

The Great Mother ~ sovereignty and wholeness.

*If the Cyprian falls on us, it's no good  
Resisting. If we yield, she will come on us  
Gently. If she finds us disdainful, she will  
Abuse us O you can't think how severely.  
She ranges the sky, she is there in the waves  
Of the sea. Of the Cyprian all things were  
Born. It is she who sows and gives love by  
Which all of us on earth have our being.*

Euripides 'Hippolytos'

Awareness of and reverence for the Great Mother Goddess has, in recent decades, gathered momentum. In historical analysis, much of this awareness was due to the work of people such as Harrison, Graves, Campbell, Sjojo & Mor, Gimbutas and others.<sup>1</sup> Many are familiar with the fact that the first anthropomorphic form to be represented in art was that of an abundant woman. Such cave art and figures in the round, of exquisite beauty and great skill, were numerous throughout Europe (Fig 1 and 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, J. 1959, *Primitive Mythology*, Souvenir Press, London.

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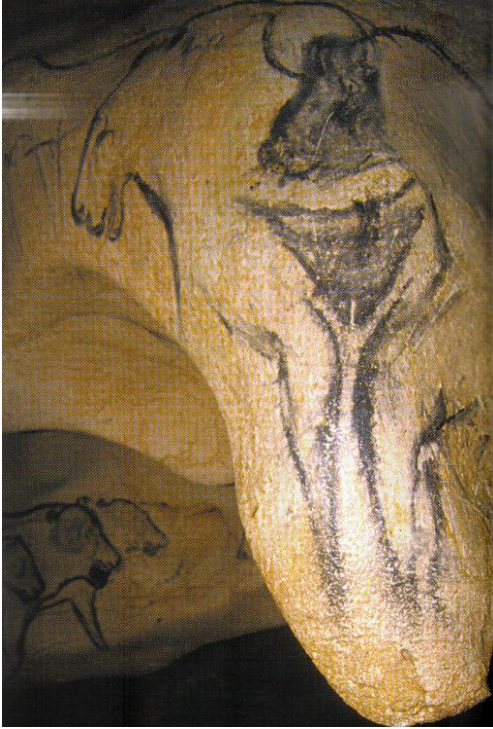


Fig. 1  
Sacred Feminine. Cave drawings in charcoal,  
Vallon-Pont-d'Arc. 28 000 BCE (Cohen 2003:12)



Fig. 2  
Brown steatite goddess, 48 mm.  
22 000/17 000 BCE (Cohen 2003: 45).

It is not a difficult thing to imagine that this art was created in honour of a female principle (as well as the manifested reality of Woman), whose creative ability and rich connections to Earth and Moon carried communities into their future. It is not only these attributes of the Great Mother, however, which were honoured in ancient times, nor which we Journey with in the present day. There are the darker aspects of the Mother, necessary for wholeness and the harvest, be that agricultural, personal or spiritual. This is the lesson of the Great Mother; the Journey to sovereignty over Self.

The Goddess Aphrodite, well known from ancient Greek culture in particular, is thought often to be merely the Goddess of love and beauty. In fact she was, and is, far more than this, and the evidence, even from patriarchal Classical Greece, shows us this. The discussion below provides some fascinating breadth to an understanding of the goddess and her worship in ancient times.

In terms of her history, Aphrodite was not an 'indigenous' Greek goddess. Her titles the 'Cyprian' and 'Paphian' as well as the inconsistent depiction of her ancestry in myth, first as the daughter of Zeus and Dione in Homer (*Iliad* 5.324), and then born of the foam from a mingling of sea water and Ouranos' castrated genitals in Hesiod's *Theogony* (188-200, 353) provide ample room for interpretation. We have further literary evidence however, that Aphrodite hails from the East. Herodotus (1.103) relates the temple of 'Aphrodite' in Syria as being the oldest of this goddess' temples, and 'the one in Cyprus the Cyprians themselves admit was derived from it, and the one in Cythera was built by the Phoenicians, who belong to this part of Syria'.

There is mixed evidence for the origins of her name. Hesiod takes Aphrodite to come from *aphros* 'foam', whereas Grigson (1976: 31) maintains this was a mispronunciation stemming from the unsuccessful attempt by the Greeks to pronounce 'Ashtoreth', which became 'Attorethe' and then 'Aphthorethe' before settling on 'Aphrodite'. That Aphrodite shares symbology with Eastern goddesses like Inanna and Ishtar is apparent in such motifs as doves, the morning and evening star and sacred prostitutes (Grigson 1976: 25). Even ancient ritual seems to show comparisons; love magic of the Mesopotamians often involved assuaging the anger of a husband through prayers and the weaving of a magic girdle, so similar to what we find in the *Iliad* (14.240), when Hera requests Aphrodite's help (Faraone 1999: 102).

