

The Goddesses of the Low Countries

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In the pre-Roman Netherlands, this is the period preceding the Roman invasion in 57 BC, not only Gods but also Goddesses were worshipped. With regard to the prehistoric experience of religion in the Netherlands, Dutch researchers have always given more obvious attention to the male Gods than to the Goddesses. The question is whether this is justified.

In this article I will try to sketch the reality of Goddess worship as it has or must have existed in the Netherlands before the arrival of the Romans, and could continue in a somewhat Romanized form under the Roman regime. I will explore the border area between prehistory and history, examine the Germanic and Celtic heritage, and the role of woman and the landscape within the indigenous religious experience.

In order to get to a good impression of pre-Roman religious life, we can consult a great variety of sources: Classical writers, linguists, historians of religions, mythological researchers and material finds of, for instance, religious statues and sacrificed objects. I shall start with the last, the material finds, because they offer the best starting point for research into Goddess worship in the pre-Roman, and therefore prehistoric, Netherlands.

The archaeological finds from the Roman era

In the river delta area of the Rhine, Meuse, Waal, IJssel and the Scheldt – to which a large part of the Netherlands belongs and also the northern part of Belgium must be counted – many stone altar statues (also called votive stones or altar stones) and terracotta figurines have been found. Due to the image that is depicted or the inscription, the vast majority of the altar statues and figurines are connected a specific Goddess. In these two categories relatively few images or inscriptions of male Gods have been found. That the vast majority of these finds are Goddess images or inscriptions is so special because they all have been created in the same period: during the Roman rule, roughly between 150 and 250 AD. Therefore without needing to apply all kinds of artifice, we can consider them as a group of closely related finds.

Of course one can doubt whether altar statues and terracotta figurines can be places next to each other. Are we not dealing here with two totally different matters? The first got a permanent place in a sanctuary; the second could easily be carried around and probably were placed by the people in their house altar, in the location where their daily activities took place. In itself the suggestion that the altar statues were made by elites who could afford them and that the terracotta figurines were produced for the much poorer population, sounds quite

reasonable. But because the population has consisted of both elites and poor people, and the altar statues and terracotta figurines were created in the same period, I believe there is little objection to place them next to each other.¹ Despite some relative small differences, the imagery on the altar statues and expressed by the terracotta figurines is very similar.²

It is known that not only altar statues and terracotta figurines have been found in the Netherlands, but also a considerable number of bronze figurines, which generally represent the Classical Roman Gods and Goddesses. Although the Goddesses are also well represented here, they certainly do not form a majority. We must realize that – in contrast to the altar statues and the terracotta figurines – they usually had not been created in North-Western Europe, but had been ‘imported’ by Roman soldiers and reflect indigenous religious worship to a much lesser degree. And even though it is known that a large part of these Roman soldiers were recruited among the indigenous Gallic and Germanic population – including of course the Batavians –, we are probably dealing here with a category of Gods and Goddesses that had a very different origin and meaning. Therefore I have chosen to leave those for what they are, and to concentrate in this article on the altar statues and terracotta figurines. Below we will see that these in particular do not exclusively reflect the religious experience that was imported by the Romans, but reveal instead something important about the indigenous religious experience in the Dutch/Belgium river delta area.³

Because on the altar statues often the inscription can still be read, either wholly or partially, we are familiar with quite a few names of indigenous Goddesses. The best known is without doubt *Nehalennia*. Far more than 200 altar statues of this Goddess have been found: in 1647 on the beach near the town Domburg and in 1970/71 not too far from there on the bottom of the Oosterschelde near Colijnsplaat (both in the province of Zeeland). But also many other names of the Goddesses are known, like *Dea Arcanua*, *Dea Hurstrga*, *Dea Iseneucaega*, *Dea Sandraudiga*, *Dea Hludana* and *Dea Viradecdis*, which sometimes have only survived on one altar statue; and besides those, several altar statues have been found of three Goddesses called *Matres*, which are mainly known from the German area of the Rhine and Mosel.⁴ The terracotta figurines have all been handed down to us namelessly, but sometimes from the imagery we can still trace their identity. Next to a majority which

¹ To make a jump to our time: some people live in a free standing bungalow in the country and others in a rental flat in a city suburb, but both serve a similar purpose: to come home, to eat and to sleep.

² Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 110-114.

³ Further in this article I will just talk about (the river delta area of) the Netherlands, but of course the borders of today did not exist in the Roman era and this delta area also included the northern part of Belgium.

⁴ K. Zee, *Inheems-Romeinse Godinnen in Nederland*, (unpublished) doctoral thesis, Nijmegen 1987, p. 70.

depict the Mother Goddess(es), also terracotta figurines have been found of *Venus, Fortuna, Minerva, Cybele* and *Luna*.⁵ Because these figurines are very fragile and could easily break (and indeed have been broken a lot), we must assume that through the centuries many have been lost. We can only guess at the real number of figurines that once must have been there: it must have been much larger than the already considerable number (of whole figurines and fragments) we have found up to now.

Although we limit ourselves here to the finds on Dutch territory, for the sake of completeness it must be pointed out that also beyond the Dutch borders large numbers of both altar statues and terracotta figurines of Goddesses have been found, which in terms of symbolism and origin are closely related to the Dutch finds. This is the case in the German Rhine and Mosel area. The area in which Gallo-Roman terracotta figurines of Goddesses have been found extends further southwards into France.⁶

Of course numbers do not tell us everything. It is a fact that archaeological finds are often based on chance and luck; that many religious statues made from wood – which are known to have existed – must have disintegrated; and that a large number of finds does not necessarily prove the importance of a religious phenomenon.

Mircea Eliade argued with regard to a much earlier period, the Old Stone Age, that the finds of feminine figurines did not imply the absence of a ‘divine masculine Being’, and that there are even indications that the Mother Goddesses had been created by such ‘supreme Being’. Eliade believed also that the worship of this ‘supreme Being’ was the oldest form of our religious experience, a kind of primal monotheism, and that the Mother Goddess only became really important after the discovery of agriculture.⁷ Although Eliade certainly has been a major historian of religion (and still is), I wonder whether by introducing this ‘supreme Being’ he did not simply create a smart detour to legitimate the supremacy of the masculine Gods. The question remains, of course, why no material finds have been unearthed from the Old Stone Age which point to the worship or the existence of such a ‘supreme Being’, whereas we have a large number of finds from that period which point to Goddess worship. But for our story Eliade’s viewpoint does not need to have direct consequences, because we are not dealing here with the Old Stone Age, but with the period just before the arrival of the Romans, many centuries after the rise of agriculture – a period in which even according to Eliade the Mother Goddess played an important role.

⁵ Georgette M.E.C. van Boekel, *Romeinse terracotta's*, Museumstukken VI, Vereniging van Vrienden van het Museum Kam – Nijmegen 1996, p 14-20; G.M.E.C. van Boekel, ‘Moedergodinnen en Venus. Romeinse terracotta beeldjes in Noord-West Europa’, *Westerheem*, AWN, XXXV, no. 1, febr. 1986, p. 14-27.

