The Roman goddess Pax as the embodiment of Mother Nature from the Ara Pacis monument in Rome: 13 CE. [Credit Wiki Commons].
Erroneous Terms in Archaeology and Popular Literature: ‘the Mother Goddess’

or

Why I Can Be Tiresome at Social Engagements

By Andrea Sinclair

This article examines the 19th and early 20th century origins for the term ‘mother goddess’ in literature. This epithet and the equally dubious notion of early matriarchal societies have dogged the steps of archaeologists for decades. In the past (and the present) this term has been generously applied to describe prehistoric goddesses and female figurines of all shapes and sizes from prehistoric and early historic period regions across Europe and the Near East.

As you may astutely surmise from my presence as a contributor to this magazine, I am an archaeologist by conviction, if not always by practical application. Determined adherence to this profession has its disadvantages, however, and may become controversial on those rare occasions when one pokes one’s head out from the cover of academia and makes tentative forays into the realm of man.

What sort of controversy could ever dog the steps of an archaeologist you ask? Well, we have this uncontrollable urge to remain objective in our dealings with historical data and that does not blend well with the image of ancient history as it is gleefully portrayed in modern popular literature and in the media.

Today’s case in point is an issue that can get me into a lively discussion with strangers, friends and not least of all, family members, who are quite ready to accept that I am qualified to speak on many things, but not to question the big issues like antiquated terminologies for mythological beings: in this instance the application of the term ‘mother goddess’, or indeed that other ambiguous term: ‘fertility goddess’. Both of which may be applied to goddesses from a plethora of regions and time frames from across the globe.

Since I perceive the biggest handicap to the spread of information appears to be the enormous gulf between academic literature (which no one reads) and popular literature (which everyone on the planet reads), I believe there is a genuine need for us academics to get off our comfy cushions and share information in a manner that is legible to all. Primarily because the real people of my acquaintance...
are actually quite receptive to data. It is absolutely impossible to impress one’s peers with your eruditeness over a glass of Shiraz if you haven’t done a spot of reading first.

Therefore today’s discussion will be an introductory course in the history of the use of the term ‘mother goddess’ in describing goddesses from antiquity. Yes, that is right, this misnomer has a long and illustrious history spanning centuries, which could inspire some of you to shout ‘then surely it must be true!’ from the stalls. Go, make a cup of tea, come back, sit down, take a deep breath and concentrate, we have a way to go.

In order not to write a small dissertation, I shall restrain my zeal somewhat and limit my discussion to an area of which I have reasonable cognisance: the eastern Mediterranean and the broader Near East. In addition, there will be no attempt at an exhaustive listing of every text or author who contributed to the current overuse of the term ‘mother goddess’ in literature, for that would be entirely beyond the scope of any article.

Where we need to start an examination of the idea of an omnipotent mother goddess in antiquity naturally rests firmly with Greek and Roman scholarship. But not just with classical scholarship, also with later interpretations of the original texts, and the first thing you need to consider is that if a classical scholar said something 2,500 years ago, it must be correct.

Right?

No, not necessarily correct at all.

Like all writers they had agendas. Ancient Greek and Roman scholars wrote colourful and exotic tales of foreign lands and their strange customs with often very little need for veracity or even for first-hand experience.

If you read any contemporary discussion of the nature and cults of Near Eastern goddesses you will no doubt come across citations of two or three primary sources from antiquity. There are many more examples of reference to Asiatic cults in classical literature, but it is these three writers who get the most press, and to an extent were used by later authors for their own sources. Those illustrious names are Herodotus, from his *Histories*, Strabo, from *The Geography*, and, last, but definitely not least, the satirist Lucian of Samosata and *The Syrian Goddess*.

Of these respectable pillars of literature, only one author may lay claim to an early date: Herodotus wrote his *Histories* in the 5th century BCE. The other two gentlemen hail from Anatolia in the Roman imperial period (Lucian: 1st century CE, Strabo: 2nd century CE). What these three scholars each had in common was a desire to describe the exoticness of the foreign in their writings and, unlike today, they...
were under no compulsion to remain objective in their narrative.

*The most shameful Babylonian custom is that which compels every native woman to sit in the temple of Aphrodite once in her lifetime and have intercourse with a male stranger.*

*Herodotus, Histories 1. 199.*

Ancient Near Eastern goddesses and their cult were described as licentious and orgiastic with appropriate relish and disdain. The Greeks and Romans were not so much shocked by the notion of sacred prostitution, as such, as by the idea that it affected women of all classes. However, these are the foundations upon which our popular description and understanding of ancient Near Eastern female deities now stands. This notion of sexual promiscuity can be seen as some association with fertility, assuming, of course, that fertility equates with sexual activity. But how does it relate to the term ‘mother goddess’? I set out to find if the term was actually cited in texts and, surprise, surprise, it was not.

