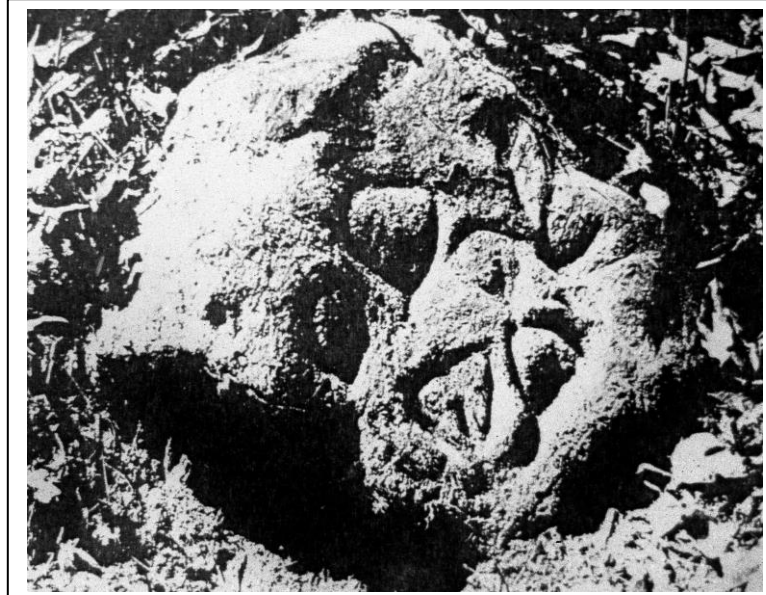


ICONS OF THE MATRIX

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Salt spring rock of the Chimanés, at Patene, Bolivia

This article was originally written in 2005 for the Journal of Archaeomythology. It's based on a Powerpoint I presented at the Female Mysteries of the Substratum Conference convened by Joan Marler at Rila, Bulgaria, in 2004.

I've reformatted the article with added graphics and new links. They still barely skim the surface.

The subject is too large for a single article, and could easily fill volumes. My aim here was to sketch out some recurrent cultural patterns of female iconography in the archaeological record.

Future articles will go deeper into historical patterns of change, such as the shift to mass production of female figurines (in ceramic molds or metal casting) in patriarchal and class-stratified societies, and the eventual disappearance of the icons.

ICONS OF THE MATRIX

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Reaching into archaic times for a long view of human culture, we are presented with deep continuities across space and time. Striking commonalities recur in the symbols and ritual artifacts of diverse neolithic cultures. These global patterns are not limited to the 6th millennium BCE, but also appear in more recent Indigenous societies in the Americas, Africa, some parts of Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. Once we break out of a fixation on “the West” and its claimed antecedents, a much more varied chronological picture appears.

In-depth regional studies are important. There is no substitute for the rich detail they offer, and an understanding of historical continuity over long periods of time is indispensable. But a broad comparative perspective also has the potential to enrich the regional studies, highlighting similarities that transcend known patterns of historical relationship or cultural diffusion. What is most significant about these resemblances is not stylistic but thematic, symbolic, conceptual.



Stela, Manabí, Ecuador

Several key themes of the iconic woman repeat on a global scale: vulva signs, female figurines, ancestor megaliths, and ceremonial vessels in the form of women or female breasts. These recurring signs reflect the spiritual concerns and ritual life of the people who created them. They belong to animist consciousness and philosophies, rich in complex meanings underlain with myth and mystery, pulse and flow. Sign is especially important to cultures based on oral tradition, conveying meaning on multiple levels. Where transmission of orature has been interrupted or severed, the archaeological and historical residue of signs remain as primary testimony to the cultural life of ancient cultures.

The concept of Matrix exemplifies the multivalent capacity of the sacred sign. By Icons of the Matrix I mean several things. One is the matrix of time and space, which various cultures call Mother Nature, Priroda, Prakriti, Aluna, or Tao. The *Tao Te Ching* describes it as “the creating Mother of everything that exists under heaven, upon which myriads of beings depend for their birth and existence.” The Latin word *matrix* itself originally meant “womb,” from the same Indo-European root that gives *mother, mutter, mater, meter, matr, mat’, mātā, madre*, and so on.

Matrix also encompasses a sense of kinship systems based on “mother-right”: that are matrilineal, matrilocal, and egalitarian. I call them “matrix cultures” to bypass the all-too-common assumption that “matriarchy” implies a mirror image of patriarchy’s relations of domination and subordination.¹ The social sense of “matrix” connotes other meanings: a life-support network within the maternal kindreds, which are cooperative and communal, and circles of exchange that reach beyond it. These are core values in the mother-right cultures.

Any discussion of the near-omnipresent female figurines must address the vexed problem of interpretation, which has generated so much controversy. Much current analysis still subscribes to doctrines that insist that relations of domination and subordination are an unavoidable human default, and that society has always functioned on patriarchal principles. These beliefs entail assumptions about who women are, what we must be and do, and perhaps more crucially, what we have or have not done and contributed. (Even though men get credited with creating civilization, this assumptive framework also casts them as natural bullies.) To

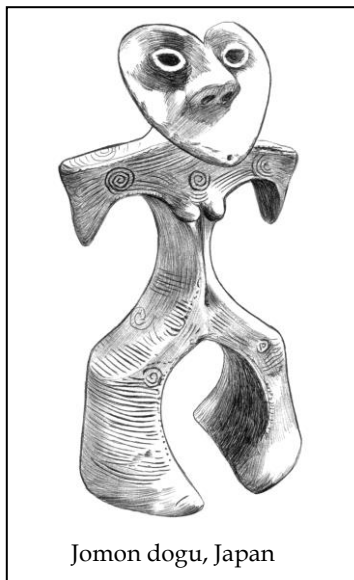


Arpachiyah, Iraq

contradict these assumptions by asserting that patriarchy was a historical development is to risk accusations of “golden age” utopianism. Nor is it considered realistic, or good academic form, to speak of the ancient female iconography as sacred. Meanwhile the living mother-right traditions are ignored.

Polarized conceptual constructs have a compelling magnetic power. The computer world calls it the “snap-to-grid” command. Philosophers know it as the “bifurcation fallacy”—if it’s not this, then it could only be that—which forces information into predetermined, polarized categories. Even the terminology has a built-in bias; everyone knows about phallic symbols, but what is the name for symbols of female potency? Insistence on terms like “fertility idols” or “Venus figurines” flattens perception of these ancient icons according to well-worn cultural scripts of female shame and anti-pagan repression. The old Eurocentric standard of *interpretatio romana* still holds sway in the prevalent nomenclature of “Venus figures” (first the famous “Venus of Willendorf,” the “Venus of Malta,” “Jomon Venus” of Japan, or “Kondon Venus” of Manchuria—and countless others). The Roman goddess Venus evokes patriarchal notions of the feminine, whose power is fixated on seducing the male, or evading his gaze—who signifies sex, and only sex.

But the Greco-Roman statues of women attempting to cover their nakedness with their hands have little in common with the [potent, self-contained icons](#) of the neolithic, or of living Indigenous cultures. Their unmediated female power evokes a huge discomfort, ambivalence and even hostility. The divine in female form remains controversial; the negative baggage piled on “goddess” over the past two millennia is still influential. Medieval theologians defined “goddess” as heretical and demonic; postmodernist critics call it “essentialist” and “dangerous.” Academia has fixated instead on terms like “fertility idol.” In popular culture the term “goddess” has been thoroughly desacralized and diminished, to the point where it is used to signify Hollywood starlets, sex goddesses and “divas.” But even the Barbie doll is a vanquished and colonized relic of much older impulses.



Jomon dogu, Japan

We need a name for the female icons; they are the primary human image in early archaeology. The term “female figurines,” while nakedly descriptive, is an inadequate designation for a cultural phenomenon that is so widespread, so central, in the iconography of archaic cultures.² “Idol” is loaded with pejorative connotations, remnants of the culture-wars against pagans. “Fertility idol” is offensively reductive. As Paula Gunn Allen says of the Laguna creator Thought Woman: “to assign to this great being the position of ‘fertility goddess’ is exceedingly demeaning; it trivializes the tribes and it trivializes the power of woman.” [Allen 1986: 14]

We could name the figurines *teraphim*, after the household deities that Rachel smuggled out of her father’s house in the Bible. Or we could call them *dogu*, after the Japanese name for the Jomon-period figurines. I like the term *matrika* (an Indic diminutive of “mother”) because these icons seem to represent the maternal ancestor, life-giver, and cultural founder celebrated in traditions of living matrix cultures. This term is congruent with cultures based on the Matrix. It has, however, culturally specific meanings in India, so in this article I will simply call them “female icons” or “sacred figurines.”