⁶ G.M.E.C. van Boekel, ‘Moedergodinnen en Venus. Romeinse terracotta beeldjes in Noord-West Europa’, *Westerheem*, AWN, XXXV, no. 1, febr. 1986, p. 14-27.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries. The encounter between contemporary faiths and archaic realities*, Harper & Row, New York 1975, p. 173-176.

As long as there are no finds which legitimate a different view, we must seriously ask ourselves whether these large numbers of altar statues and figurines of Goddesses do not reveal us after all something about the importance of the Goddess within the whole of the pre-Roman, indigenous religious experience. Even when this would indicate the continuation of religious practices that no longer corresponded to the established religion, because it is precisely this continuation of indigenous religious practices in which we are particularly interested here. Although there is – in particular foreign – literature available which indeed assigns a prominent place to the Goddess in Celtic and Germanic religion, most Dutch archaeologists and historians do not seem to be convinced of that yet.

On the border between archaeology and history

In most general history books which give an overview of the whole of Dutch history the religious experience of our prehistoric ancestors hardly or not at all comes up for discussion.⁸ It is conceivable that the low status of prehistory, which for centuries was understood from the perspective of Christian historiography, has been the cause of this. *Prehistory* was conceived as a period that derived its prime importance from the fact that it had preceded history. By definition it was considered – at least from the historical perspective – as a relatively minor period, which served mainly to prepare us for the really important period: history. Analogous to this, all religions which had preceded Christianity were classified as *pre-Christian*. The knowledge about pre-Christian religions was only interesting in so far they could provide us more insight into the rise and development of Christianity. They were primarily seen as forerunners of Christianity.⁹ Although there is at least a few centuries between the end of the prehistoric Europe and the beginning of Christian Europe, according to the dividing line between BC and AD the beginning of history and the beginning of Christianity seem to coincide. Of course science has gradually separated itself from its Christian roots, but we should not underestimate the effect of traditional image formation.

Because the more specialized studies in the field of the history of religion in the Netherlands have nearly all limited themselves to the Dutch history of Christianity – to church history –, there is not much point in consulting them to gain knowledge about the pre-Christian religious experience. There is an important exception to this, however. In the book *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*, published in 2005, by Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieberg, in the first chapter attention is paid to the religion under Roman rule.

⁸ See, for instance: Gerlof Verweij, *Geschiedenis van Nederland. Levensverhaal van zijn bevolking*, deel 1, wording van een land, De Bataafse Leeuw, Amsterdam 1995; Jan en Annie Romein, *De Lage Landen bij de zee*, deel 1, van de oudste tijden tot 1560, W. de Haan – Standaardboekhandel, Zeist, 1961, p. 61 e.v.; H.P.H. Jansen, *Levend verleden. De Nederlandse samenleving van de prehistorie tot in onze tijd*, Uitgeverij Scheffers, Utrecht 1996.

⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 15.

They have taken an important step in the right direction by supplementing the historical insights with archaeological knowledge, but they have nevertheless maintained the idea that history has started with the arrival of script.¹⁰

As is well-known, archaeology is the science par excellence that nowadays specializes in the period of prehistory, and this is understandable because our knowledge of the period depends to a large extent on material finds. By their thorough and very valuable research to map our distant past in great detail, archaeologists have certainly not ignored the finds which are associated with Goddess worship, but in my opinion there is something missing in the results of the archaeological reports. Although the researchers acknowledge the importance of Goddess worship in the Netherlands, the descriptions of the world of the Gods nearly always start with the masculine Gods, thereby suggesting (perhaps unintended) that within these religions the Goddesses were of secondary importance.¹¹

In archaeology a distinction is made between religious cults which were important in an entire region and cults which were ‘only’ of local importance, between public and private cults.¹² The difference is measured, among other things, by the size of the temple complexes. Big temple complexes would indicate a public cult with a regional significance and the small temple complexes (or the complete absence of them) would indicate a private cult that would have had only a local significance. In the Netherlands such big temple complexes have been found in three places – at Empel, Elst and Kessel – whose size suggest that they must have attracted people from a wider area.

We know from these public cult places that in them the worship of a masculine God, Hercules Magusanus, has probably been central, and therefore not a Goddess. But indirectly we can still find traces of the Goddess heritage in the name of Hercules, albeit in a negative sense. Hercules is the Roman variant of the Greek God Heracles and this name so much as ‘the glory of Hera’. Philip Slater has seen in Heracles the prototype of the Greek God who is engaged in a continuous struggle with the forces of the Mother Goddess Hera, as a reflection of the struggle of the son against the domain of the mother.¹³ We must bear in mind, however, that because of the process of the *interpretatio romana*, whereby the indigenous God Magusanus was linked to the Roman God, little might be left of the original Greek meaning of this God.

¹⁰ Joris van Eijnatten & Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*, Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum 2005, p. 30 and further.

¹¹ For instance: A.W. Byvanck, *Nederland in den Romeinschen tijd*, Brill, Leiden 1943, p. 552.

¹² Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 94; The historians van Eijnatten and van Lieberg have included this distinction between public and private cults in their study about the Dutch history of religion: Joris van Eijnatten & Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*, Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum 2005, p. 30 and further.

¹³ Philip Slater, *The Glory of Hera. Greek Mythology and the Greek family*, Beacon Press, Boston 1962, p. 337 and further.

But there is another reason to put the importance of Hercules Magusanus for the religious experience of the indigenous people in the Netherlands somewhat in perspective. The question is whether we can deduce the importance of a particular cult from the size of the temple complex. As is well-known, the Celtic and Germanic tribes preferably worshipped their Goddesses and Gods in the open air and also have hardly made any statues of their Goddesses and Gods, so for the archaeologist there is little else to be found of these ‘open air temples’ than perhaps some sacrificed objects. These people did not need cult buildings to practice their religion.¹⁴ Can it be that the emphasis on the stone temple complexes has something to do with the – unconscious – heritage of our own Christian religious practice? After all, – apart from the processions in which a statue of a saint is carried around through the streets – this has always been an indoor affair.

As far as the local cults are concerned, it is assumed that these were only important for the people living in the immediate vicinity. The fact that the majority of the worshipped Goddesses, and the finds related to them, are placed on the local level, helps to explain why Dutch archaeologists are convinced that the Goddesses would have played a subordinate role. In their view certain types of Goddesses, the *matres* and *matronae* – known Roman names for the Mother Goddesses, of whom especially in the German Rhine and Mosel area many altaar statues and terracotta figurines has been found – would not even have been Goddesses in the proper sense, but only ‘ancestral mothers’.¹⁵

It is of course a fact that both the altar statues and the figurines stem from the Roman era, and one could argue that the Roman influence in their design is so great, that little can be said about the survival of much older, pre-Roman forms of worship. In this respect it has been pointed out that the revival of the indigenous religions after the incorporation into the Roman Empire is an indication that these religions must have had very deep roots.¹⁶ Apart from the fact that several elements of Goddess worship were alien to the Roman religious experience, its local original and its connection with the local environment – expressed in the wide range of indigenous Goddess names that in no way whatsoever could not be fitted into the Classical pantheon – actually says enough about its non-Roman nature. The Romans came across this Goddess worship and allowed it to continue under a Gallo-Roman denominator. Even behind the Goddesses that can be traced to a Roman origin, as is the case with a

¹⁴ Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 132.

