

4. FROM IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHERHOOD TO 'COLLECTING MOTHER GODDESSES'

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ABSTRACT

Mention Minoans, and most people will call to mind vivid artistic images of Minoan females, from the formidable serpent-wielding figures known as the Snake Goddesses to elegantly clad ladies on frescos and gold rings. Imagery of this kind led Sir Arthur Evans to identify a Great or Mother Goddess at the heart of Minoan religion. The idea that each and every female figurine represents a 'mother goddess' concerned with fertility has been thoroughly critiqued by numerous scholars. Why then was the model of a mother goddess so attractive to early archaeologists such as Evans? Why were her powers deemed to be centred on fertility and motherhood, despite the evidence from many cultures that goddesses can and do also fulfil a host of other functions? It may be argued that this narrow view was strongly informed by the complex social and intellectual ideas of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including social evolutionary theory, Freudian psychology, and the construction of the female body in medicine. I suggest that another important factor was the contemporary idealisation of, and preoccupation with, motherhood as a conscious social strategy, in which motherhood was held to be crucial to the well-being of the imperial nation. This paper explores this ideology of motherhood and its role in shaping Evans's concept of a Minoan mother goddess.

By the mid-20th century, two quite contradictory interpretations of the idea of 'mother goddesses' coexisted within the scholarly literature. Scholars such as O.G.S. Crawford (*The Eye Goddess*, 1957) and E.O. James (*The Cult of the Mother Goddess*, 1959) still vigorously supported the notion of a Great Mother Goddess, whose domain had encompassed a geographical spread from Europe through to India, and whose chronological life extended from Palaeolithic Venus figurines to the cult of the Virgin Mary. Archaeological material found a prominent place too in E. Neumann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955). At the same time, the interpretative tide was turning to a more critical appraisal of this long cherished reading of early religious beliefs and practices. Gordon Childe's rather sharp comment that 'the collection and interpretation of mother-goddesses is just a harmless outlet for the sexual impulses of old men' (1958: 4) epitomises this shift in attitude, though the comment may be less acidic than humorous if read as referring both to himself and to his old friend Crawford, whose goddess book had just been published. This was soon followed by both Ucko's major reappraisal of figurines (1968) and Andrew Fleming's article, 'The myth of the mother-goddess' (1969). Archaeology had begun a decisive move away from the idea that each and every figurine represents a mother goddess concerned with maternity and fertility, and towards much more nuanced and contextualised engagements with the material

record. By contrast, the concept of a distant past dominated by a powerful great goddess or creatrix continued to find support in the works of the Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1974, 1982, 1989, 1991) and, through her charismatic influence, has extended far beyond the narrow confines of academia into the writings, poetry, and rituals of the modern 'Goddess movement' (though this term undoubtedly suggests a cohesion which masks a considerable variety of views: see e.g. STARHAWK 1979; EISLER 1987; GADON 1989). The importance of ancient female divinities for those involved in modern goddess worship means that this is no sterile academic debate, but continues to be a topic of huge importance to feminist spiritual thought today (most recently, RUETHER 2005). It also remains the case that ideas which developed most fully in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in which the past was everywhere envisaged as matriarchal and goddess-centred, have continued to have a major influence in the shaping of perceptions of the feminine divine. It is therefore of considerable interest to try to explore the context in which this particular reading of the archaeological record developed – in other words, to explore how this knowledge of the past was produced.

Accordingly, the central issue explored in this paper is: why was the model of a mother goddess so attractive to early archaeologists such as Evans? Why did he so readily see female divinity in terms of a 'Great' or 'Mother Goddess'? Close examination of Evans's writings shows that he returned repeatedly to this idea of a deity whose powers centred on fertility and maternity, interpreting material as diverse as Neolithic figurines, the faience 'Snake Goddesses', and images on gold rings through this unifying lens. Why was Evans so drawn to this interpretation, when near to hand, in the cultures of the Near East and Egypt (and indeed elsewhere in the world), was clear evidence that goddesses could and did play active roles in areas beyond the important but narrowly biological areas of fertility and childbirth – for example, in the legitimization of power, in protecting cities, or engaging in warfare? In addition, at least from the time for which we have any written records, these deities are individuals with names and titles, so that the idea of an earlier undifferentiated mother or creator lies less within the material evidence than in the realm of speculation about the spiritual world-views of earlier societies, and as back projections from later syncretic tendencies within Greek and Roman religion.