The sacral designation “goddess” is not off the mark if a narrow definition of that word is not insisted on, as it often is. Rather “goddess” can be considered within a continuum of sacrality and life essence, in which ancestral mothers loom large; such a perspective is characteristic of many aboriginal cosmologies. For example, the Bambara assign multiple meanings to their [Gwandusu statues](#)—ranging from “female ancestor” to the primordial divinity Moussou Koroni, the white-haired old woman who created plants, animals, and humans, and who personifies air, wind, fire, and exuberant vitality. [Also spelled Gouandousou. Imperato 1983: 30, 42-43] Much the same has been said of the *gramadevis* (village

goddesses) in India, who are both particular and universal. [Pattanaik 2000: 152] The neolithic statuettes are likely to have carried this kind of multivalent meaning.

Some of these icons had been kept in shrines, household altars, or granaries—which, as repositories of future vitality, are animist sanctuaries in their own right. In Peru, “the fertility goddess [sic] is often shown in a granary watching over the harvest.” [Trimborn 1968: 127] Figurines are also found, often broken, in middens and refuse pits. Many scholars think that they were ritually broken, as the Mimbres people in southern New Mexico “killed” pots they buried with the dead. A great many matrikas have been excavated from burials. In some cultures, such as Badarian Egypt, they were placed in every grave. Possibly they were also used in conception rituals or as votive offerings. Frequently the matrikas are [painted with red ochre](#), signifying the life-giving blood of the mother, and of Earth. They encompass the potency of women, who are shown as replete with vital essence, and embodying its origin and flow. Matrikas seem to reference the maternal ancestor as the visible, self-evident progenitor of a motherline, a lineage or clan, even a people.

Some call this an “essentialist” interpretation, and dispute the religious significance and ritual use of these icons. They see such finds in stoutly secular terms shaped by postmodern fears of biological determinism. But the recent jeremiads against essentialism have forced interpretation into a narrow field of predetermined and all-too-theoretical definitions. They treat the signs of “mother” as reductively biological, not perceiving their multivalent cultural meanings. This type of Western scientific discourse offers little insight into Indigenous cultures, which often address and describe divinities as “mothers”.

In Brazil, “the Tupians believe that every animal and plant species has its ‘mother’ (*cy*).” The Mundurucú make offerings to Putchá Si, the “Mother of Game,” to the “Mother of Fish,” and to mothers of species such as the tapir, peccary, deer and monkey. The Camayura venerate similar animal mothers (*mamaé*), as do the Canelo of Ecuador and many South American peoples. Manioc and corn also have “mothers,” like the Quechua *mamasara* in Peru. [Zerries 1968: 264-5, 279] Similarly, Corn Mothers are venerated over most of the Americas, from the Andes to the Great Lakes.



Odas Grandmother

An ancient reverence for spirit mothers also persisted in Baltic Europe. Latvians revered some fifty animist powers that they called *maté*: Mother Fire, Mother Sea, Mother Forest, and so on. [Andersons 1953: 270] Estonians chanted to “the old woman, mother of the forest.” As late as the 1920s, the Livonians south of Irben Strait worshipped the sea mother (*mjer-ämä*) as their “greatest benefactress.” [Paulson 1971: 77, 88. See Adrian Poruciuc (2010) on the Romanian Wood-Mother; many other examples could be given.]

In Nigeria, the Yoruba invoke *awon iya wa*, “our mothers,” which is called “a collective term for female ancestors, female deities, and for older living women, whose power over the reproductive capacities of all women is held in awe by Yoruba men.” [Pemberton 1989: 210] The Yoruba also call these Mothers “the owners of the world.” Sometimes the kinship emphasis is on elders. In Chile, Mapuche ceremonies begin by invoking “grandmothers and grandfathers” of the directions. Even more to the point of the iconography here, the Lenape used to make small wooden images called *odas*, “grandmother.” [From an exhibit of the

North American collection at the Museum of the American Indian, New York, 1976]

Modern theoretical preoccupations should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that some peoples did (and do) venerate a female creator or great Goddess. For the matrilineal/local Kogi in Colombia, the



Southern Illinois

Mother is the source, the sea of consciousness from which all emerged. She is Aluna, the essence of reality. “This is the Law of the Mother, the First Woman, the Mother of the Elder Brother and the Younger Brother, the feminine fertility, life itself.” [In *Parques Arqueológicos de Colombia*, 1990] Kogi people see indigenous humanity as the Elder Brother, and the industrial, colonial, patriarchal “civilizers” as the Younger. They are children of the same Mother, say the Kogi. Western Civ has designated their world as “primitive” and its historians classify such cultures as the Prehistoric, Predynastic, Formative or Preclassic. But the older orders are their own classical eras, as the ancient Tairona culture is for the Kogi..

The Indigenous world tells history in its own way, a history without written documents, without king-lists. It keeps a record, what the Iroquois call Keepings, in stories handed down over countless generations. [Mann 2000: 29ff] And when those have been lost, their memory endures in signs.

VULVA STONES

Inscription of vulva signs on boulders and rock shelters goes back to the paleolithic in Australia, Africa, the Americas and Europe. These include painted vulvas at Tito Bustillo, Spain, and deeply carved reliefs at Le Roc-Aux-Sorciers, France. [La Ferrassie](#) in the Dordogne is especially rich in vulva petroglyphs. Some are carved on stone blocks; one has an animal head sculptured on one side and a high-relief vulva on the other. Another boulder has a vulva prominently placed beneath an animal’s belly.



Abrigo del Sol, Brazil

A group of vulva-incised rocks are the centerpiece of the archaic Brazilian site Abrigo dol Sol (Sun Shelter), 10,000-7,000 BCE. The stones at this rock shelter show both surface markings and deep gouges, some of which were used for milling or tool-sharpening, and others for the widespread animist custom of grinding out rock dust for ritual use. On some rocks the vulvas are accompanied by symbols such as footprints and solar signs. The Wasúsu people say that these signs are “tokens of a long-vanished tribe of warrior women,” all killed long ago. [von Puttkamer 1979: 60-82]

Multitudes of deeply engraved vulvas cover a section of [Carnavon Gorge](#), one of many very ancient rock shelters in Australia bearing this sign. A sacred rock at Ewaninga, Alice Springs, bears similar carvings. Aboriginal people classify such places as Women’s Business. Vulvas are also scooped out of the stone at Phalai Phupayon cave in northeast Thailand. Painted a vivid crimson, they appear amongst myriads of lines and shapes. The local people still call this place the Cave of the Yonis. [Chareonwong 1988: 49-49. Thanks to Pairin Jotisakulratana for her translations.] Thick clusters of vulvas, scores of them, are carved into rock faces at San Javier in Baja California. [These petroglyph are shown, with many others, on the [Vulva Stones](#) poster.]

Mesolithic vulvas are deeply engraved at Helan Shan in the mountains of Ningxia. Rounded vulvas surrounded by concentric circles appear on a rock wall in the Wa country of Yunnan, southwest China. A modern Chinese publication identifies them as “Imprints of the Maternal Worship.” [Wen 1995] Vulvas are finely incised into a rock called Batu Pina at Betengan, Minahasa in eastern Indonesia. They also appear among petroglyphs along the Lena river bluffs in Siberia.

Vulva petroglyphs are scattered around northern Africa, including Ethiopia and Nubia; at Taouz and Adrar Metgourine in Morocco, they are outlined with layers of curved lines. A rock wall at [Tiout](#) in the Algerian Sahara shows a woman lifting her arms in a ceremonial stance; a line is drawn from her vulva to a

hunter raising a bow and arrow. In another connection to the masculine, vulvas are superimposed on “bird-man” petroglyphs at the ceremonial center Mata Ngarau, Orongo, on Easter Island. The vulva motif (*komari*) is the single most prevalent design on the island, with 564 recorded. [See Lee, Georgia, “[Rock Art of Easter Island](#).”]

A boulder deeply carved with some thirty vulvas sits near a salt spring sacred to the Chimane people in Patene, Bolivia. (Frontispiece.) In their annual pilgrimage to this sanctuary, they stop to pray at the stone and make offerings to the Salt Mother, before descending to the spring to ritually gather salt. Vulvas, lines, and animals are painted in a cave near Corinto, Morazán, El Salvador. The site’s sacredness was retained since the Spanish conquest; people call it Gruta del Espíritu Santo (“Cave of the Holy Spirit”).