*...celebrating the feast of the Mother of the Gods with great ceremony...*

*Herodotus, Histories 4.76.2.*

Much literature translates the description of these deities from western Asia as mother goddesses and goes on to describe the cult of these goddesses at length. However, allow me to be pedantic a moment, where the title is used in classical texts, and I include other ancient references in this, the term is more correctly translated as the ‘mother of the gods’. This conveys a different meaning: a goddess as procreator of gods, rather than a goddess representing a notion of motherhood. So how did we end up here with this idea embedded in language so deeply that academics unwarily slip into the same error in their own writing?

Perhaps the most convenient point to begin our discussion is in the 19th century when archaeology was in its infancy and much aligned with both antiquarianism and classical scholarship. The first academic reference to a mother goddess occurred in 1849 when the German classical archaeologist, Eduard Gerhard, aired the notion that the plethora of ancient Greek goddesses from the Classical period may have originally stemmed from one primitive earth goddess in ‘On Metre and the Mother of Gods’. This rationale set the stage for the idea to develop within European scholarship and was soon followed by another academic, again employing the example of classical mythology.

*Johann Bachofen and Das Mutterrecht*

In 1861, the Swiss anthropologist Johann Bachofen published *The Mother-right: an Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World* This volume was a lengthy academic exercise in theories of cultural evolution firmly
based on the battle of the sexes and argued for the existence of four phases of human social evolution.

These were:

1) Hetairism: from εταίρα, ‘a female companion’, but also described a ‘prostitute’, hetaerism is a social system in which women were communally shared. Also called ‘unregulated Mother-right’, this earliest period was characterised by Bachofen as being both communistic and sexually promiscuous.

2) Amazonium: was a transitional stage between unregulated and organised matriarchy.

3) Gynocracy: female rule or ‘organised Mother-right’.

4) Father-right: represented the peak of human social evolution in which all trace of the licentious matriarchal past was eradicated and modern civilisation emerged.

One can see two influences at work in this particular gentleman’s thought processes. One is the effect of a classical education on academic thought in the 19th century and the other is the impact of Charles Darwin’s theories on human evolution in On the Origin of Species (1859). For Bachofen has taken the Greek poet Hesiod’s concept of the Five Ages of Man from Works and Days (Golden, Silver, Bronze, Demigods and Men) and devised his own evolutionary theory which had human societies develop out of primitive chaos into civilised order.

The Mother-right stems from below, is earthly in nature and earthly in origin,
the Father-right, in opposition, stems from above, is celestial in nature and celestial in origin.

Bachofen 1861: 130.

It is perhaps ironic that the ideas of this 19th century scholar have had such a dramatic impact on subsequent western thought, but this actually wasn’t his intention with this theory. In his writings this clichéd vision of primitive matriarchy governed by an earth goddess was emphatically an example of moral and social inferiority, and yet this notion impacted heavily on critical thought in the next century.

Jane Ellen Harrison

Subsequent scholars took up this interesting literary rationalisation and developed it to suit their own needs. Thus, after Bachofen’s weighty publication, two British academics contributed substantially to the reinforcement of this tiresome generic term. At Cambridge the linguist and classicist Jane Ellen Harrison adapted Gerhard’s and Bachofen’s ideas to her own research and laid the foundations for modern analysis of the origins of ancient Greek myth in her Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (1903) and in the later Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion (1912).

If then we would understand the contrast between the Olympians and their predecessors we must get back to the earlier Themis, to the social structure that was before the patriarchal family, to the matrilineal system, to the Mother and the tribe, the Mother and the Child and the initiated young men.

Harrison 1912: 492.

Harrison argued that early Greece was inhabited by an idyllic society worshipping a primitive nature goddess that was later suppressed by incoming patriarchal tribes. To add insult to injury, she is the most likely historical source for the notion that this primitive mother goddess bore three distinct aspects related to some simplified notion of the female life cycle: the maiden, mother and crone. It hardly needs mentioning that Harrison, while influential, was not a supporter of the suffragette movement.

The matriarchal goddess may well have reflected the three stages of a woman’s life.

Harrison 1903: 317.

Frazer and The Golden Bough

The other scholar to contribute to this fracas has to be the great-granddaddy of all things anthropological and, to give credit where credit is due, to the neo pagan movement: Sir James George Frazer. His voluminous and now legendary (if completely out of date) study of comparative religion The Golden Bough was published in two volumes in 1890. In this voluminous tome Herodotus, Strabo and Lucian were again dusted off and cited as reliable evidence
for the cult practices and identities of ancient Near Eastern goddesses.