While by no means alone in his advocacy of a mother goddess figure, Sir Arthur Evans was one of the most important and influential scholars to place a powerful female deity at the heart of an ancient religion, though he also associates this with a more primitive stage of human development. This was very much in keeping with the contemporary intellectual climate, in which the distant past and non-Western societies were both constructed as primitive and situated at the other end of the evolutionary scale from Western, patriarchal society (KUPER 1988, 2005). At the same time we should not overlook the fluidity (even inconsistency) of Evans's views on Minoan religion. While he does refer to the primitive vestiges of a matriarchal past which sets the Minoans up in opposition to Evans's own Western present, he also develops a monotheistic status for his Minoan goddess, which could be seen as making the Minoans more evolved, more modern, and by extension more European than their Near Eastern polytheistic neighbours. A complex network of intellectual ideas and ideologies of the later 19th and early 20th centuries contributed to such readings of the past, including social evolutionary theory, imperialism, and orientalism, the ideology of 'separate spheres' of male-public/female-private, and medical and psychological constructions of both body and mind. I would draw particular attention to the ideology of motherhood as an important part of this mix, and I will argue in this paper that the development of this pervasive idealisation of motherhood as the central and only proper role for women should also be seen as a pivotal factor in constructing and collecting mother goddesses.

An even earlier historical shift in the perception of goddesses has been discussed by Ronald Hutton, who observes how the Romantic movement of the later 18th and early 19th centuries elevated the long-standing idea of a link between nature and the female (which itself was derived from the Classical Greek notion of a female earth). This is reflected in a distinct shift of focus in Romantic poetry, where Classical goddesses are associated predominantly with nature, in contrast to their earlier representations as patrons of civilisation (HUTTON 1997). The idea, then, that females (and by extension goddesses) have a particular affinity with nature rather than culture has a long and complex history in Western thought (ORTNER 1976; MERCHANT 1980), and such ideas contributed to the naturalness of a female deity as fertility or mother goddess. Hutton also briefly draws attention to the work of Gerhard as a key figure in the development of the idea of a single Great Goddess through his 1849 article on the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods (*Metroom*) in the Athenian Agora. The direct influence of Gerhard's work on the well-known evolutionary theories of his friend, the Swiss jurist and Hellenist Johann Jacob Bachofen, has been more fully traced by Philippe Borgeaud (1994-5; 1999). Evans makes no direct reference to either Gerhard or Bachofen in his writings, but the influence of Bachofen's evolutionary schema in which the nexus of mother-right (matriarchy)-primordial goddess lies at an early and primitive stage of human social development is clear enough when Evans writes of the older matriarchal stage of human development (EVANS 1921: 45-52; LAPATIN 2002: 68-71). Evans was also in contact with the Cambridge Ritualists, such as Jane Harrison and James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, and there was cross-fertilisation of ideas. Evans occasionally cited Frazer (and was clearly influenced by Frazer's attempt to trace a near universal Great Mother with a lesser son-consort; cf. LAPATIN, Chapter 6), and Harrison used Evans's material in her own writings on early religion, which incorporated a modified version of Bachofen's notion of matriarchy as a lower and more primitive stage than patriarchy (HARRISON 1903; LAPATIN 2002: 70-72).

The term 'mother goddess' has, of course, a wide range of connotations, when used both in ancient sources and in modern scholarship. It can be a term of respect as well as referring to real ancestry (as in 'Mother of the Gods'), and it can be applied both to deities who are actual mothers (Isis, Demeter) and to goddesses who have never given birth but are nurturing (*kourotrophos*) such as Artemis. Like much of the language used to describe and discuss female divinities, there is also the sense – present in much scholarship on goddesses – that these deities are somehow interchangeable, and that they can be essentialised through their commonalities as 'mother goddess', 'earth goddess', or 'fertility goddess'. It scarcely needs to be pointed out that male gods are never defined in this reductive fashion, even when they are strongly connected with fertility, presumably since they, unlike their female counterparts, are not perceived of as part of nature or treated, like their human counterparts, as creatures of their biology.

In the course of *The Palace of Minos*, Evans's own internal debates about the nature of female divinity – as glimpsed through the often ambiguous imagery of Minoan art – are visible, and while he writes of *the* goddess, he does acknowledge that the distinction between one goddess with varied aspects and multiple goddesses is a blurry one. A good example of this is his discussion of the 'Snake Goddesses' where he eventually identified only one figure as a goddess, while relegating the other two (the third being very fragmentary) to the role of attendants (GOODISON and MORRIS 1998: 124-5). Although Evans was, therefore, very well aware of the difficulties of the evidence, his overall tendency is to write of a 'Great Minoan Goddess', whom he often refers to as a 'Mother Goddess'. That Evans did also have in his mind literal associations with motherhood is clear from the lan-