¹⁵ Leo Verhart, *Op zoek naar de Kelten. Nieuwe archeologische ontdekkingen tussen Noordzee en Rijn*, Uitgeverij Matrijs, Utrecht 2006, p. 166; Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 119. Derks argues that the Goddess Nehalennia in the pre-Roman era has been a rather insignificant Goddess, but he doesn't explain why this is the case.

¹⁶ Colin Wells, ‘Celts and Germans in the Rhineland’, in *The Celtic World*, ed. Miranda Green, Routledge London 1996, p. 612.

lot of the terracotta figurines, local indigenous Goddesses could have been hidden.¹⁷

I will try to clarify below why the local nature of Goddess worship does not mean that it would have been less important.

From interpretatio romana to interpretatio moderna

Anyone who opens a Dutch history book, will – as mentioned above – generally find little or no information about the religious past of our prehistoric ancestors. Following the Classics, modern historians still largely link their field to the traditions through script and also draw the boundary of their field at the advent of writing.¹⁸ Prehistory as a period was created by people who did not actually concern themselves directly with it – by outsiders.

Also the Romans were already observing the way of life of the tribal people they came across in prehistoric North-Western Europe as outsiders. We should never forget that when we consult their writings. Of course, when the Roman writers described the lives of the tribes in the Low Countries in that distant past, that little piece of prehistory was ‘raised’ to the level of history. But they are series of short flashes, seen through the distorted ‘civilization-glasses’ of Roman soldiers and settlers. What the real lives – and in particular the religious lives – of the native tribes must have looked like, is hidden behind the veil of the *interpretatio romana*. Only in an indirect way we can get an idea about the native conceptions of life, namely by filtering out whatever is alien to the Roman conceptions of life. And yet, in this respect the Classical texts, the imagery and the inscriptions in stone concerning Goddess worship, turn out to be revealing us a lot.

The question is whether we, looking back from the 21st century to the religious experience in Dutch prehistory, look at our ‘primitive’ ancestors very differently from the Romans. Undoubtedly scientific practice – in our story primarily history and archaeology, but also other scientific branches like biology, psychology and anthropology – have greatly broadened and deepened our insight into the past. Without wanting to undervalue science and its research methods, I think there are indications that the scientific field of vision has its limitations: every modern scientist peers at the prehistoric religious experience through the lens of the *interpretatio moderna*. This *interpretatio moderna* is particularly evident in two fields. First in the assumption that in a religion one God of several Gods reign at the top of a (hierarchically ordered) world of Gods, and second in the way in which cultural connections are preferably tracked across the mainland.

¹⁷ Georgette M.E.C. van Boekel, *Romeinse terracotta's*, Museumstukken VI, Vereniging van Vrienden van het Museum Kam – Nijmegen 1996, p.14.

¹⁸ Zie ook: Joris van Eijnatten & Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*, Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum 2005, Proloog, p. 13-19.

Let me start with the first field. The Dutch researchers who have devoted themselves to pre-Roman religion seem to take for granted that our ancestors must have worshipped one masculine God or several masculine Gods. The Goddesses are not ignored, but they place them on a lower level. They show their emphasis on the (masculine) Gods in their books and articles by describing them first, and giving some space to the Goddesses in a later section or chapter. And by concluding on the basis of material finds that – as we have seen – at public cults the Gods and at private cults the Goddesses have reigned, it is confirmed that the Goddess must be placed at a lower level.¹⁹ Admittedly, there are some exceptions: sometimes it is stressed that the Goddesses have played an equally powerful role as the Gods, and I wonder whether this is a sign of the growing conviction of the importance of Goddess worship.²⁰ Some foreign studies have already given the Goddess worshipped in the Dutch river area a respected first place a few decades ago.²¹

I believe that this scientific preference for the masculine deities could have taken shape, because the religious imagery of Western scientists has been fed primarily by the three specific traditions of the Indo-European heritage. The two most important influential sources are of course Christianity and the Classical world of Greece and Rome, but, in addition, the Germanic heritage has also had a big influence. It is common knowledge (among scientists as well) that within the Indo-European religions one God or several Gods have been supreme. The underlying line of reasoning is that all Indo-European societies were organized in a patriarchal way – in other words, that men ruled in them – and that this would have been reflected in the organization of their divine world. According to this view, the worship of the Sky God was central to them all: Zeus among the Greeks, Jupiter among the Romans, Wotan among the Germanic people, and God among the Christians.²² It is not strange that many historians and archaeologists – fed by these views – could not imagine a religion in which a Goddess has been or even several Goddesses like the Matres have been central. Recent archaeological research among Indo-European nomadic

¹⁹ Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 91 and further; Nico Roymans, *Tribal Societies in Northern Gaul. An anthropological perspective*, AUP Amsterdam 1990, p. 53 and further; Joris van Eijnatten & Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*, Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum 2005, p. 30 and further. In the last book in the survey on page 33 first the Roman Gods are mentioned, then the indigenous Romanized Gods, and finally the indigenous Goddesses. The authors give the impression that these three categories are hierarchically ordered: Roman culture is considered more important than the indigenous culture, and within this indigenous culture the Gods are considered more important than the Goddesses.

²⁰ Leo Verhart, *Op zoek naar de Kelten. Nieuwe archeologische ontdekkingen tussen Noordzee en Rijn*, Uitgeverij Matrijs, Utrecht 2006, p. 166.

²¹ For instance: Miranda Green, *Symbol & Image in Celtic Religious Art*, Routledge, London 1992. On page 9 (and further) ‘the female image’ is discussed and only on page 131 (and further) ‘the male image’ is discussed. (In general it is of course an interesting question to what extent a writer’s sex has influenced the order of the Goddesses and the Gods.)

²² Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 157.

tribes in Siberia and Mongolia has made it clear that even those – and Indo-European societies in general – have probably been much more egalitarian than has always been assumed, and that also the Goddess has played an important role beside the Sky God.²³ But this new insight has not yet received the general approval in the scientific world and has not yet been able to influence the general image of our Indo-European past.

It is also conceivable, however, that scientists are not eager to imagine a prominent Goddess worship, because among the group of historians and archaeologists which has argued for the cultural importance of (pre-Indo-European) Goddess worship, are still many feminist-oriented researchers. And regrettably their researches – which often have limited themselves to adjusting the one-sided masculine perspective in order to do justice to both men and women – still get little general appreciation in ‘respectable’ academic circles and often are simply ignored. At the time I wrote this article, in 2007/2008, there were no published feminist-inspired studies yet devoted to the Goddesses in the Low Countries. (Since then, however, a few books have been published in this field.²⁴)

The second element of the *interpretatio moderna* mentioned above entails that archaeological and historical research with regard to the Low Countries still prefers to follow cultural links across *the mainland* (of Europe) and therefore too easily disregards the potential connections across *the sea*. Perhaps this preference has to do with another preference: to trace historical developments from east to west rather than from west to east. Recent research into the megalithic cultures of Western Europe and the cultural influence of Ireland has made it clear, however, that the sea has played a much more important role in the distant past than has always been assumed, if only for the fact that coastal areas have been much more accessible in times when there were hardly any roads or travelling over land was much more time consuming and also more dangerous than across the sea.²⁵ When we look at Dutch history and in a broader context to Western European history, then we can see that in different areas major influences have reached the European mainland from England and Ireland. In particular in the Middle Ages are many examples. Then the English Arthur stories spread across the European mainland. The Irish Saint Brendan story has become widespread in many European countries in that period, and it

²³ Jeannine Davis-Kimball, *Warrior Women. An Archeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines*, Warner Books, New York 2002. Also with regard to Germanic culture the prevailing imagery of their divine world (with the Gods on top) is more and more often corrected, like for instance in the book *Roles of the Northern Goddess* van Hilda Ellis Davidson (Routledge London 1998).