Further to the above discussion, it is appropriate to note the characteristics of these older Eastern goddesses. Also, whilst fertility played a central role in these Eastern Goddesses' function and worship, there was a clear understanding that these deities were often fierce, violent and warlike, harbingers and protectors of the dead; so called 'Dark Mothers' (Grigson 1976: 27; Rosenzweig 2004: 59). Whilst these divine aspects are found throughout Greek and other pantheons, they are not usually attributed to or discussed with regard to Aphrodite.

As Gimbutas (1999:164) notes, however, Goddesses that had previously claimed these aspects as their own, in order that they embody a more powerful, cyclic persona, were often the same deities who were stripped of such responsibilities in later mythology like that of Classical Greece.

Aphrodite was known as a beneficent unifier. Her epithet *en Kepois* ‘(in the Gardens)’ is thought to have actually referred to the goddess as a vegetal/fertility deity rather than a literal location. An epithet used off the Greek mainland was *Hierokepia*, which is the equivalent of *en Kepois* (Rosenzweig 2004: 30). Also, following Homer’s mythology, Aphrodite was a child of earth and sky (Zeus and Dione), and ‘the power of Aphrodite to unite the heavenly and earthly realms is the ultimate expression of her power. It is from this unification that all other unions are possible’ (Rosenzweig 2004: 80; Grigson 1976: 33). This of course includes union between man and woman. Also, whilst rain may be a basic ingredient of fertility (of the earth), as moisture itself was considered to be for women, the actual phenomenon of rain precipitating from the ocean to the sky to then fall to the earth is in fact rain *bridging* these realms; an embodiment of Aphrodite’s unifying fertility function (Suhr 1969: 33; Aristophanes *Clouds* ). Aeschylus (Fragment 25 in Suhr 1969: 39) describes Aphrodite as unifier thus:

The holy heaven yearns to wound the earth, and yearning layeth hold on the earth to join in wedlock; the rain, fallen from the amorous heaven, impregnates the earth, and it bringeth forth for mankind the food for flocks and herds and Demeter’s gifts; and from that moist marriage-rite the woods put on their bloom. Of all these things I [Aphrodite] am the cause.

This passage brings to mind even more ancient concepts of the ‘sacred marriage’ between the chthonic great mother goddess and her consort, known in earlier Indo European cultures. Consider also Aphrodite’s other well known epithet *Pandemos* (of All the people). In this role Aphrodite’s concern is with political harmony, as well as domestic. Her blessing was considered essential to the health of Athens. As will be seen, Aphrodite clearly takes on a protective role in other areas of Greece, reminding us once again of her role outside the bedroom.

A symbol that exemplifies Aphrodite's unifying role beautifully is the ladder, which she is often depicted descending, from one realm to another and most often in blessing of either a union (marriage) or other transition in life. The Ludovisi Throne as well as the medallion uncovered in Building Z in Athens are excellent examples, not only of Aphrodite and her ladder, blessing unions and transitions in the lives of Athenians, but also clearly honouring the more common protector and benefactor of land and people, Aphrodite *Pandemos*. As Rosenzweig (2004: 78) states '...it...may symbolize the unity of... two principle aspects of her power... Epithets did not compartmentalize her powers but merely provided a way for suppliants to invoke particular powers that they required in their daily lives'.

There is much debate surrounding the significance of spinning in art, and much of it is ambiguous. What is clear however, is that whilst spinning was an extremely important activity to the economy of Athens, as well as being considered an activity undertaken by the respectable wife and her women in the *oikos*, spinning appears to claim other roles (Suhr 1969: 16). It has been argued that spinning may have been considered as representing a kind of fertility symbolism or magic, as well as being considered a magical activity related to the 'spinning and weaving' of Fortune and Fate. Both these arguments are useful in exploring Aphrodite's role as a great mother goddess.

To attend firstly to the notion of spinning and fertility being linked, certain religious depictions in art from Mesopotamia and even Egypt appear to communicate a rain making/fertility goddess engaged in the act of spinning. Raw flax or wool was likened to the fleecy quality of clouds, the thread to rain and new brides were gifted a distaff or spindle on their wedding day. This may have been for practical purposes, but Pliny warns against the plying of spindles on a highway or leaving them uncovered, as this would prove damaging to fertility (Suhr 1969: 30; Pliny *NH* 28). Such a warning indicates the magical connotations of spinning and its equipment. Further, spinning was linked very closely with the nature of the universe and spinning out of destiny. The Fates are often depicted as spinning, Klotho in particular, and singing as they do so (Suhr 1969: 30). Plato (*Republic* 10.616) makes analogy to the movement of the 'cosmic spindle'.

From Pausanias (1.19.2) and others we know that Aphrodite was synonymous with Klotho the spinner, the eldest of the Fates. We know too that doves, the goddess's bird, were also linked with the Fates (Grigson 1976: 189). The mirror, known as one of Aphrodite's symbols, is depicted with the spinning goddess both in Greek art and earlier Eastern art, though it is unclear if these particular Greek depictions developed from the East. In light of Aphrodite's probable origins, however, it is certainly a possibility (Suhr 1969: 144). So, through Aphrodite and other Eastern goddesses mentioned, we have an intermingling of love/creation and fate/fortune, very much in keeping with a great mother goddess figure, one who embodies wholeness and thus sovereignty over Self.