A graceful vulva is engraved beside the entrance to a cave at Rock Spring, Wyoming. Rocks along the rivers of southeastern Minnesota are inscribed with vulvas. They are engraved on boulders at [Cape Alava](#), Washington, and at many sites in Nevada and California, such as Hickson Summit in Nevada and Council Rocks in the Chemehuevi country of southern California. [Owens Valley](#) in the eastern Sierra is full of inscribed rocks sacred to the Paiute people. They bear a diversity of hieroglyphs including many kinds of circular signs, vulvas, deer, bird tracks, and human footprints. Vulvas and cupules are especially common in the stone circles that ring village encampments. Some are associated with womanhood initiation ceremonies.



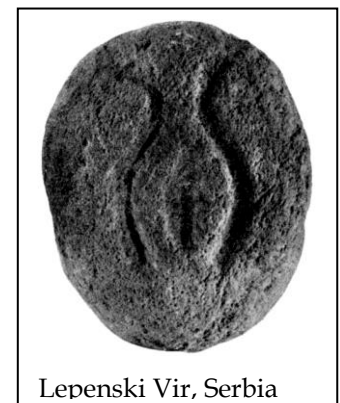
Rock Spring cave, Wyoming



The Teaching Rocks at Kinomagtewapkong (Peterborough, Ontario, shown at left) incorporate a deep crack in the stone as the vulva of an outlined woman. At Piedras Grandes, east of San Diego, natural rock formations look like vulvas, and [some have been carved](#) to enhance the resemblance. The place is sacred to the Kumeyaay, who hold womanhood initiations and other ceremonies there. [See McGowan 1991] In the same way, the Chumash sculpted a vulva around an opening in the rock inside Swordfish cave, which is filled with petroglyphs. Another place where vulvas were carved to enhance natural formations is the [Empie rock outcropping](#) north of Scottsdale, Arizona. More than twenty vulva signs are sculptured into the stone, some connected along fissures. One rock face splits into a labia shape, and above it a vulva is carved near the top of the rock. A few yards away, another is connected to a sinuous carved snake.

The cave of [Kamakhya](#) at Nilachal Hill in Guwahati, Assam is a living shrine of the vulva. It is famous all over India as a Devi Peetha (Goddess sanctuary) where the yoni of Shakti fell to earth. Inside the grotto, a natural stone vulva is watered by a spring. When the monsoon begins, the rains flush red ochre from the soil and the waters turn red. Everyone observes menstrual taboos, and women celebrate mysteries that men are forbidden to watch. (Legend says that an Ahom king was turned to stone for defying this taboo.) The women dance to drums and conch blowing until the Devi descends into the entranced dancers. Afterwards, the entire community celebrates the great Ambubachi festival. Kamakhya and its environs remain a major center for Goddess reverence today.

A trend toward freestanding sculptures appears in the early neolithic. Vulva-sculptured stones appear at the hearth altars of Lepenski



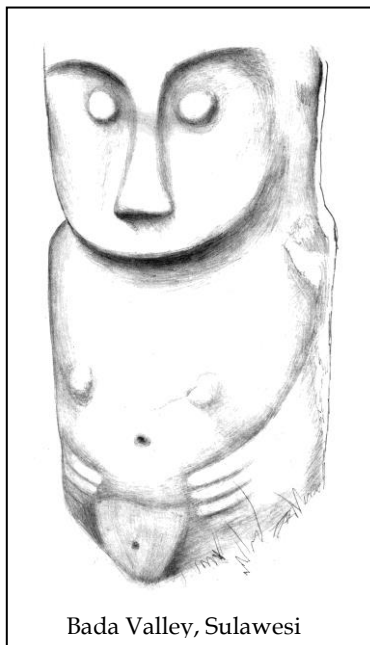
Lepenski Vir, Serbia

Vir in Serbia circa 6000 BCE. One is simply adorned with a curvilinear vulva; another larger stone shows a fish-faced woman placing clawlike hands beside her vulva. The icons bear traces of red ochre. These sculptures and their terrace of hearth altars overlooking the Danube are unique in Europe. A much more widespread development was the erection of megalithic statues: monumental stones, usually carved in low relief, associated with collective burials in womb-tombs built of colossal rocks.

MEGALITHIC WOMEN

The custom of engraving vulvas onto rock walls and boulders was carried over to some megalithic statues of women. A number of west European megaliths, such as those in Huelva, Spain, and the capstone known as [Le Déhus](#) at Guernsey Island, bear these vulva signs. So do some of the Cycladic marbles. A vulva is the most prominent feature on a rough, high-relief statue from Thera, circa 1600 BCE. Her face is abstracted to a beaked nose.

Megalithic women with hands clasped around a large vulva are found in the Bada valley of Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia. They too have abstract mask-like faces, somewhat concave with upturned edges, and no mouths. Menhirs known as *bülbiül* (“grandmother”) are scattered across the central Asian steppe, from Mongolia to [Ukraine](#). Some place their hands over the womb; others hold a chalice there. The Yakut people still make carvings of women holding a ceremonial *choron* in this manner; in their religion, it is women who preside over the great spring festival in which people gather in great circles to dance around *chorons* elevated on pillars.



Bada Valley, Sulawesi

On a series of impressive stelas at Cerro Jaboncillo, Ecuador, women proudly display their vulvas, as if emanating power. (See page 1.) They have clear shamanic overtones: one woman’s hands are modelled to look like birds; others are [flanked by spiral-tailed monkeys](#). Fantastic lizard-beings are carved on the obverse side of the stelas. Some of the women are seated on curved thrones. Carved stone seats have been found at hilltop sites. Though some commentators are quick to assign the thrones to male chieftains, only women are depicted sitting on them. [Little historical attention has been paid to these stelas; Saville’s 1907 study still seems to be the best source, with many photos.]

In the San Agustín complex of Colombia, megalithic women clasp their breasts or hold a child in front of their body. One smiles broadly, showing jaguar teeth. Some of the female megaliths of Pasemah in southern Sumatra also carry children; others ride on the backs of water buffalo, a symbol of the living *matriarchaat* of the neighboring Minangkabau. The women wear necklaces, earhoops, and circular leg-bands. They belong to a megalithic complex that includes dolmens, burial cists and stone basins.

Breasts and necklaces are a distinctive theme in megalithic art of northern Africa and western Europe. They appear in the Aveyron region of southern France and in the Paris basin, Marne and Oise regions of northern France; at Arno in the Italian Tyrol; and at Silté in southern Ethiopia. Three megaliths at [Pedras Mamuradas](#) in Tamuli, Sardinia, have breasts but no necklaces, while others (at Toninuelo and Bulhõa in southern Portugal and Tabelbalet in the Algerian Sahara) have necklaces but no breasts. The famous Sardinian marble from [Senorbi](#) has breasts and a necklace (though hardly a megalith at 43 cm).



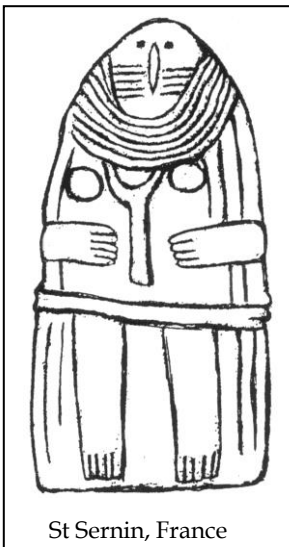
Coizard, Marne, France

Breasts and necklaces were the iconographic focus in northern France, with the faces rendered simply as brow-over-nose. Women were carved as freestanding stone statues as well as in dramatic rock-cut reliefs in the hypogea of Collorgues, Gard region. These ancestral women stand like guardians at the entrances to underground funerary sanctuaries cut out of the living rock. [See von Cles-Reden 1962; Gimbutas 1991; and Twohig 1981 for pictures and discussion of the European megaliths. Documentation for the Sahara and the rest of Africa is sparse; much more research needs to be done.]

The [face of the ancestor](#), defined by a schematic brow-and-nose, turns up in many places. It is extensively used in the Jomon figurines of ancient Japan, in neolithic sites in western Asia and the Balkans, and in the classic cultures of Brazil and Argentina, to name a few. These ancestor-faces surmount clay shrine-houses in Macedonia, circa 6000. One appears on a female megalith from Georgia (Caucasus) around the 7th century BCE. This motif is sometimes described as an owl-face, which fits in some cases, like

the offering vessels in Danish megaliths or the Jomon [“horned owl” dogu](#). But frequently the eyes are not rounded—sometimes they’re barely marked—and most lack a beaked nose. Most of them are brow and nose. Mouths are often entirely missing (as at Tabelbalet in Algeria and Collorgues in France). As folklore attests, this sign often indicates a connection with the dead. These are not portraits of individuals, but ancestral presences. In megalithic Europe, they are usually associated with collective burials.

