

Matriarchal Spirituality and Virgin Birth

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1 SLIDE: My book covers

In her excellent analysis of matriarchal cultures, Heide Goettner-Abendroth has shown that matriarchies are sacred societies and cultures of the feminine divine. In them, there is no separation between sacred and secular, and there is no firm boundary between the living and the dead, for the dead are ancestors who will return as children into the clan. Female ancestors are especially venerated in such societies, and women hold central roles as spiritual leaders and shamans.

Matriarchal societies thus live in harmony with the cycles of the earth, seen most frequently as female and as an immanent manifestation of divinity. In some cases, she is also a universal creatrix who embodies the heavens. In short, at the heart of matriarchy is generally a goddess.

I would like to discuss today what I have discerned was a fundamental belief structure at the foundation of the oldest matriarchies. Looking at the ancient Mediterranean world, in particular, I have found that in the earliest substratum, cultures were centered on the divine not only as a female but as a *virgin mother*. This, I believe, is an important concept that must be reclaimed in our unfolding understanding of matriarchy.

I will speak today briefly about the nature of the virgin mother goddess, and then I will discuss a cultic belief and practice that I contend emerged from such a concept: women's own capacity to practice virgin motherhood as a supreme shamanic art.

I discuss both of these concepts in detail in my two books, *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece*, and *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*. Today, I only have time to give the briefest outline of these ideas, but I hope it will pique your interest in exploring the evidence I provide in my work.

2 SLIDE: VIRGIN GODDESS

I find in the ancient Greek tradition evidence that originally many of the goddesses of the Olympian pantheon were understood to be virgin mothers. That is, a close analysis of textual evidence reveals that before they were made to be wives, sisters, and daughters of the male gods, goddesses such as Gaia, Hera, Athena, Artemis, and others were understood to be great goddesses who created the entire cosmos out of themselves without any help from males. They were sovereign and inviolable.

3 **SLIDE: ZEUS, ETC**

This is an important discovery, given that the idea of a virgin “father” God is a concept most of us have grown up with, despite claims of the various religions that the supreme deity is somehow neutral of gender. In fact, all throughout religious history, divinity is gendered, and throughout patriarchal history, the universal creator is generally gendered as a male who can create without the assistance of a female.

4 **SLIDE: Big Birth**

This understanding of the goddess as being able to produce the entire cosmos out of herself is one that makes more sense to many of us, given the human experience of life coming out of the female womb. Basically, ancient mythology tells us that the universe began not with an ejaculatory “Big Bang,” but rather with a powerful “big birth.”

I contend that this concept is foundational to understanding the nature of women’s cults dedicated to goddesses in the earliest epoch of matriarchy in the ancient Mediterranean world, as I will explain.

5 **SLIDE: Virgins at fire**

What I have discovered in my research has led me to propose that in ancient Mediterranean matriarchy, priestesses who held the highest position of authority were dedicated to replicating the capacity of the goddess to give birth in virgin fashion using their own bodies.

Indeed, in looking at ancient history, legend, mythology, and iconography, I have discerned that **certain specialized virgin priestesshoods existed in ancient Greece in which women attempted to conceive children in various non-ordinary ways as an elevated form of spiritual practice with a specific purpose that I will elaborate upon a bit later.**

6 Slide: Parthenon

In fact, I have come to the conclusion that a **belief in miraculous birth was at the foundation not only of Greek religion, but of Western civilization itself, which would broadly include the ancient Mediterranean world, North Africa, and West Asia.**

7 SLIDE: Examples of virgin birth

We do see stories of miraculous birth at the foundation of numerous religions worldwide. For example, in Judaism we have Sarah's miraculous

birth of Isaac. In Zoroastrianism, we have the miraculous birth of Zoroaster. In the Iroquois and Cherokee traditions, we have the miraculous birth of the holy individual known as the Peace Maker. And then there is the most famous miraculous birth of all: that Mary's birthing of Jesus.