Whatever its motive, not as an orgy of lust, but as a solemn religious duty performed in the service of that great Mother Goddess of Western Asia whose name varied, while her type remained constant, from place to place. Thus at Babylon every woman, whether rich or poor, had once in her life to submit to the embraces of a stranger at the temple of Mylitta.


The discovery of faience ‘snake goddesses’ (there is no evidence that they are deities) from a temple repository at Knossos with voluptuously naked breasts also augmented this fertility goddess rationalisation. Evan’s conclusions were equally strongly influenced by findings of female ‘fertility’ figures from Neolithic sites in Europe and the Near East. Again the foregoing contributed considerably to an idea within scholarship of matriarchal societies preceding the patriarchal in prehistory.

The Syrian Goddess

The next step in this evolution of the fictionalisation of an ancient Near Eastern ‘Mother’ was Herbert Strong and John Garstang’s translation of Lucian’s, The Syrian Goddess in 1913. While there is no reason that a
translation of a classical text by respectable early 20th century archaeologists should substantially affect the spread of erroneous terms, apart from making an obscure text accessible to the general public, the introduction to this text adequately demonstrates popular thought about Near Eastern goddesses at that time:

The dawn of history in all parts of Western Asia discloses the established worship of a nature-goddess in whom the productive powers of the earth were personified. She is our Mother Earth, known otherwise as the Mother Goddess or Great Mother. Among the Babylonians and Northern Semites she is called Ishtar: she is the Ashtoreth of the Bible, and the Astarte of Phoenicia'

Strong and Garstang 1913: 4.

The notion of early and primitive societies being by nature matriarchal also took off within the discipline of anthropology with Robert Briffault’s The Mothers: the Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins in 1927. This British doctor employed comparison with animal behaviour to argue that matriarchy universally preceded patriarchy in human prehistory. He drew heavily on Bachofen’s work and argued that primitive societies practiced a form of ancestor worship where each clan worshipped a form of primal mother.

Robert Graves

To return to the power of classical scholars to dramatically effect generations of readers, one can but mention that other literary giant and exhaustive compiler of Greek myth: Robert Graves. For in 1946 Graves published his personal musings on ancient Greek, Roman and Welsh poetic inspiration: The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth. This novel ranks with the Golden Bough as the handbook of reconstructing paganism in antiquity for a modern audience and is a voluminous exercise in reiterating the idea of an omnipotent triple goddess who was composed of three primal aspects: maiden, mother and crone. I do not think I need to point out to you the obvious literary inspirations for Graves’ writings. From the 1950s to the 1960s the disciplines of
psychology and anthropology contributed to the fracas with influential publications from esteemed scholars in their fields. Beginning in 1954 the Romanian historian and mythographer Mircea Eliade published *Mother Earth and Celestial Sacred Marriage*. This was ably followed by the German-American psychologist Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* in 1955, and in 1959 British anthropologist and prolific writer on comparative religion and the ancient Near East Edwin James published his own volume, *The Cult of the Mother Goddess*.

In the 1960s the psychologist Carl Jung (1964) and mythologist Joseph Campbell (1960) produced volumes which are landmarks of their time; *Man and his Symbols* and four volumes of *The Masks of God*. Each was heavily influenced by Frazer's *Golden Bough* and again the mythology of a great mother goddess presiding over idyllic Neolithic agrarian cultures in the prehistoric Near East was substantially reinforced, yet still employing existing antiquated notions of cultural evolution and female deity.

However, it is back to the field of archaeology that we must return in order to view the evolution of the usage of this misnomer in the second half of the 20th century. For parallel to the fields of psychology, anthropology and classics, professional archaeologists were augmenting the cliché with literature of their own.

Çatal Höyük and James Mellaart

In the early 1960s the archaeologist excavating the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük in southern Anatolia, James Mellaart, described the proliferation of naked female figurines excavated from the site as statues of a supreme deity, the ‘Mother Goddess’. Displaying the influence of the classicist Robert Graves he rationalised this great mother goddess to be again threefold in nature, with stock maiden, mother and crone attributes.

This hypothesis has since been refuted by the current excavator of the site, Ian Hodder who now argues that the claims originally posited by Mellaart are no longer supported by the evidence. The vast majority of figurines do not imitate the original mother goddess style touted by Mellaart. Instead of a matriarchal culture, overseen by a goddess, Hodder maintains that the site gives little indication of matriarchy or patriarchy, rather, the roles of women and of men appear equal and of similar social standing, but this does not prevent the site in Anatolia being the major focus of pilgrimage for New Age goddess worshippers.

