

IRAQ : ASCENT OF THE SKY GOD

by Cora Greenhill

*'The one who walked in terrible chaos
and brought life by the law of love
and out of chaos brought us harmony
and from chaos She has led us by the hand'*

*'It is you who changes destiny
to make what is bad become good.
At your right side is justice,
At your left side is goodness.
From your sides emanate life and well-being.
Ishtar, how good it is to pray to you;
There is concern in your glance.
When at a quarrel you are present,
It is you who understands the matter.
Please look upon us with affirmation.
Please listen to our prayers.'*

These songs of praise were written down over 4,000 years ago. They are addressed to Ishtar, one of the names of the Goddess in the land that is now called Iraq.

Poignant indeed that the 'civilised' world appeared to be hell-bent on returning to chaos in the very place that is called 'the cradle of civilisation.' The earliest literature in the world comes from ancient Sumer, or southern Iraq, although by the time it was written down, the Goddess described so beautifully above was already depotentiated, and political power was in the process of being secularised. The patriarchal era was on its way, and the shamanistic way of life that worshipped the Goddess as the great spirit of the sacred earth was gradually dying.

The female triangle

Her image remains there, though, not only in the literature and in the archaeological evidence of Her worship going back thousands of years into 'pre-history', but in the very shape of the landscape. Iraq itself is a triangle, which according to pre-patriarchal iconography is a female symbol, or symbol of the

Goddess, often delineated on representations of the human female as the pubic triangle, but also abstracted as a symbol in its own right. The tip of the triangle is at the Persian Gulf, where the two great rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates, having flowed through the length of the country, meet in a confluence before reaching the sea.

In landscape, the confluence of two rivers was often the site of places of Goddess worship: Olympia, for example, is such a site, where the Goddess Gaia, then Hera, was worshipped aeons before the Greek Gods arrived on the scene. Avebury is likewise on a confluence, as are many other sites. Why? Iraq is a vast and beautiful representation of the female reproductive system in landscape. The great fallopian tubes of the rivers meet and flow through the vagina of the confluence into the Gulf. No wonder the fertile plains between was the womb of civilisation. No wonder that the Goddess has had her most sacred shrines and temples here, around the rivers' confluence, since Neolithic times. It is here by the sacred vulva that the oilfields of Kuwait are now burning, threatening perhaps the worst ecological disaster humans have yet contrived. The anti-war slogan 'no blood for oil' takes on an even deeper significance in view of the lethal oil now pouring down the Gulf where Her life renewing menstrual flow should be. Never has the phrase 'rape of the earth' been more apt than as a description of this war.

Yet the rape seems to have begun at least 5000 years ago: in the literature of ancient Sumer we find the first accounts of the struggle against patriarchal abuse of power, the same struggle which in this late twentieth century, has given rise to feminism, the ecology movement, humanistic therapy and most new age thinking. Clearly, we are completing a cycle as humans on this planet, but we cannot yet know how it will be completed. Judging by recent events, the crucial question would still seem to be how masculinity can re-define itself.

Can we find anything in the literature of the birth of patriarchy that can help us in finishing with it before it finishes us? That will depend partly of course on how the literature is read.

Warrior King

When I was at University some twenty years ago reading English and European Literature, the earliest text I was given to read was 'The Epic of Gilgamesh'. Written down around 3000 BC it was presented as the first example of Western literature. Gilgamesh was a legendary warrior king from Mesopotamia, earlier Sumer, now Iraq. The Introduction to my Penguin edition describes him as 'the first tragic hero', and 'most typical of individual man in his search for life and understanding', whose story 'still has the power to move.'