But these stories are usually covered in a veil of fiction that religious followers must adhere to with a kind of blind faith with no further explanation. Moreover, there is never much discussion about the mothers involved in such stories, and whether they may have had any agency in the conception process.

8 SLIDE: Nut's belly

What I propose in the Greek tradition is that miraculous birth stories reveal an underlying cult practice in which women were active and deliberate agents.

I have discerned from the sources that the **intended purpose of divine birth** was to conceive an extremely special type of individual.

In the Greek tradition, this individual could be a hero or heroine, gifted spiritual leader, demi-god, or even a full-fledged deity. In short, the child was an avatar – a representation of the divine on earth.

According to ancient belief — and this is key to the entire practice — such an elevated being could only be incarnated through non-ordinary methods of conception.

9 Slide: Mary crowned

I have also discerned an ancient belief that achieving divine conception on the part of the priestess was considered the **highest level of magico-spiritual initiation possible**, and that it in fact resulted in her own apotheosis, that is, her becoming divine *on the ontological level*.

This is most clearly expressed in the fact that she was frequently the focus of cultic worship, either as a **nymph (which was a kind of female deity)**, a **heroine**, the **eponym** of a town or geographical location — that is, mountains, oceans, rivers, and cities were named after her — or as a **full-fledged deity** herself.

Because it may be easier for us to understand this concept by looking at the Christian tradition, I invite us to think about the Virgin Mary: The ambiguity about her ontological status — Was she a human? Was she a divinity? — stems from the fact that she was believed by many to have been a woman who *became* a goddess through her successful miraculous conception of Jesus.

I have further observed that the **child** of the divine conception was considered to be of a divine nature and similarly became the focus of worship, particularly after his or her death.

Those who were considered miraculously born in some cases achieved full-fledged divinity particularly if they agreed to undergo a **ritual sacrificial murder**. Into this category I place, for example, Dionysus, Asclepius, and Heracles, for whom one could make a case that all were historical figures who had human incarnations, and whose death stories hint of instances of ritualized self-sacrifice.

And we can think Jesus here.

10 Slide: Is divine birth possible?

This work does not argue whether or not divine birth was or is ontologically feasible.

Rather, it argues that it was feasible **to certain Greeks in the ancient world**.

I contend that the discussion is important, regardless of whether WE embrace the idea of miraculous conception or not, because it makes visible what I contend is an entire matriarchal religious phenomenon that has been obscured through the reduction of divine birth legends to the realm of pure

fiction. From the purely academic perspective this is important. And then there are the more mystical among willing to consider other possibilities, for whom this research opens further doors...

11 Slide: parthenogenesis diagram

Some scientific points may be helpful here.

Divine birth in most cases was thought to involve some kind of *parthenogenesis*: the term comes from *parthénos* (virgin, maiden) and *gígnesthai* (to be born). Parthenogenesis is thus conception and birth of a child in which a male actor – or his sperm — is not involved.

In the last chapter of *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece*, I briefly discuss scientific evidence about parthenogenesis in humans and animals. Creatures that are by design parthenogenetic range from aphids to bees to certain species of reptiles.

Artificially induced parthenogenesis has been reported in sea urchins and rabbits. Eggs of mammals, including humans, have been induced to spontaneously divide by exposing them to electric shock or chemicals.

Thus, from a scientific perspective, the door is at least slightly ajar to the possibility of human parthenogenesis. But I should emphasize that I'm

talking about parthenogenesis as a religious practice, not as a bi-product of manipulations in the laboratory.

12 Slide: Pure parthenogenetic priestesshood, daughter bearing

The information I culled through my examination of myth, legend, and historical accounts of Greek cult coalesced around what appear to be three main types of divine birth priestesshoods.

The first and oldest of these groups is what I term the pure parthenogenetic priestesshoods.

These operated under the first stage of the practice, when social structures were the most matriachal in nature. And, yes, in this work I offer detailed evidence gleaned from Greek texts of a pre-Olympian, matriarchal cultural substratum, details of which I cannot go into today.

