

Archaeology of the *Phallus* and *Shakti*: A Search for the Origins of Patriarchy in the Prehistoric Times

Tarun Tapas Mukherjee

Bhatter College, Dantan, West Bengal, India. Email: ttm1974@gmail.com

Abstract

The origin of patriarchy is shrouded in mystery. Perhaps it is even impossible to trace because of our limited knowledge about the formation of the social systems and relations in the prehistoric periods of history. There is another big limitation: this kind of research deals with big time scales and vast spaces and different techno-complexes in different parts of the world. Some of the arguments may sound like oversimplifications and overgeneralizations. But despite this, some standard behaviour and response and symbolic structures are detected in the evolution of the human culture right from the upper Paleolithic period and they demand interpretation. I propose to consider whether the rise of the representation of the Phallus in the Early Farming stage in the human culture was an attempt at suppressing the primacy of the Vulva and the Mother Goddess in the earth in favour of establishing the Father in the Sky and whether some principles were derived to adopt and apply in the prehistoric periods¹. This leads us to consider another vital question: whether the rise of the Phallus was a symbolic representation of the birth of Patriarchy in the Early Farming stage, in the Chalcolithic period, and whether the new forms of religion supported the establishment of patriarchy in that stage.

[**Keywords:** Gender, patriarchy, prehistoric culture, Mother Goddess, Phallus]

Introduction

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Materials and Methods:

The current study is based primarily on a field visit to a few prehistoric cave painting sites, caves, and megaliths found in Hazaribagh, India. The experience of the field study led to the consideration of other similar prehistoric arts and megaliths. This article is based on visual considerations supported by observations by others working in the field. An interdisciplinary has been taken to unearth the origins of patriarchy.

The Cave as home

Prehistoric humans used rock shelters and caves as temporary places of protection all over the worldⁱⁱ. (Baby, 1971) However, apart from these necessities, the cave as a site also served many other special functions and purposes: "dwellings, storage, animal pens and shelters, the sites of refuge and escape during wars or epidemics...burial places, sites of religious ceremonies and artistic display..." (Angliker, 2020). Pertinent to our discussion is another fact that the cave was also a metaphor in its architectural form and function with its exterior and interior resembling the archetypal vulva-womb performing an extended function of birth, care, and permanent rest as the grave: "Many caves were deemed sacred because they resembled the female vulva and birth canal and were, therefore, sometimes marked with vulva petroglyphs. (Bender, 2020, p. 200)

The earliest wall art

The earliest wall art engraving, dating back some 37,000 years, from Abri Castanet, a well-known archaeological site in southwestern France, not far from the Chauvet complex, represents either a vulva or the placenta. Again, the earliest vulva painting from Chauvet Cave, France seems to be of the same culture and dates back some 36,000 and 37,000 years. Don Hitchcock says, "This is a conical pendant from the roof of the cave, and consists of a bison and an exaggerated depiction of a pubic triangle and a vulva, with rudimentary legs ending in points rather than feet." (Hitchcock, 2019) Rather than being a kind of pornographic obsession, these pieces as art must have had some representational functions as symbols of high importance.



Image 1: The earliest wall art engraving, dating back some 37,000 years, from Abri Castanet. Courtesy: Raphaëlle Bourrillon



Images 2 and 3: Vulva painting from Chauvet Cave, France Photo credits: National Geographic, by Yanik Le Guillou, August 2001.

If we analyze Pictures 2 and 3 from the perspective of art, we encounter here a stupendous creation in which the mystical view of the artist (priest/shaman) is transposed on a composite image invested with a faith in the regenerative and reproductive powers operating nature with the active agency of some invisible power. Through the transposition of the human vulva on an animal, the priest/shaman imposes the primacy of the feminine principle in nature, which may be said to be anticipating the power of the Mother Goddess. The vanishing hind legs down to points erases any sense of animality in the representation and redirect the viewers to the super image of the vulva, not as something physical but as something spiritual, as a principle of life. We can understand this at the practical level concerning the "central role of women would ... have derived from the generating magic of birth (through the vulva) and the dispensation of warm milk from their breasts for 3–4 years." (Berriet, 2016, p. 7).