guage he uses; to give just a few examples: 'the organs of maternity so prominently shown' (writing about figurines, EVANS 1921: 45); 'the matronly figures represented by the early clay idols. It seems probable, indeed, that in this case as in others we see before us a primitive Mother Goddess' (EVANS 1921: 115); 'her breasts, which are almost entirely bare, are of matronly proportions' (on the larger 'Snake Goddess', EVANS 1921: 501). He also writes of 'Mother idols' in areas where there were 'a series of Great Goddesses who often combined the ideas of motherhood and virginity' (EVANS 1921: 52). The relative prominence of female imagery in the Cretan material is certainly suggestive of a central role for one or more goddesses, but striking by their absence from Minoan art are images showing pregnancy or a mother (divine or otherwise) and suckling child. Why, then, did Evans so enthusiastically espouse the idea of the 'Mother Goddess' for the Neolithic and Bronze Age Cretans?

As summarised above, other scholars have rightly drawn attention to the longer-term development of an equation between females (human and divine) and nature, and the emergence of social evolutionary ideas in the mid-19th century as factors in the production of knowledge about the past. Alongside this intense intellectual debate about the distant past, a contemporary ideology of motherhood had developed into a major public narrative in Western countries by the mid-19th century. It continued to be a recurrent and revisited theme over the course of the next century, not least in relation to the social changes wrought by two World Wars. Thus, the ideology of motherhood had developed and was at its height during the time Evans was growing up and writing about the Minoans. A number of studies have drawn attention to the point that motherhood, rather than being simply natural, is in fact socially constructed (RICH 1976; BADINTER 1981; DALLY 1982). During the Victorian period (and beyond) the idealised mother became the focus of endless professional advice and criticism, and the need for women to fulfil their child-bearing role was intimately linked to concerns about population within the nation-state and the welfare of the imperial nation. Far, then, from being a matter of private concern, motherhood was very much in the public arena, where it was both idealised and contested (YEO 1999).

In Victorian Britain the separation of the 'spheres' meant the sharp demarcation of male public space from domestic private space; the latter was seen as the only proper place for the woman as mother with her children, once the process of industrialisation shifted production away from home and family-based work (ERHENREICH and ENGLISH 1987). Motherhood became imbued with a highly charged symbolic significance in which devotion to the domestic ideal was seen as a 'sweet vocation', but one which was also burdened with heavy responsibility both for the moral well-being of the individual family and beyond that for the reproductive well-being of the nation. This domestic ideal is well summed up in the term 'Angel in the House', the title of a poem written by Coventry Patmore in 1854 about his own wife. The poem, which praises the purity and self-sacrifice of this domestic angel, grew in popularity through the rest of the century, and the image remained vivid enough for Virginia Woolf to write of 'killing the Angel in the House' as late as 1931 (published in WOOLF 1942). Although this domestic ideal was essentially a middle-class one, Queen Victoria came to be seen as a model of domestic and marital virtue, and in her public role as monarch was termed 'the mother of the nation'. While at the other end of the spectrum, poorer women, who had no choice but to engage in productive labour outside the home, were considered neglectful and inadequate mothers, and were often blamed for high infant mortality by government officials, doctors, and religious philanthropists.

Women everywhere were bombarded with 'professional' advice on every aspect of motherhood and domesticity, in popular literature, newspapers, and official pamphlets. A

whole industry in advice manuals developed, which advised on every possible aspect of good mothering (GORHAM 1982). The 19th-century discussions of the 'nature of womanhood' focused on notions of women being 'creatures of their biology' best suited for the home, and such ideas were widely supported, whether in evangelical religious teachings or biomedical studies, all of which contributed to and reinforced social ideology. Thus medical wisdom held that women should curtail productive activity outside the home in order to conserve their energies for childbirth and childrearing (HALL 1979; HARRISON 1995; HUDSON 1995), while social Darwinists held that female development was 'arrested' in order to preserve energies for reproduction (D'CRUZE 1995). I have focused on Europe, and especially Britain, since it is the immediate world in which Evans grew up that is of interest. It is worth pointing out, though, that similar ideas developed elsewhere in Europe, and in Australia, Canada (ARNUP *et al.* 1990), and the USA, where 'the cult of motherhood was nearly as sacred in mid-nineteenth century America as the belief in some versions of democracy' (DOUGLAS 1978: 74).