²⁴ For instance: Annine van der Meer, *Nieuw Licht op Nehalennia. Over een Zeeuwse moedergodin uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*, Pansophia Press, 2015; Annine van der Meer, *De Drie Dames uit Duitsland. De matronen en Nehalennia, moedergodinnen uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*, Pansophia Press, 2015; Ineke Bergman, *Godinnen van eigen bodem*, A3 boeken, 2007.

²⁵ Bob Quinn, *The Atlantean Irish. Ireland's Oriental and Maritime Heritage*, The Lillyput Press, Dublin 2005; Peter Marshall, *Europe's Lost Civilisation. Uncovering the Mysteries of the Megaliths*, Headline, London 2004.

is known to which extent the Irish missionaries have left an unmistakable mark behind on European Christianity.²⁶ So why would there have been no cultural exchange between Ireland, England and the European mainland in prehistoric times? Because of the preference for cultural influences across the mainland an important cultural source has been neglected more or less, namely the Celtic tradition from Ireland. Coincidentally, is precisely from within this tradition that Goddess worship can be put in a much more comprehensible context and can also be given much more meaning.

The Germanic heritage

We mentioned earlier the book by van Eijnatten and van Lieberg which has attempted to map the entire history of religion in the Netherlands for the first time. In the preceding centuries, however, there has been little historical conception of the prehistoric religious experience. This conception was traditionally filled in by the material as it had been supplied by Classical writers like Tacitus and Caesar. When we consult the Classical writers in order to know whether the Goddess worship in the pre-Roman Netherlands was of Germanic or Celtic origin, then the answer is rather simple. According to both Caesar and Tacitus before the arrival of the Romans this region had been populated with Germanic tribes. Although the Celts usually had been given a place in the Dutch history books, still the (Classical) had remained predominant that in the pre-Roman era the Netherlands had been populated mainly with Germanic tribes. This view implied that also the religion of the Dutch ancestors must have been Germanic, and that the traces of Goddess worship must have been of Germanic origin and character as well.²⁷

Because Dutch researchers tried to understand the Dutch Goddess worship primarily from a Germanic context, it is understandable that they were at a loss with it. When we investigate what is known about Germanic religion, then we see that Goddess worship certainly does not seem to have taken a prominent place in it. As far as the Germanic 'pantheon' is concerned, always three masculine Gods are mentioned: beside the supreme God Wotan or Odin, there are two other Gods: Donar or Thor and Tyr (or Tiwaz). In a rather unclear place outside this trio of Gods we come across the Goddess Freya.²⁸ Although the worship of Freya certainly has had aspects that we can see reflected in Dutch Goddess worship, it is doubtful whether this Germanic Goddess was the foundation of it. The Germanic world of the Gods has probably only entered the Dutch coastal areas in the first century after Christ, when the Goddess worship

²⁶ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilisation. The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1995.

²⁷ H.P.H. Jansen, *Levend verleden. De Nederlandse samenleving van de prehistorie tot in onze tijd*, Uitgeverij Scheffers, Utrecht 1996, p. 37.

²⁸ Jan de Vries, *De Germaansche Oudheid*, H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, Haarlem 1930, p. 164.

had existed in this region quite probably already for many centuries.²⁹ But still other potential Germanic ‘predecessors’ of Dutch Goddess worship can be located. In Germanic mythology there are a few other powerful female beings like the Valkyries and the Norns, and from German folklore we know the powerful female beings Berchta (or Perchta) and Holda (or Frau Holle, Mother Hulda). These last two could be reflections of an older Goddess worship and therefore could contribute to placing Dutch Goddess worship in a comprehensible context.³⁰

If we should believe Tacitus, the Germanic people worshipped a Germanic variant of the Roman Gods Mercury, Mars and Hercules.³¹ Elsewhere in his *Germania* he mentions that the Goddess Nerthus was worshipped in Denmark with fertility processions.³² It is doubtful, however, whether Tacitus – as an outsider – really has had a complete overview of the Germanic religion, just like it is doubted whether his *Germania* dealt with the Germanic people. According to Colin Wells, there were two kinds of Germanic people: first, the tribes (which both Caesar and Tacitus spoke about) that lived along the Rhine and in fact were of Celtic descent or were strongly celticized; and second, the northerly tribes, that had a more primitive, nomadic state of social and economic development and spoke a Germanic dialect.³³ As far as the connection with Dutch Goddess worship is concerned, we should especially consult that first Germanic-Celtic tribal tradition; and when we compare the Goddesses, Nerthus and Holda, with their fertility associations, qualify the best.

To emphasize the importance of the Germanic religion for the ancestors of the Dutch people often is referred to its survival in the names of the days of the week. But as we have mentioned already above, the worship of the Germanic Gods and Goddesses probably has only reached the Dutch coastal areas in the centuries after Christ, and therefore we know that these names have certainly not been used before that time to mark the weekdays. Also the distinction that Ceasar made between Gallic (Celtic) and Germanic culture has been questioned for a good while now, and new archaeological and linguistic insights have

²⁹ Judith Schuyf, *Heidens Nederland. Zichtbare overblijfselen van een niet-Christelijk verleden*, Utrecht 1995, p. 32-33.

³⁰ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, Routledge London 1998, p. 66; Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 114.

³¹ Nico Roymans, *Tribal Societies in Northern Gaul. An anthropological perspective*, AUP Amsterdam 1990, p.53; Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 32-33.

³² Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, Routledge London 1998, p. 67 en 111/113.