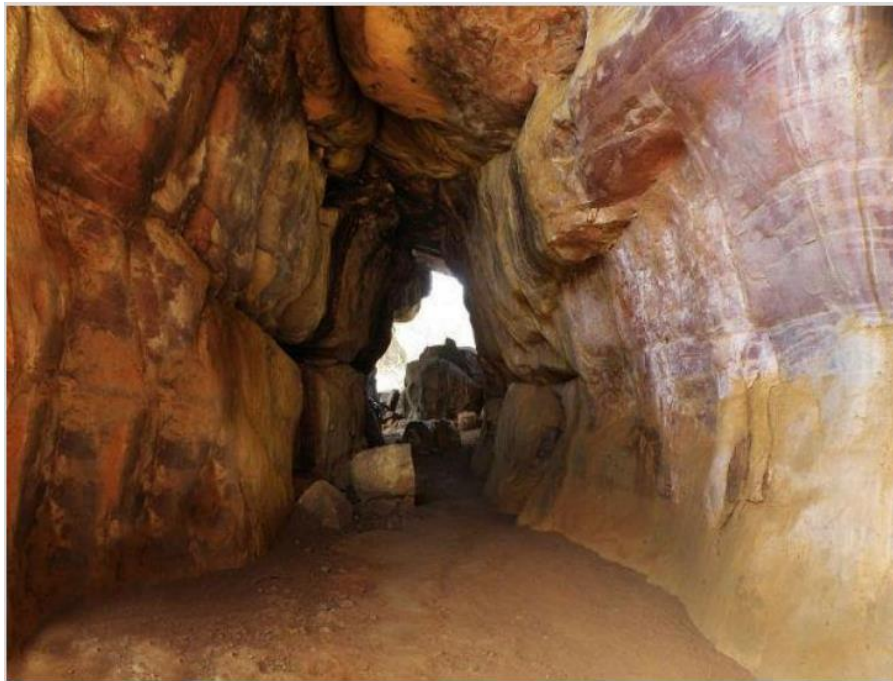
The cave as a metaphor for the vulva: the womb as home

The rock shelters are mainly of stalagmite or stalactite and over time crevices were formed inside naturally. The entrance and the interior, however, would represent the sacred vulva. (Bender, 2020)



Picture 4: Entrance of Chauvet Cave, France. Credit: Smithsonian Magazine.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/only-handful-people-can-enter-chauvet-cave-each-year-our-reporter-was-one-them-180954981/>



Picture 5: Bhimbetka Cave, India. From Wikipedia:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhimbetka_Caves,_Madhya_Pradesh.jpg

Picture 4, the entrance of Chauvet Cave, France, and picture 5 of the entrance and the façade as well, of the Bhimbetka Cave, India clearly show visually at least the people would still reside within the womb and the womb was the home for generations sometimes for the prehistoric human groups.



Image 6: One of the few sacred vulva-shaped crevices, Hazaribagh, India of Marwaduwar cave. Photo by Subhashis Das. <https://subashisdas.blogspot.com/2014/07/the-isko-rock-art-site-and-near-by.html>

Not only that in some rock shelters some naturally formed crevices would be considered sacred and worshipped by the people. This is a picture of the sacred vulva inside the Isco Cave, Hazaribagh, India.

Subhashis Das (2014) reported,

The Matwaduwar is normally associated with marriage ceremonies that were once held here. The legend goes that even the local king and queen too held their marriage here. Marriage customs inside caves signify the very primitive pre-Brahmanical birthing rituals held inside caves. Caves were deemed as the womb of the Great Mother; all appendages of the now obsolete fertility cult. (Das, 2014)