The concept of a dark mother or death goddess is not one that would normally be associated with Aphrodite. It is however, a common theme in older, less fragmented female divinities, as the concept of life and death were held to be so closely interconnected, even in later Greek times once this more holistic deity had faded somewhat. To begin with more subtle demonstrations of Aphrodite as a dark mother, it is appropriate to note the Greek sentiment toward love, which is most certainly her realm. It has been noted that whilst love or some kind of yearning to bond was considered a precursor to creation, love also had its wild, even malignant, side. In Nestor's Cup Inscription from the eighth century BCE there is an unstoppable character to amorous intent; where '...desire...will seize him instantly'. Faraone (1999: 22) says that 'crossovers between the technologies of cursing and erotic magic were extremely common in ancient Greece' and curses, so common at the time, often used love as the tool of malicious intent. This is supported by references in the sources to *eros* being *hurled* at someone by a deity, most often Aphrodite or else afflicted as if with disease (Homer, *Iliad* 14.261; Hesiod *Theogony* 122).

Another glimpse into the possible chthonic nature of Aphrodite is her role in the rite of the Arrephoria, who were priestesses of Athena *Polias* between the ages of seven and eleven who served the goddess for one year.

During their final rite, they leave the temple of the virgin and proceed to the sanctuary of Aphrodite *en Kepois* where the young girls processed down an underground descent, where they apparently left those mysterious sacred objects given to them by Athena and returned with others, of which just as much is known, from Aphrodite. After this rite, they do not return to the virgin's temple (Pausanias 1.27.3; Rosenzweig 2004: 46). There are of course two clues here; one being the subterranean sacred site and second being the role of Aphrodite as some kind of initiator. While the true nature and meaning of the rite is unclear, it nevertheless shows a more solemn and multi faceted nature to the worship of Aphrodite than is often accounted for, as in Homer's works for example.

This point then leads us to consideration of the furious, war like nature often a part of a great mother goddess, as mentioned earlier in the paper. This aspect of a deity describes one who moves to frenzy in battle, perhaps drinking the blood of the enemy and savouring death and decay as a natural part of life, but also exhibiting the traits of a mother lion, fierce and protective of her cubs (Kinsley 1989: 130). Efforts at discovering this aspect of Aphrodite in Greek times at first appears difficult; Homer's answer to this is to have Aphrodite run sobbing to her mother when she receives a cut to her wrist trying to save her son from battle (*Iliad* 5.380). Similarly, a wrathful Aphrodite is not a goddess who rages at injustices, but rather rages at insults to her pride (Apuleius 6.1). So is this all then that is left to us of the ferocious goddess from the east?

If we venture outside of Athens, certainly not. We have at least two undisputable depictions of Aphrodite as warrior and protector. Pausanias (3.23.1) relates that the idol of Aphrodite *Ourania* on Cythera showed the goddess in armour. Also at Corinth, where Aphrodite was the patron deity, the goddess was depicted as an armed protectress. Both these examples leave us with something to add to our deeper understanding of Aphrodite as Great Mother. To come to a final point in this exploration of the Goddess, Aphrodite had clear attributes as a death Goddess. One example is the Greeks' use of the dove to depict a person's soul, hence votives of doves in graves and depictions in funerary art, where a goddess (Aphrodite?) sometimes holds this bird (66.009 University of Queensland Antiquities Museum).

Also, her epithets at times clearly demonstrated her to be Queen of the dead. Aphrodite *Epitymbia* ('on the Grave') from Delphi, in Argos and Lakonike she was known as Aphrodite *Tymborochos* ('the Grave Robber'), referring to her power to bring back the dead. We also know of Aphrodite *Skotia* ('of Darkness') and *Melainis* ('Black Aphrodite') at Corinth and Thespiai (Rosenzweig 2004: 211).

It is clear from this discussion that if we describe the ancient Great Mother goddess as being a figure to evoke tenderness and honour, fear and awe through her domain of love, creation, life, battle fury and death, then we do indeed begin to understand the role of Aphrodite, not only for Greeks, but for the earlier and far flung peoples that appear to have been her beginnings. Here is a goddess strongly connected to fertility through her powers of unification, and command of the elements of earthly and heavenly realms. She is the goddess who spins out creation as well as fate, who offers blessings and curses through fortune and love, and she is most certainly a protector of her people, an armoured divinity that speaks of strength and her eastern roots, where the goddess as lover of battles was well known. And whilst she may be shown as beautiful to us, she is also the grim goddess of the grave, an aspect that does indeed appear to offer the final death-life-death element of a Great Mother Goddess.

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