

Spellcraft Issue # 8

## **The Bird Goddess- tracing Her story through history Part 1**

By Alicia Sherwood for Goddess Association in Australia.

Animal epiphanies of deities are a well known feature of spiritual traditions from all over the world, throughout prehistory and history. The bird in particular is a favourite totem of the Goddess, Her companion, messenger and embodiment of the magic of avian wisdom. It is of course the functions and characteristics of the bird goddess which most contribute to a knowledge of ancient cultures' reverence of the *cycle of renewal*. The Bird Goddess ably spanned the world of the living and the dead, solid ground and fathomless ether, the role of protector and hunter. In this issue, we will look at the some of the evidence from the prehistoric period which leaves us with a wonderful sense of the diversity and popularity with which the Goddess was worshipped in bird form. The second part of this exploration, which will be offered in the next issue of *Spellcraft*, traces later evidence in art and literature, as well as discussing further the significance of the Bird Goddess and Her attributes.

It has been said that , in the Bronze Age:

a number of symbols were used again and again, and are found widely from one end of Europe to the other. The bird...assumed an importance that it had not had since the Neolithic...and clearly possessed a significance in belief systems...<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the persistence of bird symbology since these very early periods is astounding. Fig 1 (below), a pottery container from Hotnica, near Veliko Turnovo, is dated to about 4000BC and has a clearly owl –like face, though it is uncertain whether it was used in a religious context.



Fig 1 Pottery container with owl face (Whittle 1994: 164).

In the previous issue, several examples of representations of the bird of prey, in conjunction with feminine symbolism, were given. Bird symbolism was often represented as either birds of prey, night (death) birds, water birds or other bird types specifically associated with regeneration or a particular goddess.<sup>ii</sup> A figurine (Fig 2) from the Vinca culture in Bulgaria dated to 5000-4500 BC is small-breasted and winged, reminiscent of later Mycenaean (Bronze Age Greek) figurines, known as 'Psi'. These small figurines (approx. 12 cm high) were incredibly popular for several centuries and were found in a variety of contexts; domestic shrines, votive deposits and burials. Their simplicity (amongst other things) has, in the past, meant that some scholars have overlooked their important and sacred character and function. Fortunately, this has more recently been remedied to some extent.<sup>iii</sup>

The Vinca figurine is also marked with interesting labyrinthine designs which possibly relate to regeneration symbology. Often, examples only inform us of their avian nature and are less specific in terms of particular bird 'species'. It is likely, therefore, that bird epiphanies had two streams of meaning; one general and the other related to specific functions such as death or fecundity. Bird epiphanies during the Neolithic reached far further than Europe and examples are known from the Near East, Crete, Egypt and the region of Greece.

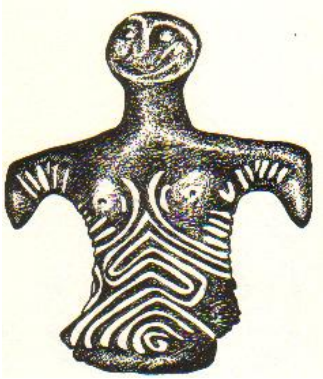


Fig 2 Terracotta figurine with wing like arms and stylized decoration. Vinca culture. (Sjoo & Mor 1987: 93).

A predynastic terracotta figurine from Egypt (Fig 3) clearly has a bird like head, as well as the raised arms of the divine epiphany. A most interesting example from Mallia in Crete (Fig 4), dating from the third millennium, shows a distinctly bird-like face with large eyes and small breasts in a vase form. The triangular sides, which have unusual embellishment, may represent wings.

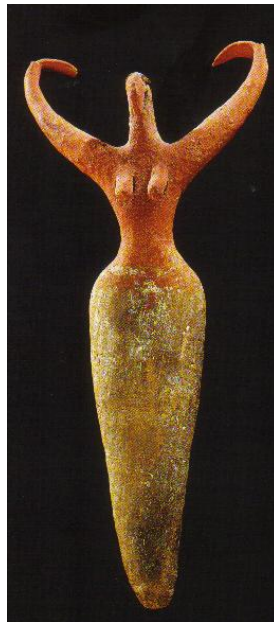


Fig 3 Predynastic Egyptian figurine with bird head and upraised arms (Hassan 1998: 107).



Fig 4 Neolithic vase with beaked face and large eyes (Sjoo & Mor 1987: 94).

The ancient Near East yields some clear examples of the bird goddess. Dated around 2700-2400 BC is a marble figurine (Fig 5) with a very unusual head and clearly defined wings held against the body.



Fig 5 Marble figurine with bird characteristics (Baring & Cashford 1991: 80).

Many interesting examples are also found in the region of Greece from this earlier time, and provide not only patent evidence for artistic representations of the bird goddess from this period, but also show similarities to the Psi figures. From Thessaly, and dated to about 6000 BC, is a female figurine with a decidedly beaked face and elongated neck (Fig 6). This figure, which also has quite large breasts, is almost certainly a representation of the Bird Goddess. The combination of unusual neck and face, and its early date, make alternative interpretations unlikely.