Re-reading it now, I am certainly moved, for it is the story of how the way of the Goddess is flouted, Her lands made into battlegrounds, and Her women raped. The Goddess Ishtar Herself is roundly insulted, 'slagged off.' Gilgamesh is the first champion of patriarchy in literature. He has an insatiable appetite for

power, not just as a military leader but as a rapist who tyrannically forces every bride to sleep with him before she weds. The parallel between the rape of women and the rape of the earth is stark. For he also personifies the same material greed that is now threatening the Gulf and our whole planet. Now it is oil, then it was timber. The mountain timber that did not grow on the fertile plains was needed to build the great palaces in his honour, and for this commodity he went to war on the neighbouring mountain countries.

Yet the real struggle that Gilgamesh is involved in is the avoidance of death. In this he might be seen as the first neurotic in literature, or the first articulate but tormented victim of a secular world order.

But there are intimations in the Epic of human condition or culture much older than that of Gilgamesh. These is the Goddess Ishtar who appears as a parody of the great Goddess who had been worshipped through thousands of years of peaceful human existence, but who is still attempting to sustain the old sacred traditions of government. And there are many symbols of masculine energy found widely in the pre-patriarchal world. It is in exploring the (d)evolution of the Goddess and her symbols that we may yet learn something about how we need to change today.

Pre-Patriarchy

In the Epic, Ishtar, Queen of Heaven, invites Gilgamesh to Her bed, to enjoy the pleasures and privileges of being Her earthly consort. He spurns the offer, accusing her of inconstancy with all Her previous lovers. What he is referring to is the ancient tradition of the 'year King', which finds echoes in many parts of the pre-patriarchal world order. I would suggest that the yearly ritual of sacrificing the King, or shepherd of the flock, of mourning followed by the re-marriage of the Goddess, cannot be explained away as a primitive fertility ritual, any more than the Goddess Herself can legitimately be seen as a mere symbol of fertility. The custom wasn't about renewing the fertility of the soil, it was a statement about power: earthly power. It suggests the absolute law that earthly power corrupts when it ceases to be contained within the sacred role of husbandry, or guardianship.

Ishtar's traditional mate or sacred consort was named Tammuz, and his predecessor in Sumeria was Dumuzi, the chosen lover of Inanna. If we look at one of the most ancient myths to be written down, the Descent of Inanna, we find a full and profound account of relationship.⁽¹⁾

Heaven and Hell

In The Descent of Inanna, the Goddess is known as the Queen of Heaven and Earth. The title already reflects a distortion of Her nature and power, for it's patriarchal thinking that splits heaven from earth, and has to create an underworld, a hell, to balance the picture. It is to this underworld that Inanna chooses to descend, to visit her sister, Ereshkigal, who reigns there. This myth is per-

haps the earliest story of healing and recovery from the wounds of patriarchy: the ages old split in the female and human psyche.

The Goddess has been elevated to live with the other immortals in Heaven, but She is not at home there. For the immortality of the Goddess is not that which transcends death, but that paradoxical immortality of the spirit that embraces death as the opportunity for re-birth. Inanna descends from heaven because the female must embody the constant cycle of the possibility of birth and death. That is why women were the sacred teachers of the mysteries in most societies even many, many generations after men had taken over political power.

In the underworld, the Goddess learns what we must all learn from those more oppressed than ourselves: she is stripped of all privilege, all her finery, the pretensions of status and personality. Finally she is killed and hung on a hook as rotting flesh. Once she has chosen the journey, she is no longer in control, as on any therapeutic journey. Such humiliation is necessary to all of us, for we have all suffered the patriarchal splitting of body from spirit. And those of us who have been elevated by the patriarchy, who enjoy status and privilege, have social and psychic counterparts who suffer in the underworld, and who are furious. Ereshkigal symbolises this fury in the myth, and when the Goddess is rescued and returns to earth, she has reintegrated the power of that repressed fury. She has trouble getting rescued, however. When her female assistant, Ninshubur, attempts to get the assistance of the sky Gods, she is refused. The 'powers that be' are afraid to interfere: their immortality is constructed from the denial of death, their power from the denial of pain. Inanna's rescuer, finally, is Enki, an ancient deity of Earth and earth's flowing waters. He rescues her not by force but by healing: he sends little messengers that he creates from the dirt under his fingernails to show compassion to Ereshkigal. The compassion enables her to weep. Thus her rage is ended and Inanna freed.