³³ Colin Wells, ‘Celts and Germans in the Rhineland’, in *The Celtic World*, ed. Miranda Green, Routledge London 1996, p. 609.

increasingly shown that the Celtic language and the Celtic cultural styles have also left their traces in the Netherlands.³⁴

The Celtic heritage

As far as the Celtic religion is concerned, current research has now given us a picture which deviates considerably from the description by Roman writers. First something about the picture of continental Celtic religion as it have been handed down by Julius Caesar. In his account about the Gallic war, he put the God Mercury central – which is probably a Roman identification of the Celtic God Lug(h). Then he mentions another three masculine Gods – Apollo, Mars and Jupiter – and as the last one he mentions the only feminine deity, the Goddess Minerva.³⁵ Because Caesar was used to thinking in terms of a hierarchical ‘pantheon’, we can derive from this order that according to him Minerva would certainly not have played the leading role in the religious experience of the Celts. But Caesar, like the other Roman writers, as an outsider must have had only a very limited idea about the nature of Celtic religion. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt has pointed out, that among the Mother Goddesses no Minerva was found in the capacity of patroness of the arts. According to her Ceasar gives us a wrong impression of the complex Goddess worship of the Celts.³⁶ When we include the insular Celtic tradition of Ireland, a very different picture emerges, because in Irish mythology the Goddesses occupy an important place, at least equal to the masculine Gods. Miranda Green sees a link between this insular Celtic tradition and that of the European mainland. She has pointed out that for the ‘pagan’ Celts of the European mainland during the Roman period the Mother Goddess was probably the most important supernatural power, and that the many images and dedications connected with her worship reflect her popularity throughout the Celtic world, so also in Ireland.³⁷

The Celts knew their Goddesses and Gods under a multitude of names. These were not so much identical to each other, but must rather be seen as equivalents of each other, originated among different tribes and perhaps on different moments, from the same generative impulse.³⁸ According to Barry Cunliffe all the Goddesses in the Irish tradition of Celtic mythology were reflections of the Mother Earth Goddess and all the masculine Gods were reflections of the Tribal God. In the Celtic world those two aspects were united

³⁴ Herman Clerinx, *De Kelten in de Lage Landen*, Davidsfonds Leuven, 2005, p. 76-78; Laurant Toorians, ‘Kelten aan de Nederlandse kust. Noordzeegermaans begon met Noordzeekeltisch’, uit: *Spiegel Historiae* 36 (2001), nr 3.

³⁵ Nico Roymans, *Tribal Societies in Northern Gaul. An anthropological perspective*, AUP Amsterdam 1990, p.53.

³⁶ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 33-34.

³⁷ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 106.

³⁸ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 39.

annually during the festival of *Samhain*, which took place every year on the 1st of November, the beginning of the Celtic year. Samhain was the moment on which the Tribal God and Mother Earth came together to have intercourse – an act that ensured that the balance of the powers was restored again and that the fertility of the land and of the people was renewed.³⁹ Although there has never been a clear Celtic pantheon, there are vague hints that the world of the Gods had been shaped in the same way as the tribe was organized. At the head was the Tribal God and his ‘consort’, the Mother Earth Goddess. And above that there was also a vague conception of the mother of the Gods.⁴⁰

Proinsias Mac Cana further details the difference between this Tribal God and the Mother Earth Goddess. He points out that the sacred sovereignty, represented by the Goddess as the personification of Ireland, is a permanent and fundamental element of the Irish tradition. In this respect he refers to the story of ‘Conn of the Hundred Battles’, in which Lugh acts as the king of the Other World and is accompanied by a young woman, who can be identified as the sovereignty of Ireland, and he makes a direct link to the Gallic monuments of Mercury and Rosmerta.⁴¹ Thus he suggests that there are indications that on the European mainland comparable religious views have existed. It is even possible that the association between the land and the king, which meant that the sovereignty of this king was connected with the fertility of the land, was once introduced in Ireland by the Belgae tribes, which probably should be identified with the *Fir Bolg* from Irish mythology.⁴² Miranda Green also sees a possible connection between the insular and continental tradition.⁴³ She also points out that the origin of the myth of the sacred marriage probably must be sought in the religious tradition of agricultural communities. This myth would have reflected the belief that the fertility of the earth needed an input from human beings. For a successful harvest the combined energy was required of the earth, which was considered feminine, and of humanity, which was considered masculine.⁴⁴ The sacred marriage can be found in many mythologies, like in those of the countries in the Middle-East, in the mythology of Classical Greece and of pre-Christian Rome. So it should not be regarded as specifically Celtic.⁴⁵

³⁹ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World*, BCA London, 1992, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World*, BCA London, 1992, p. 74. Inadvertently this image makes me think about the Christian imagery of Jesus and Mary together with Anne, the mother of Mary. It is probably not entirely coincidental that the worship of Saint Anne has been strong in regions like Brittany, where the influence of Celtic culture has also been strong.

⁴¹ Proinsias Mc Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Chancellor Press, London, 1997, p. 19, 25 en 92-93.

⁴² Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 18.

⁴³ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p 126-127.

This origin of the sacred marriage between a Goddess and a God in the agricultural communities is in line with the view of Mac Cana, that the notion of a mystical or symbolic union between the king and his kingdom is older than Indo-European society. But he immediately adds that this sacred image of sovereignty was nowhere as clearly visualized as among the Celts.⁴⁶ The possibility of a pre-Indo-European heritage within Celtic religion is an interesting fact, which we will pay more attention to below.

Some reservations can be made however. Because the Romans, except for some little settlements, have never set foot in Ireland, Roman culture has left almost no traces, like it has on the European mainland and in England. In Ireland no altar statues or terracotta figurines have been found. And Celtic culture itself didn't help much here either, as the Celts were not used to making images of their Gods and Goddesses; and when they did, they were made of wood and therefore have only survived in rare cases. And, as we have mentioned above, the Celts were not used to building temples either, because they preferred to worship their Goddesses and Gods in nature, under the open sky.⁴⁷ It is interesting that this also shows that material finds – in the form of statues or temples – do not have to be the most important evidence for the existence of a religious experience or practice.

Another comment to be made is that in the Dutch river area no images or inscriptions have been found that indicate the existence of a joint worship of the God and the Goddess, as in the case of Mercury and Rosmerta. This of course doesn't alter the fact that the finds in the Dutch river area do indicate that the people worshipped Goddesses and Gods side by side. Precisely because the worship of Goddesses and Gods took place in different fields – the Goddess in the field of fertility of the land, the animals and the people, and the defense of the land against external powers; and the God in the field of tribal matters⁴⁸ – it is plausible that both forms of worship have existed side by side and in relation to each other. Although the questions remains whether the same population groups had been involved in the worship practices, we have to ask ourselves as well whether by separating public and private cults (which we have mentioned earlier) we do not wrongly split the world of the Goddesses and Gods in two in a rather absolute way.

Celtic festivals

Interesting in this respect is that there are a few indications that the Celtic annual festivals, in which these Goddesses and Gods obviously played a role, were also celebrated in the Netherlands. For our story the festival of *Samhain*, which – as we have already pointed out – was celebrated on the 1st of November and

⁴⁶ Proinsias Mc Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Chancellor Press, London, 1997, p. 92.

⁴⁷ Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 132.