Priestesses of “pure parthenogenesis” attempted to conceive holy offspring without consorting with males in any form, human or divine. By virtue of the fact that women’s chromosomes are exclusively female, such priestess would have given birth to female-only progeny.

I again emphasize that the practice would have been patterned after what I show were originally Virgin Mother goddesses: e.g., Ge/Gaia, Athena, Hera,

Artemis. Thus, in their miraculous aspirations, divine birth priestesses would have been attempting to mimic the generative virginity of the Great Goddesses themselves.

The purpose would have been to bring forth the next high holy priestess, who was considered an incarnation of the Great Goddess herself and who functioned on the planet in this role, much as various avatars such as the Hindi Ammachi are thought to be manifestations of the goddess.

13 Slide: Cosmogonical templates for daughter bearing priestesshoods

The phenomenon occurring in a condition of pure parthenogenesis was the “replication” of the mother through the birthing of the holy daughter.

I contend that the cosmogonical template for this in the Greek tradition was the story of the mother grain goddess Demeter and her daughter, Kore/Persephone. As Sicilian scholar Anna Maria Corradini writes in her book *Meteres*, encoded in that story is an understanding that before the insertion of Zeus and Hades into the story, Demeter’s birth of her daughter originally would have been a parthenogenetic one.

I also suggest that the numerous “double goddess” images found all over the world about which Vicki Noble, who is here with us today, has written about so eloquently – images of twin females side-by-side, or emerging out of the

same torso, and dating as far back as the Paleolithic period -- may be deliberate expressions of this early parthenogenetic mystery.

14 Slide: Pure son-bearing parthenogenesis

Under the category of the Pure Parthenogenetic Priestesshood, I discern a secondary type of priestesshood, the Pure Son-Bearing Priestesshood. This would have developed during a religious period in which the male god was coming into ascendancy.

The phenomenon occurring here was the production of the “other” from the female body: the male holy being who was considered a manifestation of the male god.

At this stage, the process was still parthenogenetic, that is, there was no male fecundator, either human or divine.

Given that it was an even more counter-biological feat resulting in a different gender, son-bearing parthenogenesis may have been seen as an even more miraculous event than daughter-bearing parthenogenesis.

This condition expressed the “Miracle of the male’s containment within the female,” to quote Erich Neumann.

The child of this conception was frequently a male, who was rendered a “king.” It is in this phase, I contend, in which we begin to see the ritual sacrificial murder of the king, whose death was, in the words of Pindar, a “requit for ancient wrong.” That is, his death would in essence purify an entire people from the transgressions of their fathers. And we can again think of Jesus’s death here, who we are told “died for our sins.”

15 Slide: Hera’s parthenogenetically conceived children

In the Greek tradition, the cosmogonical template for pure son-bearing parthenogenesis was Hera’s parthenogenetic birth of the winged creature Typhon, who challenged Zeus for supremacy of the universe, and lost. It is particularly telling that Hera conceived Typhon in retaliation for Zeus’s having given birth to Athena out of his head. It is clear in this motif that she is protesting the male attempt to appropriate female parthenogenetic power.

Other myths say that Hera’s parthenogenetic child was the smith god Hephaistos, or the war god Ares.

What we have here is a problem, however: Typhon and Hephaistos are “defective” – Typhon being a freakish, winged creature, and Hephaistos being in one story born lame. Thus we see female parthenogenetic power reduced, in that it is rendered as resulting in the birth of deformity. No longer is the Goddess the sovereign creatrix of the Cosmos.

16 Slide: Hieros Gamos Priestesses

To return to the taxonomy I am outlining, I discerned from texts a second major type of divine birth priestesshood: this was the priestesshood of Hieros Gamos, or sacred marriage.

This type occurred with the full ascendancy of patriarchy.

It involved the priestess engaging in a “Sacred Marriage” rite with a male god in the spirit realm. Such a rite was thought to result in a literal conception and birthing of the god’s child. No human male was involved in the ritual at this stage.

The offspring of this union was typically male, often a lineage founder, king, warrior, or holy man.