Her first task is to find a replacement for herself in the underworld, and demons are sent with her for the purpose. She has to restrain them from seizing anyone who has mourned for her in her absence. Eventually she reaches her palace at Erech (semantically linked to the word Iraq?), where she sees her lover or consort Dumuzi sitting on her throne in royal robes, instead of his shepherd's garb, obviously enjoying his power in her absence. He has not mourned for her, and has betrayed his sacred role of shepherd of her flock. Instantly, she turns her rage on him with the eye of death, compelling him to descend and experience what she has experienced.

End of Harmony?

There are different versions of the ending of the story, some showing ways in which male and female can learn to exist in harmony. In one version, Dumuzi successfully pleads to be turned into a snake (to wriggle out of his punishment!) This is a creative solution, for the snake symbolises the earth's regenerative force and sexual energy. It has the power of cyclical self-renewal, shedding its

skin like the womb. It is universally associated with the Goddess, her control over it suggesting that under her loving guidance the thrusting and potentially dangerous masculine energy is safe and benign.

In all the many versions of the myth of the king's death, the Goddess grieves deeply at his loss. For the Goddess is not above the laws of nature or human nature: she embodies those laws. Surrender to them means accepting death, but it also offers the potential of ecstasy, for that is the ability to surrender to the sacred snake energy (Kundalini) within ourselves. Gilgamesh, the descendant of Dumuzi, spurned the sacred love of the Goddess, demanding secular, unconditional power forever. Sex became rape, guardianship became conquest. Significantly, it is a snake that snatches from Gilgamesh the flower that he has long sought and that he hopes will secure his immortality.

In the modern world it is obvious that the further a society succeeds in its pursuit of material and secular power, the further it distances itself from the ability to surrender to ecstasy. In the West people are trying to reconnect with this by contact with the music, dance and more holistic belief systems of races and cultures that our 'successful' regimes have exploited and attempted to destroy. And men are attempting to retrieve their connection with the feminine.