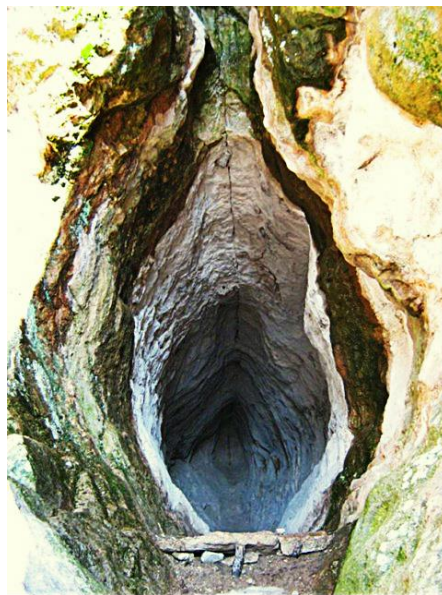


Image 7: Thracian sanctuary Utroba cave, Bulgaria. From [Wikipedia](#)

We have pieces of evidence that the people would worship not just naturally formed shapes. Sometimes they would carve out or modify an existing structure. The following is a picture of the Thracian sanctuary Utroba cave ("Womb Cave", "Cave Vulva") carved out of the rock in XI-X century BC, near the village of Nenkov, Rhodope Mountains, Bulgaria.

After the discovery of the cave a newspaper reported:

The cave is in a natural horizontal slit in the rock, 22 meters deep, which was further formed by a human hand. The height of the hole is 3 meters and the width – about 2.50 m. Inside penetrates sufficient light. The whole cave is literally shaped like female genitals and it can be referred to as the caves-wombs described by the thraceologist Prof. Alexander Fol.

In the hole we can find a carved altar – about 1.30 meters high, which is in the form of small genitalia lips. The center is a small hole about 10 centimeters deep and 5 centimeters wide, and it is slightly cut. The historian prof. Ovcharov considers that the cave used to be a temple of the Thracians during XI-X century BC. The tunnel is an ideal north-south orientation, with its entrance from the south. There is a particular crevice in the ceiling. Right there, exactly at 12 noon a sunbeam shows and falls at the altar. The phenomenon continues for several minutes. Gradually, the light will take the form of a phallus. (Novinite, 2009)

We have another interesting instance with the Baghorⁱⁱⁱ stone from Central India. J. M. Kenoyar et al (1983) unearthed a triangular vulva stone near the village of Medhauli, in the Sidhi District, Madhya Pradesh.

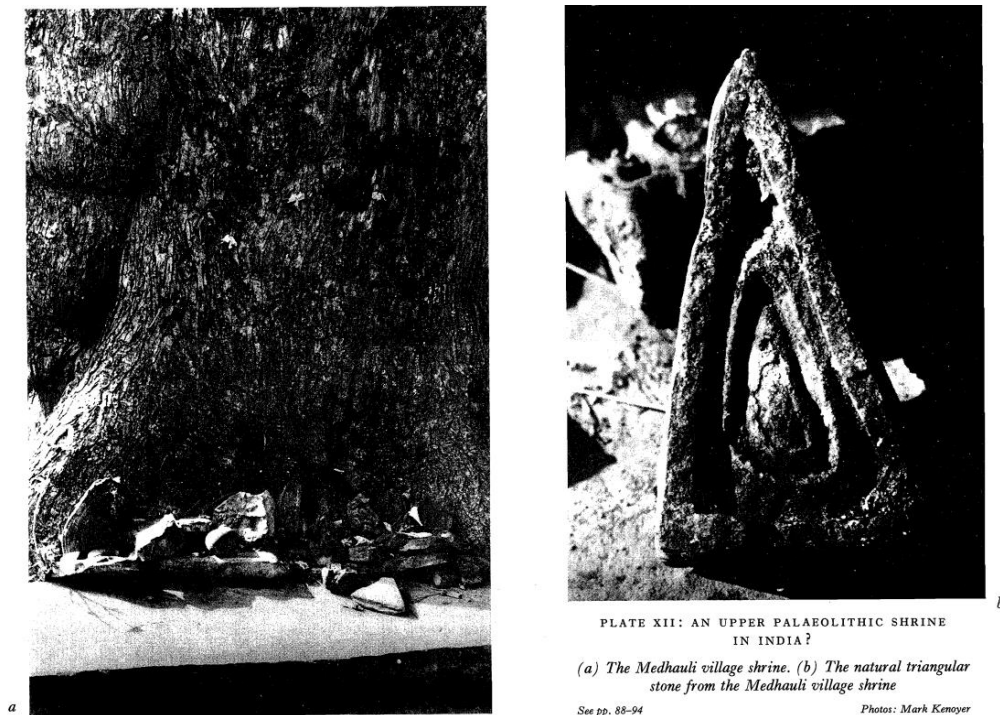


Image 8: The platform and the Baghor Stone. Photo: Mark Kenoyar

After scrutiny the team concluded:

Its central position on the platform, its striking similarity to the stones in the present-day shrines to the goddess, the immediate and spontaneous recognition of its significance by the local inhabitants...provide strong circumstantial evidence that it had a special significance for the group that brought it to the site. We believe that there is a very strong probability that this structure and the stone represent a shrine to the goddess, or female principle, Shakti, which was built by the group of final upper paleolithic hunter/gatherers who were living at the site... (Kenoyar et al, 1983, p. 93)

So the cave was representing more than one thing: shelter, home and the sacred temple.

So we understand that the earliest religious symbol of humankind--connecting our existence and consciousness to a divine and holy source and purpose- is the Vulva. Vulvic symbolism is not just abundant in our earliest prehistoric art; it was the temple itself. The cave, the original temple of ceremony, was equated with the womb of the Earth Goddess. Early humankind held a reverence for the regenerative powers of the female body and equated with the Moon waxing and waning in her monthly cycle (Silver-Hughes, 2011) (Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, 2005) This equated the womb with the Lap of Life- in the female, as well as the agricultural womb of the Earth. At one point of time in the history of the evolution of human culture, we know that humans left the cave and became settlers in open spaces. Whether coincidental or not, even then the shape of their huts would mimic the cave form or the vulvic structure. Whether coincidental or not, even then the shape of their huts would mimic the cave form or the vulvic structure.

The cosmos as a temple of Dharitri

The warming of the climate along with other factors after the end of the Ice Age from roughly 11700 years ago onwards facilitated the dispersion of human groups all over the world at different points in time. A new phase, Early Farming followed away from the hunting/gathering state and human groups settled in open spaces on relatively high ground resembling the outer womb, a kind of elevated space, sometimes created by human labour. In the Hindu religion this kind of place, *Kurmaprishtho* was considered divine. The elevated ground, a feature to be found throughout the world during the phase of Early Farming, must have had some practical purposes but there must have been some symbolic functions as well. Here we can make some conjectures: the womb-like shape of their settlement places could point to the feminine principle operating in nature in the form of regenerative and reproductive power from a deity whose image was immediately available to them in nature in anthropomorphic forms like a hill resembling the shape of a pregnant woman or the image of two hills together resembling the shape of human breasts. But these immediately available forms had greater symbolic meanings. The journey out of the cave led the humans to an understanding of the presence of a feminine principle or a deity out in nature on earth. The concept is finely preserved in the idea of *Dharitri* as the Mother Goddess.

In the early settlers' worldview, the earth was the womb of Mother Nature and the entire cosmos was her temple with the sky as the roof. This is corroborated by the architectural forms created by these early societies. First of all, in its rudimentary form, the elevated place of worship would symbolically represent the supernatural womb, the seat of the feminine principle. However, more

complexity is to be noted further during the advanced Neolithic culture or Neolithic Revolution when the tomb would be constructed as a place of worship. For instance, the passage tomb of Bryn Celli Ddu, Wales (Image 7), dating back to 3000 BC, was constructed at a time when England, Ireland and Scotland were at the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution. Structurally and functionally here we can see the womb has become tomb. Inside the tomb, the human remains in the form of bones would be kept inside. The ancestors would take their final rest in the lap of the mother and the living would be offering homage during the Summer Solstice when the passage would be lit up by the sunlight just for a few moments only for a day in the entire year. People still flock to Stonehenge for witnessing this kind of cosmic astronomical drama at the time of the solstices.



Image 9 and 10: Bryn Celli Ddu, Passage Tomb, Wales. 3000 BC.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryn_Celli_Ddu#/media/File:BrynCelliDdu3.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Bryn_Celli_Ddu#/media/File:Bryn_Celli_Ddu_01_977.PNG

Artificially created other structures during the Neolithic period confirm the same kind of widespread belief systems.