The image I use here is of Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great. Various legends relate that Olympias conceived Alexander through sexual union with Zeus Ammon, who appeared to her in the form of a snake.

Alexander, as well as Pythagoras and Plato are some of the historical figures said to have been conceived through women’s sexual rites with gods. I have a chapter on that in my dissertation, but did not have room to include it in the book, and plan to do so in my third book. **Most of the legendary kings, rulers, and heroes of Greek tradition were also said to have been born in this way.**

17 Slide: cosmogonical templates for *hieros gamos* priestesseshoods

On the cosmogonical level, the stories indicative of hieros gamos are found in the scores of mythological stories of “rapes” of mortals and nymphs by male gods.

Among them are those of:

- Daphne/Apollo
- Syrinx/Pan
- Europa/Zeus, and many, many others.

The “Rape” element, here, I argue, is indicative of the appropriation of the divine birth priestesseshoods by the male patriarchal political and religious establishment.

18 SLIDE: PERSEPHONE

I argue extensively in my second book, *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*, that, for the ancient Greeks, Persephone represented THE paradigmatic case of the Virgin Mother Goddess who is raped. I posit that the Greeks themselves understood that her rape represented the moment in

which the Great Goddess's parthenogenetic ability was interrupted and usurped.

The event of this rape represented the breaking of the Matriarchy, on both cosmic and terrestrial levels. For, I contend that the Greeks understood that Persephone's rape also served as the cosmic paradigm for the interruption of women's mysteries of divine birth on earth. I further propose that this event corresponded with the transition in divine birth practices from parthenogenesis to *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage, with male gods.

This is why this story of Persephone's rape is so significant in the West. I show that both parthenogenesis and Persephone's rape formed the basis of both mystery traditions related to these two goddesses: the Thesmophoria and Eleusinian mysteries. Unfortunately, I don't have time to go into that today, but I provide a detailed discussion of it in my second book, *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*.

What we are left with are stories in Greek myths of the various goddesses' anger and displeasure over the loss of virginity of their priestesses and nymphs. I suggest these allude to the conflict that the priestesshoods experienced in this transition. While the practice was being controlled by men, priestesses would still accrue benefits in terms of social status and eventual divinization.

19 SLIDE: Plutarch Quote

The ancient belief that it was possible for divine spirit to have sexual intercourse with a woman and make her pregnant “so as to breed in her the first beginnings of a generation.” was recorded by the Greek Delphic priest Plutarch, who noted that Egyptians believed in the phenomenon.

Thus the idea that women could consort sexually with gods and have their children was alive and well in Mediterranean antiquity.

I should note that a belief that humans may have sexual intercourse with deities is widely attested in the anthropological literature, as well, where shamans, in particular, are said to enter into such relations. So with this idea, which may sound strange to contemporary Western ears, we are fully ensconced in the world of shamanism.

20 Slide: Basílinna

It is in the figure of the woman known as the basílinna that we have a striking HISTORICAL attestation of a priestess engaging in a ritual sexual encounter with a god in 5th BCE century Greece.

The basílinna was the wife of the *basileus*, a kind of priestly kinglike figure of Athens.

She was said to have carried out “many ceremonies, holy and secret, which were handed down by the ancestors” and which it was “not permitted for people even to hear of” (Demosthenes). These included a solemn sacred marriage rite that she carried out with the god Dionysus at the Great Dionysia festival once a year. It seems clear from the ancient texts, that this was a bona fide sexual union.

21 SLIDE: DILDO

What I have discerned is that the basilinna, as well as other priestesses engaging in a *hieros gamos* ritual with gods used an artificial phallus, or dildo, to facilitate the “divine encounter.”

I believe one clue in this direction is the myth that Isis constructs an artificial phallus for the slain Osiris before conceiving Horus.

Another indicator along these lines is the various Roman legends that women could be impregnated by phalli and other stones.