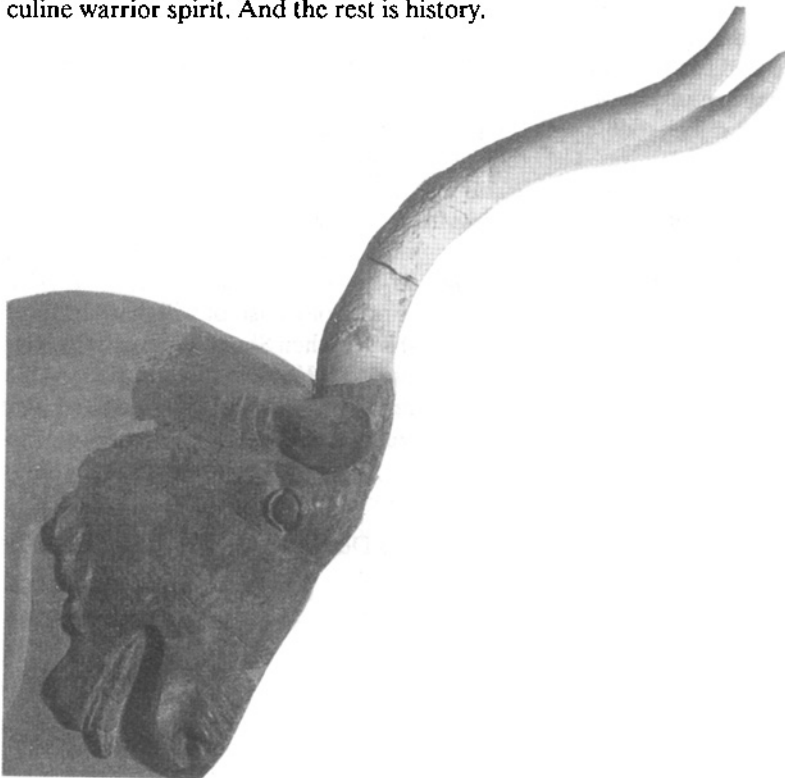


But another aspect of male energy is symbolised in pre-patriarchal cultures by the bull: the sacred Bull of Heaven appears in both the stories I have mentioned. My understanding of the Bull of Heaven is that it was a recognition that, like sexual energy, the fight energy or ferocity of humans had a place in the sacred scheme of things, and needed to be contained, but not denied, in a healthy society. The clearest illustration of this is to be found not in Sumerian, but in the ancient Cretan culture. The creative Cretans played with actual bulls in sacred games with extraordinary feats of athletic daring. There was no cruel torture of

the animal, as in modern bullfighting, but at perhaps a later stage in Crete's history it became the tradition to sacrifice the bull. The decline of this most joyous of civilisations seems to be directly connected to the refusal of the king to sacrifice a favourite bull given for the purpose by a god. Man refused to sacrifice his bull energy, and by way of divine retribution, the queen was caused to give birth to the monstrous minotaur, half man half bull. The society had been brutalised.

Sky Gods

In the earlier of the Sumerian myths, The Descent of Inanna, the Bull of Heaven is Ereshkigal's husband: it has died. This would suggest that the dangerous side of masculine power is being denied or repressed by the sky Gods, just as the dark side of the female is. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Ishtar is so furious at being insulted by the hero, that she demands of her father (who by now is the more powerful deity) that the Bull of Heaven is unleashed on earth in revenge. As a last resort, She seems to be prepared to use force, under divine control, to confront the threat posed by the sacrilegious Gilgamesh. But Gilgamesh succeeds in killing the bull, symbolically putting an end to any divine control of the masculine warrior spirit. And the rest is history.



Now the American sky Gods have wreaked their terrible revenge on the people of Iraq, an oppressed people suffering already under tyranny. Saddam Hussain is the very epitome of the unleashed fury in the return of the repressed. He is personifying for the whole Arab world, perhaps the whole non-Western world, the monstrous behaviour of people who have been abused and exploited systematically. As in a society, or a family, where power is upheld by the threat of violence, one class or one child will become the scapegoat, will exhibit the violence and take all the punishment. The rest of society, or the rest of the children, comply and hold on to their privileges. But for how long? The Arab family of nations has sided against Iraq, out of fear and to protect its vested interests with the West. But Saddam Hussain is also a hero to many Arabs. He is seen as fighting back for Islam, for the soul of the Arab world. The West cannot expect this soul to be loyal for long to a system where nothing is sacred. Democracy, as an ideal, could be seen to be the Western answer to the ancient tradition of the year king. This war, has shown us how little remains of ideals within our democracy, how little it has to do with guardianship.

I overheard a news item near the beginning of the war that said that an Italian poll had put Madonna third after Saddam Hussain as the nation's most hated persons. This may seem a frivolous comparison, but both are hated because the return of the repressed is not nice: it can have an obnoxious face. But both are also adored for their power in hitting back from where they have been most hurt: they are inspirational to those similarly oppressed. Someone said to me recently that the trouble with the peace movement in Britain is that it is too associated with feminism. The clock ticks on as we debate -isms, and the destruction continues. The question is, do the clock hands stop at twelve, the end of the patriarchal day and era, or do we find a way of moving them through to thirteen, the magical number of moons in the solar year? Do we move on from patriarchal linear, fragmented thinking to the cyclical, shamanic way of the Goddess? Will our twentieth century end in a holocaust, or will there be future generations to look back and see this as the era when She re-emerged from Her 4000 years of suppression and was listened to? We have that choice now. She is speaking out clearly to us from all over the world, and from nowhere does She speak more clearly than from beleaguered Iraq.

(1) I am indebted to Sylvia Brinton Pereira's *Descent to the Goddess* (Inner City Books) for my understanding of this myth.