Image 11: Newgrange, Ireland. 3200 BC. www.newgrange.com

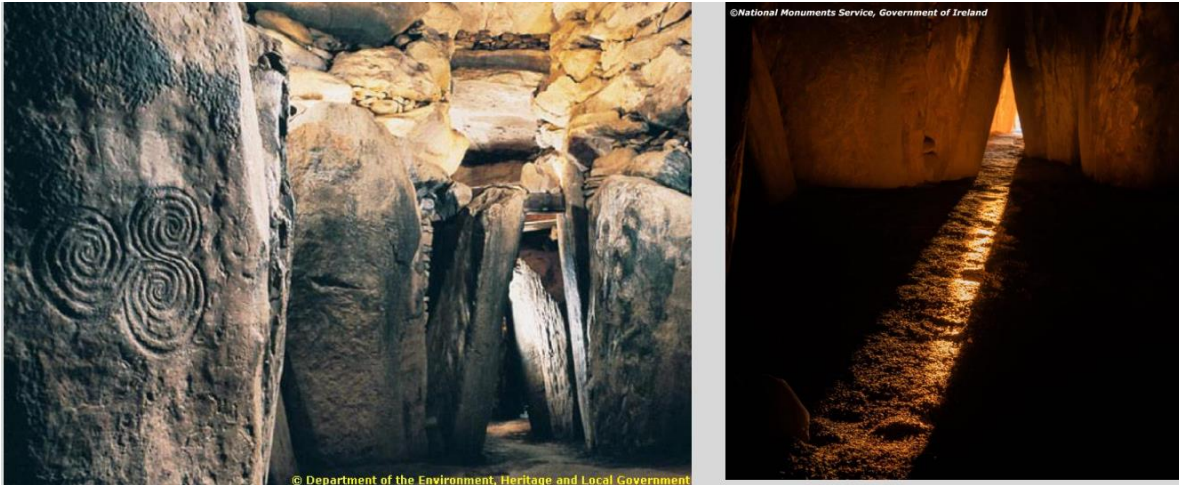


Image 12: Maes Howe, Mainland Orkney, Scotland. 2800 BC. Credit" Wikimedia.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maeshowe_Chambered_Cairn_-_geograph.org.uk_-_3221595.jpg

Such grand Neolithic tombs were not static; rather through the artificial architectural arrangement in combination with the natural world, they would perform a dynamic function at specific dates like winter and summer solstices when for some moments the tombs would automatically get converted into a stage for witnessing the divine phenomena as a proof confirming their belief systems. Take, for instance, the workings of the grand tomb of Newgrange, Ireland. Above the

entrance to the passage at Newgrange, there is an opening called a roof box. Its purpose is to allow sunlight to penetrate the passage and chamber at sunrise around the Winter Solstice. At 8:58 AM a narrow beam of light penetrates the roof box and reaches the floor of the chamber, gradually extending to the rear of the passage. As the sun rises higher, the beam widens within the chamber so that the whole room becomes dramatically illuminated and falls on the Triple Spiral. After 17 minutes the sunbeam leaves the chamber and retreats back down the passage.



Images 13 and 14: Winter Solstice at the Neolithic Passage Tomb of Newgrange. 3200 BC

Triple Spiral/ "Triskeles" (three legs) and has been interpreted in various ways. Some of these connotations include the following symbolism: life-death-rebirth, spirit-mind-body, mother-father-child, past-present-future. (Tsuji & Müller, 2019). *Cultural History. In Spirals and Vortices* (pp. 3-29). Springer, Cham. The cupules or the cupmarks have been a matter of controversy regarding their symbolism and practical purpose. What we are confirmed about is that these arts drew upon the vulva as the source of creation creation-preservation-end.



Image 15: Neolithic spirals. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newgrange#/media/File:Newgrange,_Meath.jpg

Image 16: Cupules with other designs.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newgrange#/media/File:Ireland_2010_etc_079.jpg

Some changes in the worldview of the Neolithic people are to be noted here. As human groups expanded to large societies and technological advancements were on the way, people started making more connections with the cosmos to find new meanings that would address their relationships appropriately. This trend or change is to be found in the passage tombs of Orkney, Maes and Newgrange. The sunlight was added as an extra element in its momentary intervention. For an agricultural society, the sun must have had larger practical and symbolic functions to play in their life.