Yet a third clue are the mysterious occasional mentions by ancient writers themselves that among the items in sacred chests held by priestesses associated with particular rituals were sometimes artificially made phalli. So this idea, again, may not sound as outlandish to the contemporary Western mind as it initially seems.

22 Slide: Priestesshoods of Hieros Gamos by Surrogate

To return to my taxonomy, I have also discerned a third type of divine birth priestesshood: those in which holy women engaged in ritual ritual sex encounters with deities by using human male actors. I call these “priestesshoods of *hieros gamos* by surrogate”

The “God” was believed to come through the body of the male, and thus that the child was considered the god’s.

23 Slide: Egyptian pharaoh and queen

This is the form of divine birth engaged in by priestesses in Egypt to create the pharaonic line.

It is here that the phenomenon of divine birth finds its most comprehensive documentation as a *ritual activity* of certain women.

24 Slide: Aithra

In the Greek tradition, I contend that there are several stories reflective of *hieros gamos* by surrogate.

One is the story of Alcmene, a princess and priestess of Messene. She was said to become pregnant with Heracles when Zeus visited her “in the likeness of her husband Amphitryon.” That, I posit, is referring to a sex rite in which the husband deliberately invoked and embodied the god.

The child who resulted from this union was the hero Heracles.

25 SLIDE: Preconditions thought necessary for Divine Conception

There were, it seems, various preconditions though necessary for divine conception to happen.

One was that the women involved had to be virgins – or at least celibate for the term of their practice. Celibacy allowed for the storing up of the woman’s sexual vital energies so that she would have the necessary internal energy for the task. Thus virgin birth was a kind of tantric practice, if you will.

I also find evidence that women would have engaged in this practice by entering a profound trance state.

I contend that the proper altered state of consciousness may have generated through the use of psychotropic compounds (mentioned by Iamblichus as one method for inducing ecstasy). I find evidence of the use of such sacred medicines by the oracular priestesses of Delphi and the priestesses of Hera at Argos, where asterion, which is cannabis, was a plant associated with the mysteries.

26 Slide: Some characteristics of divine birth priestesshoods (1)

We also have hints of a possible strong lesbian contingent in the nature of Artemis's cult, in particular. There is, first of all, a strong erotic component in the description of Artemis's relations with her female followers, whom I contend reference actual historical priestesses who were part of her parthenogenetic cult.

We see the lesbian element particularly strongly, in one tradition, in which Zeus seduces Callisto, one of Artemis's favorites, by taking the form of Artemis herself. Callisto subsequently becomes pregnant, which shows us that we are in this transitional period in which the priestesses of

parthenogenesis were under pressure to convert to sacred marriage unions with gods.

So, to conclude, I propose that at the heart of ancient Mediterranean matriarchy was the goddess, and at the heart of the Goddess tradition was a belief in the divine feminine as a virgin mother who created all of existence out of herself. Following on that was an ancient belief in women's capacity to mimic the virgin motherhood of the goddess so as to bring special beings to the Earth plane, who ideally would help humanity advance its understanding.

Unfortunately, the practice of holy divine birth was usurped by the masculine, a phenomenon that had dire circumstances, indeed. For as the records tell us, the children of the male gods, who came through the bodies of the holy virgin priestesses, were none other than the patriarchal warrior kings of old. I contend that the so-called "myths" and "legends" detailing such stories are really speaking to us of actual historical events. And the phenomenon being described is nothing other than the advent of patriarchy on the planet. So the rather shocking, but perhaps not surprising, implication of this work is that what was once the most holy practice of matriarchy was twisted and used to advanced patriarchy.

Thus I believe it is important today to untangle all of this history so that we may get back to the original kernel of matriarchy in the Western world. By

acknowledging the ultimately parthenogenetic capacity of the feminine, we restore and honor a critical piece of our world that has gone missing.

Embracing the concept of a universe in which the feminine, rather than the masculine, is seen as the primary ground may help us to realign and heal our relationships with one another. It may inspire us to adopt new models of relating that establish harmony and respect among the genders and between humans, mother earth, and all her creatures.