Indeed academic criticism of the argument for a mother goddess based on the plethora of female figurines was not lacking in the 1960s. Peter Ucko (1962, 1968) and Andrew Fleming (1969) both argued convincingly for a less narrow approach to interpreting these figurines from Neolithic Europe and the Near East and by the 1970s archaeology...
Did I say ‘vast time span’? Two prehistoric ‘goddesses’: a) The Venus of Willendorf, a limestone figurine discovered at Willendorf in Austria in 1908. Palaeolithic: ca. 24000-22000 BCE. Natural History Museum, Vienna, Austria [Credit Wiki Commons].
had moved away from the notion of a matriarchal ideal for the prehistoric period. However, this has not stopped perfectly sound scholars from using the term mother goddess to describe Near Eastern goddesses of varied description in publications.

**Marija Gimbutas and Old Europe**

Ten years after Mellaart, in the early 1970s, the Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas decisively finished the work that Eduard Gerhard so ably started, with her own theories in *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. In this work she argued, like Mellaart, that the nude female figurines occurring in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic of south-eastern Europe and Anatolia demonstrate the important status of women and the existence of a cult of a mother goddess in prehistoric society. Like many before her she argued for an ideal of ‘Old Europe’ wherein the worship of a female supreme deity preceded the warlike masculine culture and gods of the subsequent Bronze Age.

Gimbutas, a colleague of Joseph Campbell, went on to an illustrious career extolling these theories, publishing two more books on the subject before her death in 1994. She was the ‘pin up’ girl for late 20th century feminism and for neo-paganism, although some branches of feminism have since justifiably rejected her theories as perpetuating antiquated models for gender.

*...since she was so steeped within the ‘establishment’ epistemological framework of polar opposites, rigid gender roles, barbarian invaders and culture stages which are now regarded as outmoded. It is unfortunate that many archaeologists interested in gender are drawn to historical fiction and emotional narratives.*

*Meskell 1995: 83.*

Since the late 20th century the term mother goddess has gradually lost favour within academic circles. This is not to say that the term has lost ground elsewhere as the sheer breadth of alternative literature in print and on the internet pays tribute to the power of the past to inspire the present. But what we actually have is the construction of a compelling modern mythology regarding female deities in prehistory and not historical verity.

This outdated term has emerged from questionable beginnings in conservative 19th century classical scholarship and from there has branched out to envelope the entirety of cultures from the continent of Europe and those flanking the eastern Mediterranean over a period which spans the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and even the Bronze Age. This is a ludicrous state of affairs which undervalues the sheer plurality of cultures and polytheistic pantheons that have inhabited this region and truly vast time span. There is also currently no material evidence to support these outmoded theories.

The spread of this erroneous term appears to be dependent on the basic inability of western scholars...
from monotheistic backgrounds to fathom the multiplicity of deities that can exist simultaneously within polytheistic religions. There is no limit to the applications for divinity in polytheism. But ultimately the biggest impediment to progress is the inability for literature to shrug off antiquated 19th century notions which are grounded in excessive sensibility, misguided fantasies about social evolution and prim notions regarding the role of the female in society.

My own issue with the term mother goddess is this narrow approach to gods of the female gender, as though by virtue of their gender their function could only relate to reproduction and to nurture. To illustrate my point I will refer back to that phrase from Strong and Garstang in 1913:

Among the Babylonians and Northern Semites she is called Ishtar: she is the Ashtoreth of the Bible, and the Astarte of Phoenicia

There are three Near Eastern goddesses named here: Ishtar, Ashtoreth and Astarte. It does none of us credit when we lump them all equally under the umbrella of one supreme ‘mother goddess’. Each goddess was considerably more complex than this idea implies and each embraced her own unique characteristics.

One goddess may serve as an example: Ishtar was a state goddess, the patron of kings whose standard rode into battle at the head of armies. She governed sexuality, yet could cause sterility as easily as promote fertility. She was a goddess not defined by gender stereotypes and sat squarely in the divide between masculine and feminine. She had a celestial origin, bore no offspring and fits very poorly into the mould of a nurturing figure. It would be convenient if in the future we could move away from this outdated terminology and accept the sheer breadth of goddesses that were available to polytheism in antiquity, just as we have always accepted the variety of roles that male gods may govern.

To reiterate, the term ‘mother goddess’ has become so associated with a narrow vision of female deity in literature that the words have become almost meaningless. Perhaps it is worth closing with my own approach when viewing an image that has cult significance and may be reliably associated with a female deity. There are few characteristics that would lean one towards this assumption: a recognisably pregnant (not just obese) figure, perhaps bearing a child or breastfeeding, and finally, (this is a clincher) bearing an inscription reading ‘this is a mother goddess’.

Further Reading


This breastfeeding female figure from Cyprus may be an example of a mother goddess, or it may be a votive statuette offered at a sanctuary intended to promote lactation: ca. 600-400 BCE. Museum of Lyon, France. [Credit Wiki Commons].