⁴⁸ Proinsias Mc Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Chancellor Press, London, 1997, p. 92.

marked the beginning of the Celtic year, is especially interesting. During *Samhain* the Goddess and the God were ritually united with one another. Barry Cunliffe points out that ‘In Celtic mythology Samhain was the time of reconciliation between the tribal god and the earth mother in her tribal guise, when they came together for intercourse – the act ensuring that the balance of the forces has been restored and that the fertility of the land and the people was renewed’.⁴⁹

An important indication for the existence of the festival of *Samhain* in the Netherlands comes from an unexpected angle: from Dutch literary history. In the 19th century the orally transmitted *Lied van Heer Halewijn* (Song of Mister Halewijn) was written down, which probably goes back to a medieval source. Frits van Oostrom, a Dutch historian, has pointed out that *Halewijn* probably refers to the festival of *Haloween*, a later name for the Celtic festival of *Samhain*. According to van Oostrom, also other elements in the song strongly indicate that in the story of Halewijn the festival of Haloween is reflected.⁵⁰ In other Dutch folk tales, like the well-known story of *Blauwbaard* (Bluebeard), there are also elements that remind one of the story of Halewijn, which makes it conceivable that the figure of Halewijn could survive – and thus the memory of the Celtic festival of Samhain – in the Netherlands under different names.⁵¹

Another indications for the celebration of the Celtic festivals in the Netherlands is supplied by the settlement *Lugdunum Batavorum* or *Lugduno*, which must have existed somewhere at the mouth of the Old Rhine (which still flows through Leiden) in the Roman era and – as I have argued elsewhere – almost certainly is of pre-Roman origin.⁵² When this settlement is indeed of pre-Roman origin, than it is plausible that the festival in honor of the God Lug – *Lughnasa* – has also been celebrated in this region. There is another indirect indication with regard to the celebration of *Lughnasa*. In Irish mythology it is mentioned that the *Fir Bolg* arrived on the feast day of Lughnasa in Ireland, together with the *Fir Gaileoin* and the *Fir Domnann* – who were considered to belong to one race and one power. When the *Fir Bolg* refer to the Belgae tribes and the *Fir Gaileoin* to the Gauls – as has been argued – , then this suggests that Lughnasa must have been celebrated in the regions where these tribes came from, which includes at least also a part of the Netherlands.⁵³ When the festival of Lughnasa and Samhain once have been celebrated in the Netherlands, we can

⁴⁹ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World*, BCA, London 1992, p. 72; Zie ook: Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, p. 189; Alexei Kondratiev, *Celtic Rituals. An Authentic Guide to Ancient Celtic Spirituality*, New Celtic Publishing, Scotland 1999, p. 105 and further.

⁵⁰ Frits van Oostrom, *Stemmen op Schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300*, Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2006, p. 88 – 93.

⁵¹ Ton Dekker, Jurjen van der Kooi & Theo Meder, *Van Aladin tot Zwaan kleef aan. Lexicon van sprookjes: ontstaan, ontwikkeling, variaties*, Sun Nijmegen, 1997, p. 65.

⁵² Wim Bonis, ‘Lugdunum Batavorum en het Keltische erfgoed’ in the *Leids Jaarboekje*, Leiden 2005, p. 45-52.

⁵³ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 17.

assume that the other Celtic festivals have also once been celebrated here. It reinforces the idea that the Celtic heritage must once have been influential in the Netherlands.

As far as the whole discussion about Germanic or Celtic culture is concerned, in current science the conviction grows that trying to identify the origin of certain tribes as Germanic or Celtic is just a false starting point, which goes back to the ideas of Caesar and Tacitus. We know now almost certain that those tribes, in any case before the arrival of the Romans, did not think about themselves in terms of ‘Germans’ or ‘Celts’, just like the American Indians – or Native Americans as we prefer to call them now – before the arrival of the Europeans did not think about themselves in terms of ‘Indians’. On the altar inscriptions we can read that they always identified themselves with a certain tribe.⁵⁴ That is why it makes sense not to choose for an exclusive Celtic or Germanic origin of Goddess worship in the Netherlands, but to take plausible or demonstrable links with both seriously. In line with this thought some researchers talk in this regard about ‘Celtic-Germanic peoples’.⁵⁵ As will be seen below, we should not even hold on to this Celtic-Germanic origin, because the roots of Goddess worship might prove to be much older than this.

The part played by women

It is not inconceivable that the masculine Gods in the world of the Germanic and Celtic tribes have quite naturally been given a leading role, because through trade and warfare the men had always been the most striking presence for the outside world. Despite the fact that among the Celts and Germans the women sometimes fought alongside the men on the battlefield – even in leading roles like Boudicca among the Iceni, Cartimandua among the Brigantes in England, and Veleda among the Bataves in the Netherlands – trade and warfare primarily involved the men. Hilda Ellis Davidson has argued that Goddesses were mainly associated with feminine matters, including weaving and the fertility of the land and of human beings.⁵⁶ These also happen to be the matters which have remained quite invisible in the battle of the Romans against the Celts and Germans, and in the many centuries of historiography – from the time of the Classical writers to the present.

Much thought has been given to the relationship between Goddess worship and the social position of women, especially from a feminist perspective. There is evidence which suggests that the most essential steps in human development have mainly been inspired by the input of women. In this respect we should not only think about economic and technological innovations,

⁵⁴ Nico Roymans, lecture about the Celts in the Netherlands, RMO Leiden, 13-02-07.

⁵⁵ Joris van Eijnatten & Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*, Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum 2005, p. 25 and further.

⁵⁶ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Roles of the Northern Goddess*, Routledge, London 1998, p. 182 e.v.

but about woman as the social centre of the community.⁵⁷ Although the relationship between Goddess worship and the position of women in Celtic society is doubted, it is a fact that Celtic women – as has generally been the case in ‘primitive’ societies – in comparison with the Mediterranean world have held a relatively high position.⁵⁸ There are indications that the matters which were often associated with Goddesses, were also the matters in which women initially were involved and sometimes even permanently were involved. For instance, taking care of the crops of the land, giving birth to children and caring for them. The frequent association of Goddesses with wells and rivers can also be related to the role of woman, whose life was often centered in and around the settlement, where the water supply was essential for survival.⁵⁹ It goes without saying that – given the daily needs of humans for water, which used to be as important then as it is now – our ancestors preferably set up their settlements in the vicinity of wells or rivers. This made the association of a Goddess with this well or river – the lifeblood of the community – also obvious.

Is there also concrete ‘evidence’ about female participation in Goddess worship? As far as the Goddess Nehalennia is concerned, for instance, all the altar statues erected in her honor came from male merchants or traders, who apparently all came from somewhere else and only made a stopover at the Nehalennia temple. But we cannot deduce from this that the worship of Nehalennia must have been an exclusive male affair. As Miranda Green has emphasized, the male dedications only tells us something about the social and economic state of affairs, namely that men were the ones who could afford these altar statues. Women simply would not have had the means to erect expensive monuments. As far as the continental Celtic cults where healing Goddesses were worshipped are concerned, it is in any case demonstrable that there have been many women among the worshippers.⁶⁰ The question remains, of course, how many women have participated in Goddess worship in the Netherlands, but in any case we must not be led astray by the male dedication on the altar statues.

We may assume that in the case of Nehalennia we are dealing with Goddess worship which had certainly been alive among the local population before the Romans arrived, perhaps among the tribe of the Menapians (Menapii) who at the time lived in the region of province of Zeeland. From the inscriptions on the altar statues, which are rather standard Roman in nature, we can deduce little about the local worship practices, except perhaps that the local population also called for her protection during a trip across the sea and thanked her at a safe return. But from the imagery on the altar statues we can deduce a little more. With a few exceptions in which Nehalennia rests one of her feet on a boat,

⁵⁷ Margaret Ehrenburg, *Women in Prehistory*, British Museum Press, London 1989, p. 50.