The female ancestor represented with hands on belly is another common megalithic theme. She is common in western European megaliths (Fivizzano, Liguria; [Toninuolo](#), Spain; Collorgues-du-Gard and many other French sites). The ancestral woman is represented in over fifty megaliths from the Aveyron region of southern France. Again, the face is a spare geometric mask. It is framed by multiple necklaces on a cloaked figure from St Sernin, one of the most impressive of these megaliths. The horizontal lines on her cheeks, on many female statue-menhirs in France, may be face-paint or tattoos.



St Sernin, France

The St-Sernin icon bears a strong thematic resemblance to Ethiopian megaliths planted in the earth at Silté and Soddo, southern Ethiopia. Both groups are dressed slabs decorated in low relief that [highlights the breasts](#), thick layers of necklaces, and hands over belly. The [Ethiopian women](#) are larger

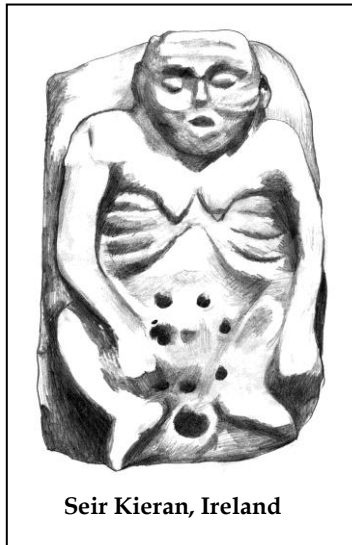
and more richly carved with other symbols and patterns. Sorghum, the staff of life over much of north Africa, appears in the lower body of several. (On one megalith it doubles as a vulva.) Another statue holds staves in her hands and wears a cup suspended from her necklace. Most of the Silté monuments appear to have been decapitated, although at least one survivor shows a head carved in the round. Many bear rows of cupules (circular borings into the stone). [Crawford 1991: 134-5; plates 39-41]



Silté, south Ethiopia

Cupules (or “cup-marks”) are also found on European megaliths, and on petroglyph stones all over the world. This animist ritual practice originated in very ancient times, and persisted into the middle ages, when it was practiced even on the walls of certain Christian churches, such as the cathedral of Nuremberg.

Devotional scrapings have also hollowed out the vulva of a medieval serpent-woman at Sanchi, India. Many of Irish sheila-na-gigs (sculptures of women displaying their vulvas) show clear traces of this boring or scraping process. [See photos in Anderson 1977]



Seir Kieran, Ireland

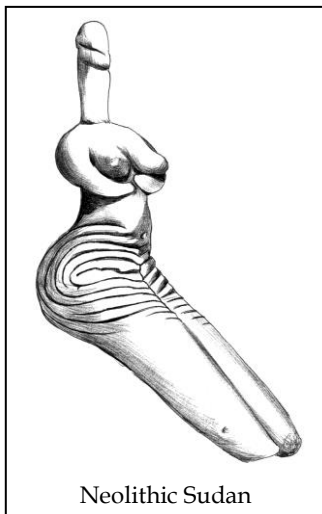
The old statue from Seir Kieran is an archtypical Irish sheila: a hairless crone, with prominent ribs and small, pendant dug (a far cry from the porn queen favored by some post-structuralist interpretations of vulvan iconography). Like the Cailleach Bhéara, a woman of legendary age who was remembered as the mother of nations and peoples, the Seir Kieran sheila is old, a progenitor and ancestor. A ring of borings circles her womb, with the deepest, representing the vaginal portal all sheilas display, at the base. Atop the bald head of the sheila are two holes, placed as if to attach a headdress or a pair of horns.

Rock dust from these icons was revered as potent in healing, blessing, conception, and protection. [Flint 1991: 257] Present-day accounts report that in some parts of Ireland, the sheilas still figure in devotional “patterns” that involve walking around sacred sites. Sometimes, even today, these ritual courses include touching or rubbing the stone vulva, as Mara Freeman witnessed at an old church at [Ballyvourney](#), Cork. She was amazed to see a devout Catholic matron who had been performing

the Stations of the Cross reach up through a window and rub the vulva of a sheila perched above it. [Mara Freeman, “Sheelas,” Online: The Celtic Culture List, Celtic-L@listserv.hei.ie, March 1, 1998]

These archaic devotions persist within the conservational gravity field of folk culture. Even in modern times, women in some districts of Europe went to sacred stones and megaliths said to confer the power to conceive. They rubbed their bellies or vulvas against the rock, or lay in a rock “bed,” often sleeping in it overnight. [Sebillot 1904: Vol IV, 56-57] Or they slid down a boulder, as Scottish women did on the [Witches’ Stone](#) near Edinburgh, which was carved to resemble a vulva, and as Estonian women did on the cupule-studded Sliding Stone of Kostivere. Animist practices of this kind draw on the sacred power of the living rock. The vulva stones and megalithic icons express this power through signs of female generativity, sexuality, nurture, and immanent vitality.

SIGNS OF THE MATRIKAS



Neolithic Sudan

All these themes are repeated in the classic icons of the neolithic era: the matrikas fashioned in clay and stone and ivory. Like the megalithic women, many place their hands on the belly, or occasionally to the vulva. Some hold up their arms in invocatory postures; others [fling them wide](#). Countless others cup their breasts, in a widespread sign of life-giving power. The breast gesture is already present in paleolithic statuettes from Willendorf, Menton, and Lespugue; in the early Canaanite neolithic; the Naqada period of [Egypt](#) and up the Nile in ancient Sudan; at Catal Huyuk and Hacilar in Anatolia; the Sesklo culture of Greece; the [Ozieri](#) of Sardinia; the Halafian and ‘Ubaid in Iraq; the Kulli in Pakistan; and more in ancient Iran, Lebanon, Cyprus, and western Mexico. Female icons with hands to breasts survive even into the early centuries CE in west Asia, Egypt, France and other places.

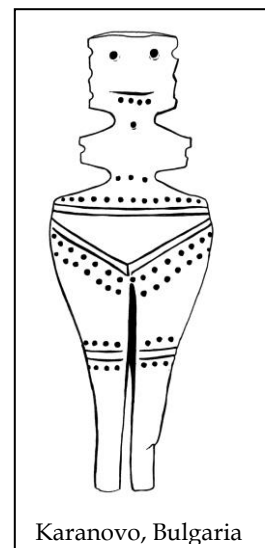
Around 4000 BCE, the matrikas of neolithic Sudan (unimaginatively designated as the “A-group”) show similarities to the Naqada figurines in

Egypt: hands on breasts, seated with thick legs close together, and big buttocks. But the phallic pillar-heads with diagonal snake-like eyes are distinctive, as are the heavy curved lines flowing around vulva and hips. The hands-to-breasts motif continues for thousands of years, and remains a central sign of African sculpture, in the maternal ancestor statues of the Yoruba, Bamilike, BaLuba and other peoples. It was the favored female iconography of the [Nok culture](#) of Nigeria, from about 400 BCE. Its ceramic masterpieces emphasize heavy necklaces, the women's belt and loincloth, and breasts adorned with dotted lines (also seen in Saharan murals and on Ethiopian megaliths. This pattern could well represent the African custom of cicatrization, but the question remains: what do the ritual scarring patterns themselves represent?

It seems to me that the sign-inscribed matrikas reflect ritual acts, and not only in the making and use of the figurines themselves. In fact, painting and incision on the icons are likely to have originated in women's ceremonies in which they painted, tattooed, or scarified their bodies with sacred patterns and substances. Paint-up has been an integral part of [Australian women's ritual](#) for tens of thousands of years. Scarified patterns are often applied as part of African womanhood initiations, and tattooing has similar significance in Samoa, Micronesia, and the Arctic, to name a few. Not a few matrikas have vertical lines on the chin, a very common tattoo pattern for women around the world, including Maori, Bedouins, villagers in some parts of Syria, and northern Californian peoples such as the Shasta. In [tropical South America](#), aboriginal people use body painting for ritual, but it has everyday uses too. A person who is painted is clothed in signs, which often confer protective power.