Fig 6 Female figurine with beaked face and elongated neck. 6000 BC Thessaly (Baring & Cashford 1991: 59).

Later, in the Bronze Age, bird symbolism in sacred contexts continues to exert its importance. In Europe, the Celts had a long history of reverence for birds. In mythology, Llew and Blodeuwedd have the eagle and the owl as their bird epiphanies.<sup>iv</sup> Egypt continues to provide a wealth of evidence for the sacred nature of birds and instances of bird epiphanies. In one creation myth, primordial existence was in the form of a Cosmic Egg, which contained Re in bird epiphany, who then proceeded to create the world. In addition, several Egyptian Goddesses are known to have embodied bird epiphanies. Mut was worshipped as a vulture goddess and Isis and Nephthys are both represented with wings. Maat, the embodiment of absolute justice, is depicted iconographically as a feather.<sup>v</sup>

A Minoan Bird Goddess is found in clay ware designs. Figs 7 and 8 below depict stylized figures dancing. They have egg shaped bodies and the heads of birds. The divinity, and gender, of these figures are inferred by several features. Firstly, bird headed figures, which are almost certainly divine, are known from Minoan seals. Secondly, and perhaps more significant, is the egg-shaped body that houses within it many seeds, and is reminiscent of the pomegranate, the fruit of the dead. The depictions are probably meant to represent the abundant life held in the womb of the divine feminine. Note also the blossoming stems of vegetation that sprout from the hands. All these clues seem to indicate an illustration of a regenerative bird goddess.

An example from Crete evinces such characterisation. A goddess figurine with raised arms from Late Minoan III period (Fig 9) has birds on her crown, and possibly thus indicates the presence of a bird goddess.<sup>1</sup>



Fig 7 Minoan bird goddess? Stylized figures that exhibit divine and bird epiphany characteristics (Goodison & Morris 1998: 122).

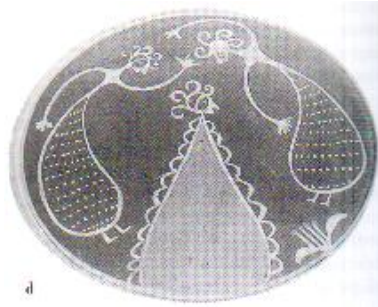


Fig 8 Dancing goddess of regeneration. Crete. (Goodison & Morris 1998: 122).

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<sup>1</sup> There are other figures which are almost identical, except that the crown includes pomegranates or poppies, both of which are associated with the dead. The poppies may also allude to the use of opium in religious ceremony (Hawkes 1968: 88). The fact that these examples of iconography are so similar, with the exception of the crown's symbol, may suggest a relationship in the significance of the two symbols. This in turn affirms the meaning of regeneration ascribed to bird symbology and to the female deity.



Fig 9 Cretan goddess with bird crown (Preziosi & Hitchcock 1999: 211).

Even the East produces interesting examples in the Bronze Age. Fig 10 below is a terracotta relief of a goddess, probably Inanna-Ishtar, since she is surrounded by the six eight-pointed rosettes typical of depictions of her.<sup>vi</sup> Notice, however, should be taken of the face. It is unmistakably beaked, and has large, rounded eyes. Perhaps this is a bird epiphany of the well known deity. Certainly, the sacred nature of avian attributes penetrates the iconography of Goddesses from many cultures, and over many millennia.



Fig 10 Relief of Inanna-Ishtar with bird face (Westenholz 1998: 77).

Next issue will continue the fascinating history of the Bird Goddess.

Harvest Blessings to one and all!

The Goddess Association in Australia (G.A.I.A.) is a not for profit, member- driven organization which is committed to bringing women together, united in the timeless wisdom and lore of Goddess. For more information go to [www.goddessassociation.com.au](http://www.goddessassociation.com.au)

Alicia Sherwood M.A. (Ancient History) facilitates programs and workshops for women. For more information, go to [www.moontree.net](http://www.moontree.net)

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<sup>i</sup> Harding A.F. *The Mycenaean and Europe* (1994: 321).

<sup>ii</sup> Gimbutas M. *The Living Goddesses* (1999: 41).

<sup>iii</sup> The Mycenaean Phi and Psi figures were the basis of my research for my Masters thesis. The information contained within this article is adapted from Chapter 7 of this work.

<sup>iv</sup> Mac Cullough J.A. *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (1911:108).

<sup>v</sup> David A.R. *The Ancient Egyptians. Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1982: 122).

<sup>vi</sup> Westenholz J.G. 'Goddesses of the Ancient Near East 3000–1000 BC', Goodison, L. & Morris, C. (eds.), *Ancient Goddesses* (1988:77).