⁵⁸ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 15-27.

⁵⁹ Hans Biederman, *Die Großen Mutter*, Wilhelm Hein Verlag, München, 1989, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Miranda Green, ‘The Celtic Goddess as healer’, in: Sandra Billington en Miranda Green (eds.), *The Concept of the Goddess*, Routledge, London, p. 26.

these do not depict a crossing and a safe return, but refer to the fertility of the land. Whenever Nehalennia is depicted herself, nearly always she sits on a chair (or throne) with a basket with fruits beside her and some fruit on her lap. It has been suggested that the fruit on her lap would have been sacrificed to her to thank her for the safe return.⁶¹ But another explanation is also possible. It is conceivable that for the local population Nehalennia not only took care of their protection at sea, but also ensured them a good harvest. The symbolism on the altar statues – fruits, vegetation, the horn of plenty – refers to associations with fertility and rebirth. Even Nehalennia's watersymbolism might not simply have been linked to the protection of seafarers, but could also have referred to the field of healing and rebirth.⁶² We should bear in mind that a Goddess often could perform several functions simultaneously. For the visiting traders of course only the safe crossing counted, but the population living in the area constantly had to provide their daily food, which beside fish must also have consisted of products from the land, and also had to take care of their sick. The two different explanations for the presence of Nehalennia's fruits need not exclude on another by the way, because why could the fruits of the harvest not also have been used as a sacrifice to the Goddess? The depiction of a Goddess with fruits on her lap was not limited to the Netherlands, but was widespread across North-Western Europe, as witnessed by the many terracotta figurines that have been found which depict the Goddess in a similar way. Also because agriculture has often been the work of women in earlier times, it is conceivable that, despite the lack of any evidence, women have played an important role within the local variant of Nehalennia worship.

I suspect that the archaeological finds of the altar statues and terracotta figurines should have got a much more prominent place in the history books, when they had depicted mainly masculine Gods and certainly when they would have fitted in a Classical setting. I get the impression that archaeologists and historians have been a bit at a loss with this overwhelming number of feminine deities that with their indigenous names have offered them few leads within the generally accepted frameworks of Dutch prehistory and history. Above we have already seen that those leads are definitely there, when we traced the links to Celtic culture. Below we will see that, when we dig a bit deeper than Celtic culture, we even get many more leads.

The Goddess more ancient than the God

We have already pointed out above that Goddess worship does not stop at the Dutch border, and should not be considered an isolated phenomenon. In fact, Goddess worship in the Netherlands can only really be valued, when we try to

⁶¹ Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 224.

⁶² Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 179-180.

understand it from within a much larger context than has been the case until now.

In science there is not yet a consensus about the nature of the earliest form of religious experience. Earlier we have already mentioned Mircea Eliade's ideas about this: he was convinced of the fact that the earliest human beings believed in a 'divine supreme Being', being part of a kind of primal monotheism, and that the Mother Goddess appeared quite late and only became important after the discovery of agriculture.⁶³ For me remains the question why in the period in which many figurines of Goddesses have been unearthed, the Paleolithic, no material traces have been found of such a 'supreme Being'. Eliade is not the only one who does not acknowledge the Goddess at the basis of our religious experience. In fact, he still represents a majority of scientists.

In recent decades, however, there are a growing number of researchers who are convinced that the Goddess religion has represented the oldest form of religion, and so was there already before the rise of agriculture.⁶⁴ According to these researchers it is precisely the masculine Gods that have only become part of our religious experience after the rise of agriculture. Relatively many of those researchers are feminists.⁶⁵ But there are certainly also male researchers who consider the Goddess religion the oldest form of religion.⁶⁶ I find the reasoning of these researchers, which are often very solidly substantiated with archaeological 'evidence', with psychological and social insight into human nature, and with mythological knowledge, a lot more plausible. They often try to go one step further than the purely material dating and classification and to understand which meaning Goddess worship must have had for the people living in the distant past.

⁶³ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries. The encounter between contemporary faiths and archaic realities*, Harper & Row, New York 1975, p. 173-176.

⁶⁴ In this respect I prefer to talk about an even more basic 'Goddess heritage' being the oldest form of spirituality, which only later gradually turned into a Goddess religion and into a form of worship of Goddesses in an anthropomorphic sense. If you want to read more about this theme: consult my book *The Survival and Revival of the Goddess Heritage*. More information about it you can find on my website <http://eng.wimbonis.nl>

⁶⁵ For instance: Ann Baring & Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess. Evolution of an image*, Penguin, London 1991; Monica Sjöö & Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother. Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, Harper, San Francisco 1991; Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, The Aquarian Press, London 1995; Rachel Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess. Sacred Wisdom in Myth, Landscape and Culture*, Element, Shaftesbury 1997; Buffy Johnson, *Lady of the Beasts. Ancient Images of the Goddess and her Sacred Animals*, Harper, San Francisco 1990; Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade. Our History, our Future*, Pandora, London 1990.

⁶⁶ For instance: William Irwin Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light. Mythology, Sexuality and the Origin of Culture*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1986; Geoffrey Ashe, *The Dawn Behind the Dawn. A Search for the Earthly Paradise*, Henry Holt, New York 1992; Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess. The Conflict Between Word and Image*, Penguin, London 1998. In fact a few men have been the earliest researcher in the Goddess field: J.J. Bachofen in the 19th century with his study *Das Mutterrecht*, Robert Briffault at the start of the 20th century with his study *The Mothers* and later in the 20th century Robert Graves with his book about *The White Goddess*.

It is mainly the feminist researchers who have pointed out that the fact that only women could bear children must have made an enormous impression on 'primitive' humans, who saw this fertility reflected in the animal and plant world around them. Fertility was a mystery embodied in the worship of the Mother Goddess. Marija Gimbutas has shown on the basis of archaeological finds and interpretation of symbolism that in 'Old Europe' Goddess worship has been central, and that it only was suppressed to a subordinate position due to the rise and the invasions of the Indo-European peoples, for whom the Sky God was the most important God.⁶⁷ Although the 'Old Europe' of Gimbutas was primarily located in Eastern Europe, there are enough indications that also in the Netherlands once there have lived pre-Indo-European peoples. Therefore the insights by Gimbutas are certainly relevant for the religious experience in Dutch prehistoric times.

Gerda Lerner has advocated the ancient roots of Goddess worship on the basis of a sketch of 'primitive' human existence. She points out that in the Old Stone Age, different from our modern age, the mother must have been powerful and necessary for a child to survive. The child was completely dependent on its mother for warmth and food supply. As a result, the mother figure naturally became central in the religious experience of the humans at that time in the form of the worship of the Mother Goddess.⁶⁸ But in addition, she supports these ancient roots of Goddess worship by relating mythological and archaeological 'evidence' with each other. She points out that in almost all myths, rituals and creation stories of the 4th millennium BC the Mother Goddess has been central, which legitimates us to read and recognize their meaning in the archaeological finds.⁶⁹ Lerner also notes that the social changes reflected in the religious development show a clear pattern. Important changes like the introduction of the plough in agriculture, the increasing militarism, the rise of kingship and the rise of the state all have had an impact on the myths. According to her, this pattern looks something like this: the Mother Goddess, after she had been central for a long time, was gradually devalued; the male son and consort of the Goddess appeared and later started to dominate. Then this son/consort fused with a storm God and turned into a male Creator God, who led the pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. And wherever such changes took place, the power of creation and fertility would pass from Goddess to God.⁷⁰

The landscape and connectedness

If we bear in mind the relative antiquity of Goddess worship in comparison with the worship of Gods and try to relate this to the finds of Goddess statues and

⁶⁷ See, for instance.: Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, HarperCollins publishers, New York 1989; Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2001.