Matrikas are often nude in modern terms, but not truly naked. They are clothed in signs, their bodies and faces painted or incised with lines, dots, spirals, swirls, chevrons, zigzags, dotted patterns, or splashes of color. The brilliant red-glazed matrikas of [Chupicuaro](#), Mexico, exemplify this eloquent body-inscription, with their black and white zigzag patterns. The Vinca matrikas are incised with V's and chevrons, and some have meanders on the belly. So do some Japanese *dogu*, which are often embossed with spiral patterns. A statuette at [Yalangach-depe](#), Turkmenistan, has legs painted with patterns and sun symbols. Step-patterns and zigzags adorn the hollow matrikas of the [Condorhuasi](#) culture in Argentina, and their even larger counterparts in western Mexico wear spirals and dot patterns.

The pubic triangle is often shown as a numinous forcefield rendered with outlines, hatchmarks, swirls and, especially, dot patterns. Vulvas outlined or filled with punched dots occur on ivory and wooden matrikas in [predynastic Egypt](#) and [Be'ersheva](#), in stone at Siluca, Bulgaria; in ceramic in Japan, Turkmenistan, and the Balkans. The Jomon people made clay vulva triangles as stand-alone objects, with dot-impressions and, sometimes, with breasts and navels. Giant dotted vulvas with triangle patterns are the focal center of the wooden "[paddle dolls](#)" found in 11th-dynasty Kemetic burials, and dot-impressed vulvas appear on clay women at Karanog and Meroë, Sudan, as late as the 3rd century CE.

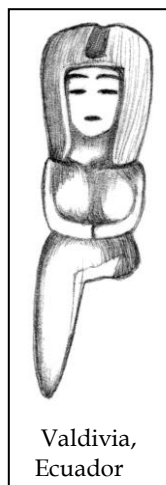


Karanovo, Bulgaria

Vital essence is also expressed—or rather invoked—by painting the matrikas with red ochre, the blood of Earth (in ancient Egypt, Japan, Canaan, Indus foothills, Mexico, Utah, and [Italy](#), to name a few). Many ancient peoples also painted the bones of their dead with this sign of life-bearing blood. The matrikas themselves were commonly buried with the dead, as signs of rebirth.

The sign of hands-on-belly also evokes this power of the origin and of progeneration. It is first seen on paleolithic statuettes, like the [mammoth ivory icons](#) at Mal'ta, Siberia. A limestone relief from Laussel places one hand on the belly, the other holding a animal horn. In the 7th MBCE, a small marble statuette with hands over belly was created at Catal Höyük, and dozens of alabaster women were carved in the same attitude at Tell-es-Sawwan, Iraq. In the 5th MBCE this gesture is seen in the stone women of the Ozieri culture in Sardinia, the [Lady of Pazardjik](#) in Bulgaria, the Vinča matrikas, and many other Balkan icons.

Their torsos are inscribed with rich labyrinthine patterns in the Tisza culture of Hungary. In the fourth millennium, the Valdivia figurines from ancient Ecuador and the Hongshan culture in northeastern China also clasp their centers. See more examples [here](#).

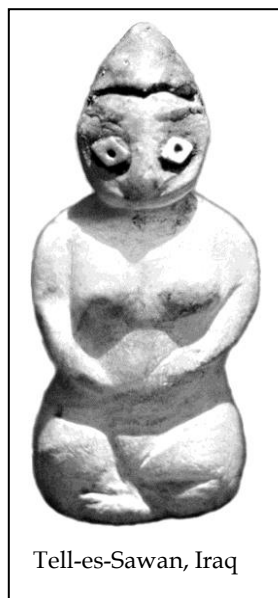


Valdivia,
Ecuador

Countless examples of the hands-on-belly sign are found in the Americas: in the Paracas and Nazca cultures of Peru; the Condorhuasi of Argentina; the Marajoara in Brazil; Guanacaste-Nicoya, Costa Rica; in El Salvador, and in thousands of examples from Mexico, from Chupícuaro to the [western coast](#). In Colima and Jalisco they are painted with elegant spirals over their wombs. In Veracruz, the [Huastec](#) created beautiful stone sculptures of women holding their bellies. The Arawaks sculptured a nearly round zemi stone in this stance at Santo Domingo in the Caribbean. Seated women from a mound at Dayton, Tennessee, are sculptured in stone with hands-on-belly motif. It appears in ceremonial pipes of the Tapajós river in Brazil and of the mound temple cultures of eastern North America. The woman's belly is the bowl of the pipe. One pipe excavated at Mt. Vernon, Indiana, was gorgeously carved in stone as a birth-giving woman.

Wooden ancestor statues from Malawi to [Mali](#) make the ancient gesture of clasping the center, as if to say, "I contain, I am brimming with vital power." This is the classic stance of African sculpture. In Ghana, centuries ago, the Ashanti created ceramic effigies of ancestors, usually representations of heads. In more recent times, young women tie wooden *akua-ba* into their clothing in order to conceive. These small wooden statues retain the large heads of the old ceramic icons, but their outline, with arms outstretched, resembles the ancient Egyptian ankh.

The ancestor connection is explicit in the Hongshan culture of the 4th MBCE in northeastern China. Matrikas are found on and around red-painted circular altars in temples that are also funerary sanctuaries surrounded by burial grounds. At Niheliang, which Chinese archaeologists call a "female spirit temple," they discovered many small [clay figurines](#) and several lifesized unfired clay statues of women, delicately painted with red patterns. The lifesize clay women—except for the [one already uncovered](#)—await development of a technology that will allow them to be excavated without being destroyed. Another shrine with matrikas has been excavated at Dongshanzui. [Nelson 1991: 302-308; Yang 1999: 76-81, 96-97]



Tell-es-Sawan, Iraq

In ancient Japan, people placed [dogu figurines](#) on stone altars at the northwest side of their houses. A smaller number have been founded buried in the ground, some inside stone circles. Most have been found in middens, broken; Japanese archaeologists speculate that they were used in healing or magical ceremonies. Other archaeological finds have a clear-cut sacramental context. Marija Gimbutas has called attention to the Moldavian shrine at Sabatinovka, with its altar full of painted matrikas sitting on tiny horned chairs, and a life-sized chair in the same shape. [Gimbutas 1991, 14; 260-62] [Similar assemblages](#) have been found at [Soborul Zeitelor](#) and [Ghelaesti](#). At Ovcharovo Tell in Bulgaria, archaeologists excavated a similar "cult scene" of painted figurines with their arms raised. They were accompanied by an array of clay furniture, including painted panels, little chairs, tables with tiny lidded vessels, querns and grinding stones, as well as a couple of larger bowls. [Stefanova et al., 2004:7]

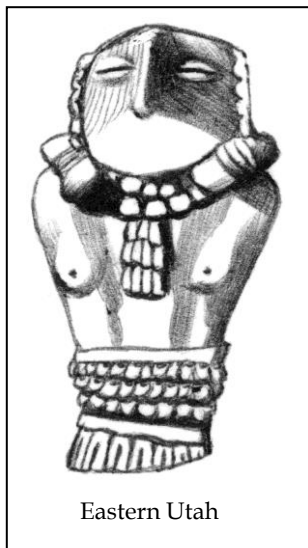
Matrikas are also clearly treated as sacred images in 6th millennium Iraq. In the early levels of [Tell es-Sawwan](#), alabaster female icons were found in rooms where thick layers of residue showed that offerings had been burned there over long periods. One matrika stood in a central niche in the wall of the end room.

D.G. Youkana thinks the building "had a religious purpose": the veneration of "a mother deity with prominent buttocks." He compares this shrine to a building of similar layout at Yarim Tepe, which had "no

domestic debris” and “a number of figurines representing a mother deity...” Rooms of similar orientation and contents were excavated in level IV at Tell Hassuna. Another shrine was found at Choga Mami, in a heavily plastered room with three conical pillars in its corners (and traces of a fourth), along with “remains of clay figurines representing seated women” and “highly polished pestles.” [Youkana 1997: 16-17, 50-58]

Matrikas are often found together with animal figurines, especially in the oldest archaeological layers. This association repeats the connection of vulvas with animals in many ancient petroglyphs. Sometimes the matrikas themselves show animal traits, like the vulture-headed icons of Amratian Egypt or the snake-faced nursing mother at [al-Ubaid](#), Iraq. At Vinca, Serbia, a bear-headed mother suckles a bear-baby, and many other icons have duck-bills. The famous goddess from a granary at [Catal Höyük](#) sits on a throne flanked by leopards, the prototype for Kybele and her lions many millennia later. At Hacilar, too, a woman sits on a leopard throne, their tails snaking up her back. Another stands with a leopard cub balanced on her hip, the tail dangling. At Lago Valencia, Venezuela, it is snakes that hang from the matrika’s shoulders to her inner thighs. A serpent also crawls over the lap of a seated figurine of the Namazga culture, Turkmenistan.