Not everyone, of course, subscribed passively to the belief and practice of the Victorian 'separate spheres' and the definition of maternity as a woman's highest calling. But it is interesting that even in the contesting of this essentialism, women actually used the high status assigned to motherhood by powerful institutions, such as the state, religious groups, and medical professionals, as a means of subverting and creating space for themselves outside the home. For example, some women used their role as mothers as a route to being heard in debates on political issues such as slavery, while others reshaped conventional motherhood into a new kind of mother, the 'virgin or moral mother', calling upon single women 'who are mothers in heart, though not by God's gift on earth' to become involved in social work (YEO 1999: 208). Motherhood, then, whether actual or metaphoric, was a key framework through which women's roles were defined in practical, spiritual, and ideological terms from the mid-19th century onwards.

Arthur Evans was only 6 when his own mother died after childbirth, and his half-sister Joan records his sense of loss (EVANS 1943: 93-4). Lapatin (2002: 67) rightly notes that 'it would be facile to suggest that Evans's devotion to the Minoan mother goddess as an adult stems entirely from this significant childhood event', though others have suggested this. However, Evans's personal experience does map on to a larger social reality, for at the same time as motherhood was idealised, the harsh reality was that maternal (and infant) mortality was very high and that, like Evans, many children grew up under the care of a step-mother or an extended family. Falling birth rates combined with high mortality, particularly in the period from 1880 through World War I, was seen as a reflection of the overall health of the nation, and the poor health of the recruits for both the Boer War and World War I was a matter of grave concern. The statement, 'It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the service the State most requires from the generality of women is motherhood and the maintenance of the family in purity and happiness' is typical of the language used in relation to motherhood and the state (SUMMERFIELD 1995: 313, citing a publication of 1919). These concerns were mirrored across the Western world; in 1906 President Roosevelt rebuked 'white women who engage in willful sterility – the one sin for which the penalty is national death, race suicide' (DAVIS 1981: 351), while a Canadian welfare writer in the interwar years was voicing the view that 'we are only now discovering that Empires and States are built up on babies' (ARNUP 1990: 191). Far from being the meek and passive 'Angels of the House' envisaged by Patmore, some women utilised these public anxieties concerning demographics and the nation's health to argue for greater rights for women, based precisely on their role as producers of children for the nation. Using the

government's own rhetoric of mothers in the service of the nation, a speech to the Fabian Women's Group in 1910 argued that 'childbearing is the supreme service which she alone can render to the State of which she is a member, and is on a par with the primary duty of the adult male to defend his country against invasion' (cited in YEO 1999: 213). Motherhood was also part of the complex discourse of imperialism, colonialism, and the nation-state. Pro-natalist policies and motherhood were placed at the centre of nation and empire building, making bearing and rearing children a national, imperial, and racial duty. Yet it was also believed that European-born women suffered severe health problems in tropical climates, and that these interfered with their ability to reproduce, especially if they remained in the colonies for protracted periods of time (DAVIN 1978; STOLER 1991: 83). Central to the ideology of motherhood, then, were anxieties about fecundity (both falling birth rates and the health and purity of the offspring) and the valorisation of the maternal role as the most important contribution a woman could make to her country. Although the majority of modern scholars have tended to view the nation-state as a strictly male affair, women, and particularly the concept of motherhood and 'mothers of the nation', in biological, cultural, and symbolic forms have been and remain even today of great importance to the nationalist project (YUVAL-DAVIS and ANTHIAS 1989; YUVAL-DAVIS 1997; RAM and JOLLY 1998). Today, falling birth rates have yet again become a matter of considerable concern, and the rhetoric of the discussion is startlingly close to that of the past. The British *Observer* newspaper carried an article entitled 'How the baby shortage threatens the future', and cited the call from an Australian politician to women to have a child for themselves, one for their husband, and 'one for Australia' (*Observer*, 19 February 2006: 8-9).

As well as his numerous references to a mother goddess, Evans also refers to the goddess as combining motherhood and virginity, both in his earlier writings and in *The Palace of Minos*. It takes no great leap of imagination to see the figure of the Virgin Mary as an underlying part of this idea, so it is all the more intriguing that the period 1850-1950 is often termed the 'Marian Age', marked by the emergence of major Marian cults such as Lourdes, and framed at either end by the official recognition of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption of the Virgin (1950). Catholic resistance to the modernism of the 19th century made active use of the idea of women as good mothers within their own sphere. Catholic mothers were offered not only the exemplum of the Virgin, but also of St Monica, mother of St Augustine, whose devotion and tears helped accomplish his spiritual salvation. The *Life of St Monica* proved an excellent didactic tool for teaching women about 'true motherhood', and a 1910 English translation by Lady Herbert of a French *Life of Monica* of 1865, produced for 'the anxious and fearful mothers of our times', was followed by further Lives and books which extolled 'true motherhood' (ATKINSON 1985: 162). Just as Pope John Paul II displayed a marked devotion to Mary, his late 19th-century predecessors Pius IX and Leo XIII were especially devoted to the veneration of the Virgin. Miracles and apparitions relating to the Virgin increased at this time, and statues of Mary received crowns (CORRADO POPE 1985). The combination of virginity and motherhood set Mary apart, and made her a model to which no real woman could aspire, yet the 19th-century resurgence of the veneration of Mary does fit into the wider idealisation of motherhood over this same period of time, adding yet another layer to this complex and pervasive ideology.