The arrival of the Phallus

At the height of the Neolithic Revolution in Ireland, England and Scotland we find the rise of stone circles. The circle itself must have been drawn from the vulva, but the underlying vulvic base design was imposed and suppressed with something else that would orient the eyes not to the base but to something beyond the ground, to the horizons and the sky. The phallic presence of the stone or menhirs^{iv} represented a shift in favour of the sky god (Frazer, 1926, p.33), a shift to be noticed in the replacement of the supremacy of the moon with the sun because of agricultural productivity. Bertoni & Miranda commented on these new developments:

Representations of the penis, in the form of standing, phallic-shaped stones called 'menhirs' were revered in Britain and parts of Europe. Unusually shaped stones were considered sacred in every part of the ancient world. 'Menhirs' represented the places the Goddess could take up residence in the deserts of Mesopotamia in antiquity. They are still there, between Egypt and Israel, and they represent the ancient Hebrew Goddess, Asherah, Astarte/Esther. As maleness became more highly valued, statuettes were created with exaggerated erections. (Bertoni & Miranda, 2010, p. 62)



Image 17: The Ring of Orkney, Scotland, 2500 BC and 2000 BC.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ring_of_Brodgar,_Orkney_Standing_Stones_02.tif

The grandest of all the stone circles is, of course, the Stonehenge. The complexity of this cremation-burial implies the presence and implementation of a complex religion that depended on the calculation of the revolution of the earth. The act of cremation, reserved for the high people of the time, perhaps made way for the shift in the presence of another world up in the sky. Thus, the imaginary Father would replace the motherly principles in the practice of their religion, or at least suppress if not replace them.

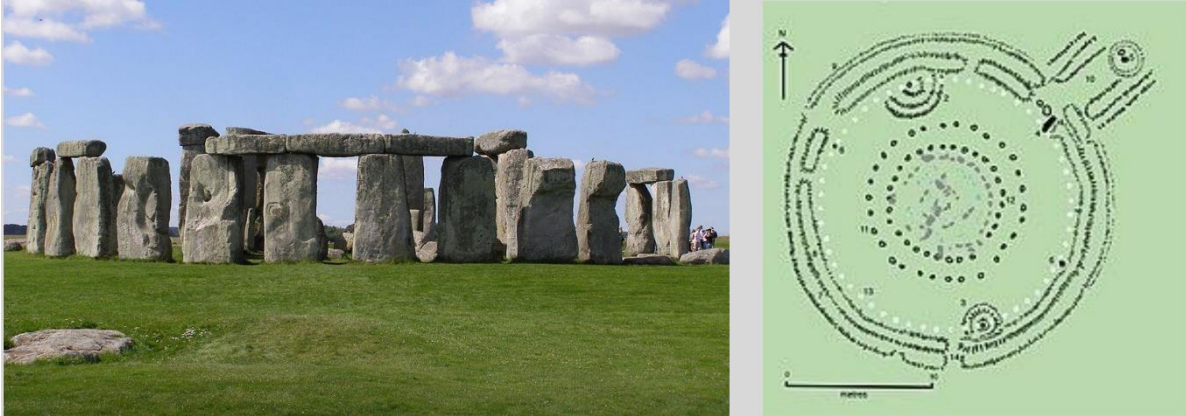


Image 18: Stonehenge, England, 3000 BC-2000 BC.

Credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stonehenge2007_07_30.jpg .

