar image exists, that none of the animals represented look at all like these parts. But is it even a human sketch? Is it indeed the Goddess?

A look at any of the neolithic ‘goddesses’ gives the identification a strong justification. The figures have very large breasts, round bellies, and the prominent pubic V with a cleft clearly representing female sex. They could represent pregnancy. Some even have sketchy arms with hands resting over their swollen breasts or bellies, a gesture as touching as when one sees a pregnant woman anywhere, resting her hands on her belly. How human that gesture is! The breasts are very large and pendulous. Given the deepest nature of the cosmos and the planet we occupy, these images could hardly refer to anything more fundamental than fertility, the absolute power of life. And, in association with drawings and figures of animals, so beautifully rendered, possibly an acknowledgement, perhaps, just perhaps, even a prayer, a meditation, on the pulsing, bloody,



(<http://daedala.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/willendorf.jpg>)

Venus of Willendorf

milky,  
fleshy,  
even

incestuous, link between human and animal life. (Take *that*, you fundamentalists!)

I am old enough that the first inklings of the presence of the Goddess came to me at the time a movement was fomenting among some feminists. *The Chalice and the Blade* (<http://www.rianeeisler.com/chalice.htm>) had just been published, and its author, Riane Eisler, described a peaceable, “partnership” model that existed in neolithic societies, nurtured and guided by feminine power, evidenced by archaeological remains in the earliest discovered settlements, cities and temples, I was electrified. It changed definitively the way I saw the world. Eisler’s passionate, forceful book also directed the as-yet unfocused feminist rage I felt toward the “dominator” model of the Bronze Age Kurgan horse invaders, who shattered the matriarchal peace forever and imposed the dire, death-worshipping patriarchy we’ve lived under ever since.

Eisler’s book was based on the work of Marija Gimbutas (<http://www.marijagimbutas.com/>), an archaeologist born in Lithuania who opened new sites in Eastern Europe and used her findings to reinterpret previously uncovered material. I read Gimbutas’ work hungrily, grateful for a female interpreter who cast new light in a field dominated by males. Though I hopefully followed the prodigiously documented arguments she made for an “Old Europe” that worshipped the Goddess, many of the images she used, very often of artifacts she herself uncovered by digging, never added up to the same sum for me. As much as I wanted to be, I did not find myself completely persuaded. More recently, Gimbutas’ interpretive leaps have been seriously queried by other scientists (<http://www.suppressedhistories.net/articles/eller2.html>), not always male.

Still, I loved the sheer number of female figures that had lain in the earth for millennia; there are no doubt many more waiting to be uncovered. What I did not love was that these Goddesses had no heads, or if they did, no faces. Many are so obese that I cannot imagine a female living in the late Ice Age could look like that without being kept confined in a cave and force-fed bonbons for a lifetime. And, would women, no matter how matriarchal, never appreciatively model the image of a male love partner? As for the fundamental power of the fecund female, all animal life closest to



(<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/notrocketscience/tag/gravettian/>)

Gravettian Venus

us emerges from the same door. Still, people living so close to the wild would never fail to notice that fertility in most animals, and certainly in mammals like the beautiful lions and bison, is a two-way engagement, and that unfucked females do not bear. Ancient people figured out the precession of the moon. They were hardly unobservant, nor, as the drawings so beautifully attest, stupid. That many ancient female deities and powers are associated with bulls, or snakes, makes perfect sense to me. Just yesterday I saw a rattlesnake rising alongside a boulder, slowly, deliberately, and gracefully seeking prey in a cleft of rock. It was a perfect image of phallus, the beautiful word for an erect penis.

Breathtakingly powerful goddesses exist in many ancient mythologies. Yet even in many of the places in which the goddesses are still worshipped, I see no evidence that living, breathing women and their children were also revered, or treated at best with anything other than casual brutality. Instead, they have far too often been raped, abused, murdered. A father cannot know a child is his the way a mother indisputably knows what child is hers. The happiest see their own faces in the child, especially if it lives long enough. But, males of many species kill their rivals' offspring. A father never really knows if a child carries his own selfish genes or not. A shockingly high number of deaths of women in India is fiery; houses set afire, acid thrown. A study in Maryland within the past decade found that the greatest cause of the deaths of pregnant women in the U.S., next to organic complications of pregnancy that still persist in an age of social and medical advancement, however politically compromised, is homicide. To me, the ancient female images have more than a whiff of the revolting taint of snuff pornography. If the urge to perpetuate one's own genetic package drives so much of nature, when could a Goddess — a female image of life — have ever subdued the rampant river-god in the blood of the human species?

Why, when surrounded by such lovingly drawn portrait heads, in which one can read the





(<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chauvet/en/>)

Chauvet Horses

individual traits of a horse, or a male and female lion hunting together, and the bull so nearby, would the one human figure amid the riches of Chauvet, a female, lack a head?

I do not believe in the patriarchs' vicious sky God (nor have I ever forgiven his benighted, hateful believers – especially the females), but I am not a convert of the Goddess.

I didn't quite get it then, that, like so many of my contemporaries, I was searching for the feminine face of god. I still am. I want godhead in my image, not a man's; not a bursting, headless blowup doll, not a harridan or witch, not a sorrowful, passive receptacle. The one goddess who comes closest is Guanyin. But, I do not even begin to truly understand compassion. I also realize, only of late, that my searching is clouded by the mythologies of the culture in which I was raised, Western positivism, American Puritanism. And, yes, the godforsaken patriarchy. My search has always been obscured by the shadow of Plymouth Rock. I expect things of my goddess: kickass power, creative intelligence, deep wisdom, just like the best women I know. She would prevent the murder of innocents, or at least, give us a clue as to why. Without even knowing it, I have expected her to be as literal as the Puritan's god. No wonder I haven't found her yet.