This Western construction of motherhood also contributed to the creation and maintenance of a border between motherhood and sexuality, and I have discussed this elsewhere in specific relation to the representation of the breast as either good or bad, the Madonna or the Whore, either maternal or erotic, but never both (MORRIS 2005). This division has been described as 'one of the most over-determined dichotomies of our culture' (YOUNG

2003: 158), and is part of the wider dualism of much Western thought. Evans presents the female body through a language of maternity – he writes of ‘organs of maternity’ and of breasts of ‘matronly proportions’ (cf. above). In his discussion of the ‘Snake Goddesses’ he draws on parallels with Egyptian imagery of Hathor and Isis, and he writes of the ‘Egyptian Mother Goddess’ influencing her ‘Minoan sister’ or the ‘analogous Cretan divinity’ (EVANS 1921: 513). Interestingly, he does not refer at all to another aspect of Hathor’s divine character, her sexual allure as a source of power. Elsewhere too, while he draws widely on Near Eastern and Egyptian *comparanda*, he presents the sensual and erotic as being specifically oriental: writing of clay figurines, he says that ‘the Semitic types took on a specially sensuous character’, which relates to the Babylonian mother goddess (EVANS 1921: 51). On one level Evans was, of course, simply responding to the observable fact that Near Eastern figurines and other images *are* more sensuous in bodily form, and that attention is actively drawn to the breasts and the vulva (in Mesopotamian literature the vulva – far more than the breasts – is repeatedly referred to as the site of sexual pleasure and as erotically alluring; see BAHRANI 2001).

I suggest, however, that other factors would also have led him away from the possibility of seeing breasts as both maternal and erotic, and more generally away from sexual power (such as displayed by Hathor and Inanna) as a facet of his Minoan divinity. One factor is the way in which motherhood (and the associated nurturing breast) was constructed at this time in opposition to sexuality, using the familiar imagery of ‘Madonnas and Magdalens’ (TRUDGILL 1976). A second, related factor is the way in which the European imagination had cast the East in the role of the effeminate and sexually unrestrained, so that seductive females from Salome to Cleopatra abound in orientalist art and literature. Bahrani has emphasised that there was a dialogue between these ideas and the world being revealed by excavation; the discourses of orientalism and imperialism affected scholarly interpretations of finds (making every nude female figurine a fertility goddess – but that is another story!), and these finds in turn filtered back into 19th-century visual arts and ideologies of female sexuality (BAHRANI 2001).

Evans and other early writers immediately aligned the Minoans through the Greeks to the origins of Europe, and the spirit of the Minoans was presented as European and not Eastern, as Lapatin (2002) skilfully illustrates in his discussion of how the Boston ivory goddess and other ivory figures were enthusiastically compared with Classical art and ideals. The erotic belonged to the sensuous world of the Orient, while the Minoans had been appropriated as ‘European’, and in this context I suggest that Evans and others mapped out from the ambiguous material evidence not a sensual but a maternal ‘Mother Goddess’ who better fitted European sensibilities.

Scholars have become increasingly aware of the extent to which 19th-century ideas and ideologies have shaped interpretations both of the past and of other, non-Western cultures. It has been suggested, for example, that the ‘Mother Earth’ deity attributed to American Indian traditions is a modern American invention arising from the ‘baggage of nineteenth century primitivism’ (CLIFTON 1994: 203; see also GILL 1987). I have suggested here that the ideology of motherhood should be added to this complex mix; it was a lens through which early ideas of the feminine divine were shaped, and which continues to exert a strong influence on our attempts to produce knowledge about the past. Some goddesses are ‘mother goddesses’ (in the various senses of the word), whereas others are not; many deities and other powerful beings such as ancestors played important roles in issues of ‘fertility’, but rarely to the exclusion of other concerns. But perhaps it is not after all surprising that 19th- and early 20th-century society, with its anxieties about the fecundity

and health of the nation and with its powerful ideology of motherhood, should shape the distant past as an echo of its own concerns, so that the ideal role for a goddess was that of motherhood, and that even the feminine divine could not escape the notion that biology is destiny.

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