Image 19: The Base design. Drawn by Adamsan - Cleal, Walker, & Montague, Stonehenge in its Landscape (London, English Heritage 1995) Pitts, M, Hengeworld (London, Arrow 2001)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stonehenge_plan.jpg



Image 20: Stonehenge on a summer solstice

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonehenge#/media/File:Summer_Solstice_Sunrise_over_Stonehenge_2005.jpg

The stone circles became a kind of portal or a passage to another world; they are “universally viewed as connections to the heavens, to ancestors, to the gods themselves”. (Varner, 2004, p. 1) To achieve this, megaliths would be erected on womb-shaped mounds and aligned with the Mother Goddess in the form of hills. But the function changed already in favour of phallic principles to be implemented everywhere. The large-scale domestication of wild animals might have supplied Neolithic leaders with psychological and organizational tools for the suppression and exploitation of women. For, there is much evidence that during the Neolithic period women spent a lot of time with grinding corn, which led to the erosion of their hipbones. (Macintosh et al, 2017).

Birth of New Religions and Patriarchy

Speziale-Bagliacca identified the constructions of the menhirs "by psychoanalysis as primitive events in the human psyche" (Speziale-Bagliacca, 1991, p. 37), and pointed out the "positive connotations of the phallus, which are associated with the production of pleasure, research, nourishment, creativity, loss of self-control. Fertilization..." (Speziale-Bagliacca, 1991, p. 37). But there must have been negative connotations too: suppression, domination, falsification. Complex relationships after the success of farming and herding demanded more control on the members. Imaginary relationships and hierarchies would follow. The erection of the phallic menhirs^v seems to be a reflection of the controlling mechanism operating in human society. Bovasso (2010)

Its rising up represents not only an exteriorization of psychic contents but the objectification of the woman herself for a place in the world... Rising-up, however, has a broad cultural distinction whose significance is marked in the appearance of menhirs and standing stones as the monuments complementing burial mounds. It is as if the matricentric stone age consciousness expressed in uterine-shaped tombs signalled an emergence from the underworld through the use of menhirs, tor stones, herms, obelisks and other kinds of phallically rising towers.

So patriarchy seems to be contemporaneous with the introduction of the phallus in the stable stage of human society, where the male principles would be glorified and false myths would be created. The imposition of the phallus on the feminine principle is best illustrated in the image of Shiva lingam, where the lingam, though stated to be in a cosmic union, plays the dominant role, and *Purusha* rules *Prakriti*. The same can be understood concerning the suppression of the Goddesses like Inanna, Astarte, and Lilith in the late Bronze Age period. Bertonis & Miranda commented on this change,

The Goddesses of Egypt were gradually deprived of their protective, leadership functions in the societal religio-mythic systems; and the male gods assumed total power. This happened in Greece, Rome, and all through the Near East, Middle East, Mediterranean and southern Europe. (Bertonis & Miranda, 2010, p. 61)

The authors linked the debasement of feminine representation in the following manner:

Even though the Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age Goddesses were often depicted with exaggerated breasts, buttocks, bellies, and thighs, there was nothing pornographic about them. This would come much later in the patriarchal era when women were increasingly debased in patriarchal myths, religions, and customs. (Bertonis & Miranda, 2010, p. 61)

When human culture entered the iron age, the male gods were established everywhere in superior positions. The exercise of control over a vast expanse of land relates the establishment of patriarchy with organized religions. The expansion over the land also implies both symbolic and literal control over the female body. When we come to the historical times, we find masculine glorifications of the metaphor of seeds-field in many 'sacred' books.

Not to conclude:

Historical periods, phases of culture, and acceptance of new technology overlap and they are not straightforward nor clear-cut. It is more so when we study prehistoric cultural materials. So, conclusions in such cases are bound to be generalizations and overs implications. With this awareness, this article tries, not to any such attempt, but to find out the connections of the origins of patriarchy in human culture in prehistoric times. However, the pieces of evidence are to be found globally in similar patterns in a similar context. In this case, these pieces are circumstantial. The author hopes that the clues about the connection can help future researchers on the topic.

Notes

ⁱ Prehistoric periods and cultures are different chronologically at different places around the world.

ⁱⁱ "... natural features such as rock shelters and caves have been used as temporary places of protection for hunting parties for all prehistoric peoples." Raymond S, Baby in "Prehistoric Architecture: A Study of House Types in the Ohio Valey", *The Ohio Journal of Science*, 71(4): 193, July 1971. Page 193

ⁱⁱⁱ Baghor site has been interpreted as the earliest mother goddess shrine in the subcontinent. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/444365>

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