([http://daedala.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/sarah-palin\\_18.jpg](http://daedala.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/sarah-palin_18.jpg))

Perhaps I  
can take  
heart  
from a  
new

## Mama Grizzly

generation of feminists, who take the sacred image of the cave bear seriously, projecting a renewed power and vitality, and who are both spiritual and commonsense practical. They call themselves “Mama Grizzlies.”

Or, maybe not.

So where is my Goddess? If she is in my image, what aspect of it? If I am not to literalize her, how can I see her? I'm not sure I ever will. But when I look at the animals of Chauvet, I feel wonder and awe rising. The animals hunt, they battle, they run. They are living. Many are animals the people of the [Ardèche river](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorges_d%27Ardeche) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorges\\_d%27Ardeche](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorges_d%27Ardeche)) valley would have hunted and killed. They would be eaten by the hunters and their community. Some, like the lions, might kill the hunters. The technical skill of the artists — and I am a skilled enough artist in my own right to appreciate it fully — is greater than my own at rendering the personality, spirit and being of an animal, though I am often inspired to try. I feel the same wonder when I see wild animals on the desert trail near my home: gila monster, deer, peccary. And I feel dread. One does not touch the gila monster; the javelinas are large, dangerously short-sighted and sharp-tusked, and anger easily when their young are running with the band. One does well to admire the rattlesnake from a safe distance and you never want to step on one.

We live in what the Tibetan Buddhists call meat bodies. Life carries no guarantees, whatsoever. But, it is magnificent. I am female, and want to project my feelings of awe toward a female way of seeing the world. I would expect males to look toward a male. And both to take delight in the other.

Perhaps Eros is both my god and goddess. A much earlier, primeval Eros than the chubby cherub with the bow was darker, more shadowy, one of the protogenoi, or firstborn of the cosmos, who emerged out of Chaos long before the appearance of Aphrodite, who was later reckoned his mother. Among the protogenoi, gender seems to matter less; their issue, if any, are not necessarily created through coitus. The scant textual mentions are vague. Sappho called Eros the “Limb Loosener.” She may have been referring to the shuddering, petite morte of orgasm. Eros also surely appears in the typhonic imperatives of childbirth; the diminishment and disappearance of boundaries between self and other in all unforeseen moments of deep connection, as when one comes eye to eye with a wild animal; and the disentanglement of spark from clay in death.

Will I ever find my Goddess? Would I even know if I did? At this point, I very much doubt it. The best I can do, like my ancient brothers and sisters at humanity's dawn, is to look, make art, live, love, and die.

For a sample critique of the Chauvet Venus hypothesis:

<http://accuca.conectia.es/czuchner010701.htm> (<http://accuca.conectia.es/czuchner010701.htm>)

I obtained my doctorate at Pacifica Graduate Institute, which houses the [Opus Archives](http://www.pacifica.edu/opus_archive_research_center.aspx) ([http://www.pacifica.edu/opus\\_archive\\_research\\_center.aspx](http://www.pacifica.edu/opus_archive_research_center.aspx)), the repository of Maria Gimbutas' library, as well as that of Joseph Campbell; eventually it will house that of [James Hillman](http://www.mythosandlogos.com/Hillman.html) (<http://www.mythosandlogos.com/Hillman.html>), the most prominent post-Jungian

depth psychologist, and of my own academic advisor, Christine Downing (<http://www.pacifica.edu/innercontent-m.aspx?id=1880>), a prominent religious scholar and writer-participant in the birth of the goddess movement of the 70s and 80s.

Posted in Uncategorized

I remember these discussions about Gimbutas's work: why are the breasts so big, why no head? I thought Gimbutas answered that well. These statues are not a literal depiction of a personal deity. They are symbolic of the life force, the vulva, the breast, the organs of nurturance representing the female-ness of creation. If the phallus can be depicted later in history, as in a herm, to represent fertility, why not parts of the female form? Earth based spiritualities, religions, cosmologies that encompass and inform the totality of a culture do not usually have a "personal" god or goddess. This animistic presence is literal in a completely different way, in fact, the statement "Thou Art Goddess" is also a literal commentary used by some. How does the saying go? Don't mistake the signpost for what it is pointing too. What I am hesitant to accept is the word "feminine." That is a construct of gender that I believe is malleable, and of course changes in every culture. In a way, the vulva and breasts of these ancient statues remove any reference to "feminine," and refer to raw female-ness. And wow, I read Downing! Very cool she was your advisor!

By: [circasantaniello@yahoo.com](mailto:circasantaniello@yahoo.com) on June 3, 2011  
at 5:57 am

Reply

Circe, thank you for this comment. My insight was that I've been seeking my 'goddess' through the literalizing lens of Puritanism, a persistent, unconscious force in this culture. You make the point much more clearly and completely, that literalizing any image of deity stops very far short of the truth of the psyche. Your thoughtfulness reminds me I'm whining when I complain about Gimbutas or, for that matter, the use Eisler made of her writings. Still, I would love to know the impossible: what did the images mean to the people who made them? And, hopefully, the more possible, and I realize, my real point: what can we do to empower and enfranchise our sisters, real women in the real world, to quell rape, oppression and murder and liberate the creative energies of half the world.

Yes, Chris Downing is a wonderful inspiration. She is a fierce scholar and thinker, and a generous teacher, still going strong in her 70's.

By: **daedala** on June 18, 2011  
at 9:42 am

Reply

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