Matrikas often wear necklaces, headdresses, or caps. Some have elaborate coiffures, like the big hair of the Valdivia figurines or the bitumen topknots of al-Ubaid in southern Iraq. The women at Catal Höyük wear caps with a rolled edge, while at Hacilar it was pointed hats with concentric rings. Over much of South and Central America, the women wear [squared, flat headdresses](#). Sometimes, as in Pakistan, Japan, Mexico and Utah, the matrikas are garbed in ceremonial dress.



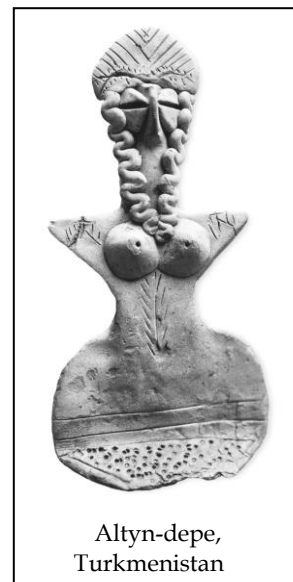
Eastern Utah

The “Fremont” matrikas of eastern Utah wear beautiful necklaces and deer-hoof-rattle belts; their faces are painted with curved lines of red ochre. Jomon dogu often wear robes emblazoned with spirals and other patterns, and occasionally spiralled hats. Certain Mexican styles, such as Zapotec and [Remojadas](#), stand out for their festival attire, with rich headdresses, plumes, and ornaments. The most elaborate costumes are found on matrikas in Pakistan and India. They are festooned with thick layers of necklaces, bangles, long earrings, and towering headdresses laden with discs, flowers, and rolls of cloth. These styles were already well developed before the 3rd millennium, when they appear on the well-known matrikas at [Mohenjo-Daro](#) and Harappa. They carry on through the 2nd millennium in north India, and continue into the Maurya period of the last centuries BCE.

Such cases demonstrate the spread of styles from one region to another. Perhaps the most spectacular case of proven cultural diffusion

is the spread of al-Ubaid matrikas and ceramic styles from southern Iraq to Turkmenistan in the Namazga epoch, and from there, to Baluchistan in the hills west of the Indus. Another well-known example is the spread of a prototype originating in the area of Halaf, Syria. The [Halafian style](#) rapidly swept over much of west Asia at the height of the neolithic era. The spread of its distinctive breast-cupping matrikas and vessels painted with bull’s heads, butterflies, and Maltese crosses, was a veritable cultural movement, not associated with conquest or ethnic migration.

The spread of artistic styles is likely to have borne along ideas and ceremonial practices as well. The newly adopted features were, after all, used in offering vessels and grave goods. As Marija Gimbutas recognized, “formal repetition” of symbolic elements is a key element of the ancient iconography. [Gimbutas 1974: 38] In fact, all religions employ it.

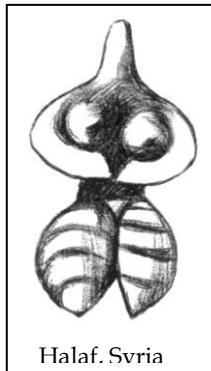


Alтын-depe,
Turkmenistan

However, there is a manifest reluctance, particularly on the part of Anglophone academics, to consider the neolithic female icons as having religious significance.

Diffusion does not explain the trans-historical and intercontinental recurrence of certain themes. “Coffee-bean” eyes are one of the most widespread features; they turn up at Sesklo, Greece; Sha’ar haGolan, Canaan; Chupícuaro, Mexico; in ancient Japan, Anatolia, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and India; in the southern Andes and over much of Colombia, Venezuela and the Caribbean. The shape comes naturally to an artist working in clay; it’s easy to add a blob of clay and make an eye with one horizontal impression. But the coffeebean eyes were also carved with considerable effort in walrus ivory in the Okvik culture of St Laurence Island, Alaska, and in wood in [Ghana](#), or in stone in other places.

Other renditions include slit eyes (Jomon-period Japan; Achilleion, Greece; Valdivia, Ecuador; Santarem, Brazil); inlaid eyes (predynastic Egypt, Tell es-Sawwan, Iraq; Be’ersheva, Israel); painted eyes (notably at [Tepe Gawra](#), Iraq); and round “goggle” eyes (Japan, Pakistan, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Brazil). Artists in ancient Louisiana and medieval Georgia rendered eyes with rectangular incisions recalling the faces on Pueblo kachinas. The [Vinča icons](#) of Serbia are instantly recognizable by their distinctive angled, convex eyes. “Eye goddesses” of ancient Syria and Iberia placed great emphasis on this feature. At [Tell Brak](#), they were carved in stone, often with eyes in the center of the breasts. Perhaps they signify the “eye of life” that Sumerians attributed to the goddess Ninhursag, farther down the Euphrates.



In some regional styles, the female icons are faceless or have very abstract or cursory features. In the Halafian style, the head is often just a pinched clay tip. Some Sudanese statuettes have the same pinched face, but with tiny incised features. In [Baluchistan](#), ring-like eyes were added to a hand-pinched face; at Gumla, the heads were rendered as flat tabs. Early Hamangia (Romania) and Cycladic icons have featureless pillar-heads. Sharply beaked faces are seen on some early Egyptian, Balkan, Halafian and Cycladic matrikas. Mask-faces are well known for Jomon and Vinča, but also appear in Martinique and elsewhere.

Some matrikas stand, others sit or, occasionally, crouch with their knees up. Often their legs are close together, tapering to a point, even merged into a single block. (This motif was popular from the Mediterranean to Pakistan.) Or they assume a widelegged stance, especially common in Japan, South America and [western Mexico](#). These regions also favor broad-bodied women, depicted in large hollow clay statues. Some have bulbous legs, as in Japan, Venezuela, and Mexico.

In other places the legs are rounded, as on the little marble Karanovo icon from Tell Azmak, Bulgaria, and elsewhere in southeastern Europe. Sometimes the bulbed legs resemble breasts, especially on the [classic Karajá icons](#) of Brazil, which terminate in nipples. Halafian matrikas have very round legs that taper to a point. Sometimes they are painted with horizontal lines. This motif of lines painted or incised horizontally on the legs spread over much of west Asia and the Balkans, including the Sesklo and Cucuteni cultures. It occurs as far east as Taxila, Pakistan. An older expression is the segmented legs seen at Kato Ierpetra, Crete, and the [Yarmukian sites](#) south of lake Galilee.

A very ancient type of seated matrika has a triangular profile, often with the outstretched legs drawn up in a curved shape, or in their most abstract form, flanged outward. These are among the oldest clay figurines, appearing in the 9th millenium at Tepe Sarab and Jarmo Iran (where one archaeologist calls them “double-wing-based objects.” [Morales 1983: figures 157, 164]

Others appear somewhat later at [Netiv Hagdud](#), Israel; Cayönü, Anatolia; and [Mehrgarh](#), Pakistan.



Seated matrikas with outstretched, tapered legs in a triangular pattern were also quite common in southern America many thousands of years later. This is the classic form at [Marajó](#) and Santarem in Brazil; Diquís in Panamá, [Nicoya in Costa Rica](#), and Kaminaljiujú in Guatemala. But a wide diversity of styles developed in the Americas. In the Condorhuasi culture of Argentina, the hollow legs are outstretched, while in [Illinois](#) and Ohio, they tend to be drawn up to one side. In the Ulúa valley of Honduras, matrikas are often cross-legged, and from Georgia through Louisiana to Missouri, they sit with calves folded under thighs. Many others stand.

The arms of some matrikas are abstracted to vestigial stubs (classic Vinca, Lengyel, Cucuteni, the “C-Group” in Sudan; some Mexican and Japanese, and many Pakistani and Indian matrikas). A few at Tepe Gawra, Iraq, and Meroe, Sudan, are entirely armless. Occasionally the legs too are missing, with the artist’s attention entirely devoted to a curved torso. Stone images of this shape have been dubbed [“fiddle idols.”](#) Pillar-headed “violin” figurines of polished stone have been found at Gilat, Israel, and in the Cycladic islands, dating to the third millennium. Around the same time, violin-shaped matrikas appear in the Namazga culture of Turkmenistan. One from Altyn Depe has coffeebean eyes, a large dotted vulva, and a “tree of life” pattern incised on her torso. A rounded Indian version comes from Bilwedi, Madhya Pradesh, circa 1000 BCE. She is entirely covered with red ochre paint.

Classic matrika shapes cross over into other media in some places. Rock art and offering vessels underline their ceremonial context. Silhouettes shaped like matrikas appear in rock art at Beyuk-dasha, Azerbaijan. Eight women stand in front of a large bovine creature; though armless, they are shown as if holding staves or crooks. Abstract matrika outlines were also sometimes painted on the walls of pots. [Predynastic Egyptians](#) brushed their armless silhouettes onto zigzag-adorned pots. Or they were modeled in relief, like the woman



Beyuk-Dasha, Azerbaijan



Predynastic
Egypt

on the side of a vessel at Maheshvar in the Indian Deccan, 2nd millennium BCE. Another abstract figurine with raised arms was fashioned on a pot at Umm Dabaghiyeh, Iraq, circa 6500 BCE.

The vulture-faced matrikas of Egypt in the predynastic Naqada epoch are famous for their invocational stance, with arms raised in a curve above their beaked heads. This motif is repeated in [ochre-painted pots](#) of the Gerzean period, which frequently show a goddess or priestess lifting her arms in a circle-shape. Usually the woman stands in a boat, as the focal point of a tableau of people, birds, and animals. This scene is repeated in a petroglyph in the eastern desert: she stands in a boat that a group of women are towing up the Nile. The upraised curve of her arms is strongly reminiscent of the dances that women in Uganda and [Rwanda](#) still perform in honor of the cow.

Painted pots are like neolithic canvases that allow glimpses of ceremonial culture. In ancient Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, China, and Greece, they show scenes of women dancing hand in hand. Spirals, animals, plants, quadrants, water and net patterns were painted or incised on ancient vessels all over the world. The symbolism of offering vessels allows insight into the spiritual values of cultures that have not left a written record. Many pay reverence to the principles of nurture and the life-giver.

BREASTPOTS

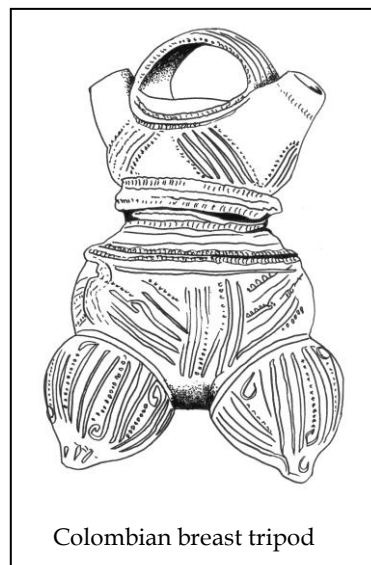


Si, neolithic China

style were beautifully painted with curling flame-like patterns in orange on cream in the Mongolian Xiajiadian culture.

Miguel Covarrubias remarked on the stylistic similarities between ancient Chinese and American cultures. He presented a compelling visual comparison of breast tripods from Sha Jing, Gansu, and at Chupícuaro, Mexico. Both have a narrow band with dot-impressions around the neck. [Covarrubias 1967] These breast tripods appear in a variety of styles from the Mexican plateau through Central America into Colombia (left), where one breast-tripod is decorated with pecked dots and lines, some ending in tiny spirals. It too has the thin dot-impressed band. A more unusual example from Guatemala is glazed and stands on more than three breasts.

Women in the lower Mississippi region created a different style of breastpots. In the area of Nashville, Tennessee, potters fashioned rounded and painted breasts that circle around the sides of footed vessels. Some have narrow necks for pouring libations. Others are capped with female heads. Vessels with breasts facing the four directions have been found in farflung locations: in the Philippines at Mindoro, Calapan (below); as stirrup-top libation vessels in Peru; and in the Lausitz region of Germany (left). These belong to a cultural movement that flowered in the mid-2nd millennium, in which women made breastpots over much of central Europe. Its influence extended as far south as Italy, in the Terramare culture.



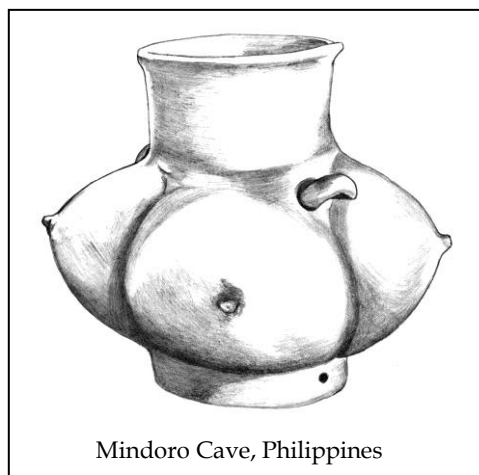
Colombian breast tripod



Lausitz region, Germany

The Lausitz breastpots resemble an early Cucuteni prototype over three thousand years older, from Negresti, Romania. The vessels are remarkably similar in shape and even in the tender modelling of the breasts. The neolithic pot is set apart by light fingertip swirls that surround and connect the breasts. A later phase of Cucuteni-

Tripolye expressed the same motif in a different way. Another pot from Levikovsky, Ukraine, has four large breasts incised with spirals that flow toward the nipples.



Mindoro Cave, Philippines

Another variation on the theme comes from Glendora, Arkansas, perhaps 700 years ago; it is skillfully inscribed with sinuous double spirals that feed into each other and swirl around the four breasts. A pot from the ancient Otomanská culture in central Europe is covered with small, pointed breasts (and again here undulating curved lines join the breasts). Rounded breasts entirely cover the surface of a late Chavín vessel from Tembladora, Peru.



Nupe waterpot, Nigeria

African artists created unique styles of breast pots. A late-period Kemetic vessel stands on multiple breasts connected to the Tjet symbol sacred to Isis. The Matakam of Cameroon create “soul pots” (*mbulom*) that open out from two round breast bulbs, and necks adorned with clay studs. In northern Nigeria, the Nupe make tall ceramic waterpot-stands, [breasted cylinders](#) adorned with patterned lines (left). They connect the nurturing sign of the breasts with the life-giving power of water, integrated into daily life as part of the household furniture.

An [Öllampe lamp](#) of the Yoruba has a breasted pillar raised above a bowl by four skirtlike curved bands. Its arms reach up to grasp another bowl where the head would be. The breasts and arms are covered with dotted striations. Another ritual pot shows a human figure—not an infant—suckling at breasts molded into the pot, which represent the deity of the Ogun river.

The Aworri Yoruba also make pots consecrated to river deities; a woman sits on each pot lid, holding between her breasts a small pot filled with stones from the riverbed. Here the sign of the female breast is used for river gods as well as goddesses. A precedent for this exists in Kemetic representations of Hapi, god of the Nile, who was always depicted with the breasts of a woman. These traditions emphasize the sacred meaning of the breast sign as a broad metaphor for life-giving power. (See more examples of the breastpots discussed in this section [here](#).)

MATERNAL URNS

People all over the world made ceremonial use of the woman-vessel: Canaanites, Indonesians, and the Nok culture in ancient Nigeria. Some beautiful examples come from the Ozark region of Missouri. Female effigy vessels from Costa Rica and Ecuador show hands on belly. Their bodies are artfully painted, as are their counterparts at Casas Grandes in Chihuahua. One of these shows a sitting woman with one hand to her breast and the other cupping her belly. The vessel opens through the basket on her back. These compare with the Canastera (basket-woman) pots of Calima, Colombia, in the 8th century BCE. Like the Costa Rican and Chihuahuan vessels, they show solidly built women with peaceful expressions.

A magnificent vessel from the great Colombian mound at Betancí exemplifies the iconic power of the hands-on-belly gesture. Four women face the directions,



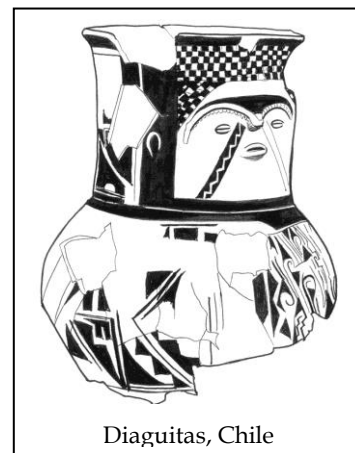
Betancí, Colombia

cradling their bellies. Their torsos and shoulders are lightly incised with signs, and they wear patterned sarongs slung low around their hips. The women smile, gazing dreamily through half-closed coffee-bean eyes. Probably they represent ancestral mothers, as do present-day female effigy pots of the indigenous Embera. [Labbé 1998: 197] Betancí is a place where predominately female iconography correlates with high female status: “historical sources confirm that women held considerable political power in this region, sometimes ruling entire provinces.” The Spanish were stunned to find that a great *cacica* (female chieftain) governed the Zenúes from her capital of Finzenú. In matrilineal style, she is associated with a brother, not a husband. [Labbe 1998: 37-40, 173-178]

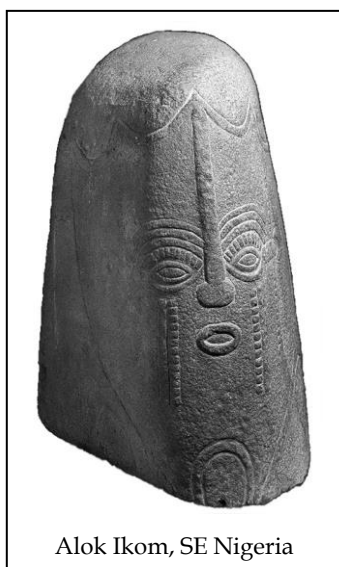
Many ancient cultures customarily placed remains of the dead, especially children, in funerary urns shaped like women. Or they filled them with burial offerings of food and drink. At [Hacilar](#), Anatolia, woman-vessels with hands-to-the-breasts are painted in red ochre with lines, spirals, chevrons and zigzags. Around the same time, circa 5500, motherpots appear in a different style at Gradešnica, Bulgaria. Breasted ossuaries with mask-faced female heads occur at [Azar](#) in the southern Levant circa 4000 BCE. Maternal urns were also favored in early Crete, on Cyprus, and at [Troy](#), where they are modeled with the “ancestor-face,” breasts, and raised arms. In Etruria they hug the belly. Female vessels were laid among burial goods across the Americas, from the great Brazilian ceremonial center of Marajó to the mounds of Arkansas and Illinois.



Fascinating similarities turn up between some of these mother-pots. Around 5500 we find ochre-painted offering vessels at Hacilar with a woman's head and neck forming the neck of the vessel. This construction appears around the same time at Hassuna in Iraq and in the Starčevo culture in Bulgaria. A cultural connection is conceivable in this case—but not for the similarities between the Hassuna urn and those of the Diaguitas culture that flourished in the southern Andes sixty-five centuries



later. The time/space gap is too great for any diffusionist explanation.

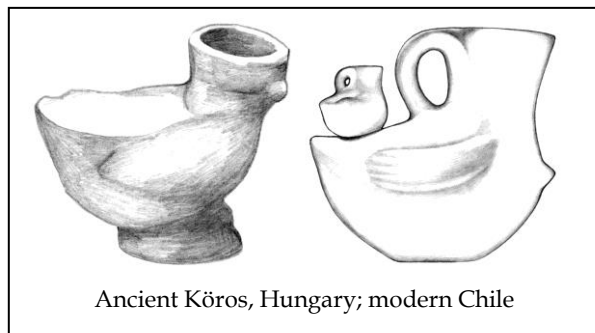


Both woman-vessels have stovepipe necks enclosing a face framed by patterns, and other designs painted on their rounded bodies. Both faces show the ancestor face: the two arches of the brow connected like bird's wings over a snub-nose. Both have coffee-bean eyes with lines streaming from them. The triad of vertical lines on the Iraqi urn also appears in South American archaeology, so frequently that it has been given a name: the “[crying eye](#)” motif. This sign appears on female urns of the Calchaquí culture in Argentina, that of [Cunani](#) on the border of Brazil and Guyane, and as far north as Chihuahua (where three vertical lines were painted below the eyes on the woman-pot described above).

In our Chilean example, the line is diagonal and encloses a zigzag. Woman-urns with diagonals or zigzags below the eyes are also known from Samarra, Iraq; Hacilar, Anatolia; and the early Vinca culture in Macedonia, circa 5100 BCE. Separated as they are by many thousands of years, and even more miles, I can confidently state that no historical diffusion or ethnic connections account for such distinctive resemblances. They appear of their

own accord out of the human creative spirit and common cultural meanings. They are icons of the grieving mother and of the ancestral source that people looked to for rebirth.

The “crying eye” sign appears in west African megaliths as well (see photo above). Stone pillars in the upper Cross River region of Nigeria show lines streaming from their heavily outlined eyes. One has a mask-like lioness silhouette around the face. The gender is not clearly marked, unless the outlined oval swelling on the belly represents pregnancy. The Ekoi people venerate the stones as ancestors.



Ancient Köros, Hungary; modern Chile

I found another stunning resemblance of Diaguitas ceramics to a much older pot in neolithic Europe. Centuries ago, Chilean potters made breasted bird-woman vessels, painted with kaolin, carbon and ochres. Their descendants have kept the prototype alive, though they no longer paint them. Their bird-pots express the same concept as breasted vessels in the shape of waterbirds from the Körös group in Hungary, circa 5500 BCE. [Gimbutas 1991:29]

Breasted bird decanters of an entirely different shape were made in the ancient Aegean, with a long spout and dotted circles around the breasts. Whatever the style, a nurturant bird mother is the common theme. An unusual woman-pot comes from Tell Far’ah, Jordan, circa 4000 BCE: a ceramic figure raises her arms toward a pot, which sits on her shoulders in place of a head.

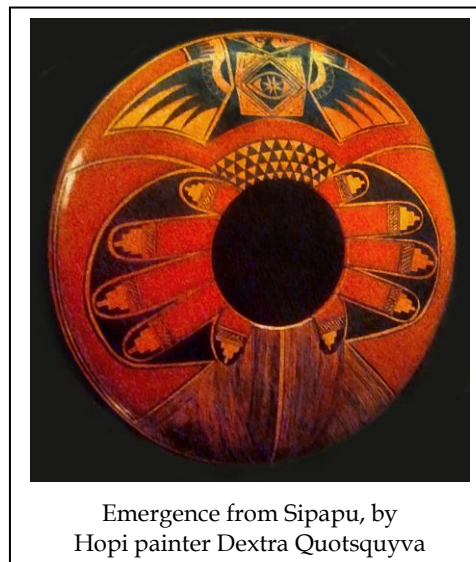


Ban Chiang, circa 300 bce

Occasionally vulvas are highlighted, on round-eyed clay matrikas attached to a Carib pot at Vivé, Martinique, and on a fierce-looking woman sticking out her tongue on an apotropaic Tairona vessel of Colombia. An outright sheila-na-gig turns up at the classic Halaf site in Syria. Some unique pots of the Nazca culture in Peru are molded and painted with a series of large, naturalistic vulvas, with clitoris. More abstract vulva forms are painted on pots of the Banpo (China) and Cucuteni-Tripolye (Ukraine) cultures. Vulvas were painted with fine red ochre lines on vessels at Ban Chiang, [Thailand](#) (the dating on these varies wildly, from 2100 to 200 bce).

There are certain to be objections to interpreting the symbol in question as a vulva, I refer skeptics to a similar fine-lined vulviform on a Hopi pot. In this case, an authentic culture-bearer can shed light on the symbolism. The master potter Dextra Quotsquyva explains that she [painted this sign](#) to represent the womb of Mother Earth as the source of life, “surrounded by the spirits of all unborn people entering the world.” [Arnold 1982: 602-03] An entire body of origin stories out of the maternal *Sipapu* lies behind this single symbol.

This does not “prove” that the neolithic Thai symbol is a vulva, but does demand serious consideration of the idea. Matrix icons are still a living tradition, whose custodians unequivocally affirm their sacredness. Whatever stories underlay the Ban Chiang pots is now unknown, since their transmission was severed by time, in history. But there would have been stories, and meanings, and ceremonies, connected with these pots and their symbols. It makes no sense to deny that.



Emergence from Sipapu, by Hopi painter Dextra Quotsquyva

Notes

1. Clearly not all present-day matrilineal systems are egalitarian. Many, particularly those practicing patrilocal residence, show increased emphasis on patrilineal inheritance and the sexual double standard that goes with it. The historic trend toward patriarchy deserves further analysis not possible in this short article. My use of “matrix” rather than “matriarchy” is a strategic choice, not only because of its multiple resonances, but also for clarity, and to interrupt the misrepresentation of these cultures as another system of domination. But feminist scholars of this subject, whether they use “matriarchy,” “gylany,” or other terms, agree that the egalitarian matrilineages uphold a different paradigm than the hierarchical patriarchal societies.
2. Jacques Cauvin (2000: 205) calls the female icons the “central preoccupation of the Neolithic.”

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