⁶⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 40.

⁶⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 148.

⁷⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 145.

figurines in the Dutch river area, then we must ask ourselves seriously – as Mc Cana has suggested with regard to the Celtic sovereignty rituals – whether we are not dealing here with a phenomenon that is much older than the Celtic or Germanic heritage. That possible ancient origin becomes even more plausible by the central role that *connectedness* with the local environment has played (and still plays) in Goddess worship.

While Gods have always been closely connected with the tribe and there also were in a certain sense mobile, Goddesses have always been closely connected to certain localities – like specific wells, rivers, forests or hills – which made them much less mobile. The worship of the Celtic Goddesses shows a principle which had a more general meaning. So when a people moved for some reason to another area, they took their God with them, but they always had to rediscover the power of their Goddess in their new location. This is closely associated with the view that the masculine God creates the world from without and doesn't form a part of his creation, but the Goddess creates life from within, remains part of her creation and cannot be separated from it. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford have pointed out that from the Old Stone Age on there were two kinds of myths, Mother Earth myths and hunting myths, which later in the New Stone Age changed over into the worship of Goddesses and Gods next to each other. The Goddesses represented the intangible whole of creation, *Zoe*, and the God represented a specific tangible part of creation, *Bios*.⁷¹

We can see how the Goddess principle (of connection to a certain locality) even has survived in the Christian worship of the Virgin Mary, because this worship always needed apparitions or the mysterious discovery of a figurine of the Virgin Mary in certain localities to bring the worship fully to life. The grottos dedicated to the Virgin Mary which have been created everywhere throughout the years, also express the connectedness with a certain spot. The site of the grotto or cave was directly connected to the place where the apparitions once had taken place. Even when these grottos were copied all over the Christian world (like has happened extensively with the Lourdes grotto), still a connection of the Mary worship with a certain locality was expressed.

The fact that in the Dutch river area Goddesses have once been worshipped fits perfectly in the context of comparative mythological research. Water places – in particular rivers and wells – have always been places par excellence where Goddess worship could come to life. This was not only reflected in Celtic or Germanic mythology, but also in Classical mythology. Think about Venus and about the nymphs.⁷² The observation of *the numinous* in the water is important in this respect. There appears to be a lot of evidence that

⁷¹ Ann Baring & Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess. Evolution of an image*, Penguin, London 1991, p. 148.

⁷² See: Nico Roymans, *Tribal Societies in Northern Gaul. An anthropological perspective*, AUP Amsterdam 1990, p.89, for the important role of rivers and wells in Celtic religion.

in non-Mediterranean Europe from the Bronze Age on water has been central in ritual activities.⁷³

Not only the water but also the land has played an important role in this principle of connectedness. In this respect we can recall the theme of the sacred marriage between the Goddess and the God. The intimate bond between the Mother Goddess and the land(scape), which on the European mainland was expressed through the fact that Goddess worship was always closely connected to certain localities, was also reflected in comparable concepts from the early Irish myths.⁷⁴ Alexei Kondratiev has emphasized that for the Celts the land was a living entity, conscious and receptive to human activity, but also inhuman in its nature and necessities. The land was for them the ultimate reality, for which the human consciousness of the tribe had to bow. In personalized form she manifested herself as the Goddess, whose favours had to be won.⁷⁵

The way in which the local connectedness was expressed by Goddess worship, is beautifully illustrated by the composition of the divine couples that were worshipped in Celtic Europe. The divine couple Mercury and Rosmerta has already been mentioned earlier, but there were several other divine couples, like Apolla Grannus and Sirona, Mars and Nemetona, and Sucellus and Nantosuelta.⁷⁶ We can see a clear pattern emerge in the composition of these couples. The God, who often (though not always) had a Roman name and an indigenous nickname, was paired with a Goddess with only an indigenous name, which points to her local origin. We can deduce from this that the God was probably 'imported' by Roman soldiers, Roman traders, or perhaps even by a Celtic or Germanic tribe (whether Romanized or not) that had settled in a new location. The Goddess, however, had already been connected to the locality where she was worshipped.⁷⁷ Because the God often got a double name, it seems probable that the Roman God was equated with an indigenous God, but it is striking that this process apparently had not taken place with the Goddess. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt observes a similar process in the period when the Celtic tribes settled in Ireland. According to her, they brought their sea God with them, but they adopted the local Goddesses, which were connected to the earth and survived as an immobile tradition of their predecessors.⁷⁸

⁷³ Miranda Green, 'The Celtic Goddess as healer', in: Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (eds.), *The Concept of the Goddess*, Routledge, London, p. 26; Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 89 and further.

⁷⁴ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 107.

⁷⁵ Alexei Kondratiev, *Celtic Rituals*, New Celtic Publishing, Scotland 1999, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 30.

⁷⁷ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 124-135.

⁷⁸ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 61.

Survival of the pre-Indo-European Goddess in the Netherlands?

Archaeological research made it clear that there are no indications that in the last thousand years before Christ there have been large displacements of population in the Netherlands. In this respect soil investigation indicates a large degree of continuity of habitation.⁷⁹ This is not only an interesting fact to be able to determine whether Celtic or Germanic tribes have settled in the Netherlands or have mingled with the indigenous population living here, but also to examine to what extent the religious experience at the time has been Indo-European or pre-Indo-European.

This could also provide an answer to the question why Goddess worship could remain so strong among the Celtic and Germanic tribes that were organized in a patriarchal way. It has been pointed out that ‘mixing’ of wandering (Celtic) tribes with the local population probably has taken place, and certainly when the number of the indigenous people far surpassed the number of Celtic newcomers, pre-Celtic Goddess worship could have survived within the new Celtic or celticized context. The relatively few archaeological traces of invading tribes in the millennium before our era could indicate that the wandering Celts often consisted of small groups, which after operating for a while in a certain area, finally settled there and mixed with a fairly large indigenous population.⁸⁰ The indigenous element could have been much more powerful than previously thought. This could also help to explain the rather mysterious names of many of the Goddesses in the Dutch region: they may have been part of an unknown pre-Celtic language. Perhaps we can imagine that the elites of those tribes – just like the Catholic Christians centuries later – have made frantic efforts to suppress these forms of worship, but that they failed because of the pressure from within the native ‘common folk’. But probably we will never be able to find out exactly what has happened.

Conclusion

With the above story I have tried to make it clear that Goddess worship has taken an important place in the religious experience in the Netherlands before and after the Roman occupation. A much more important place than hitherto has been shown in the researches of Dutch historians and archaeologists. Several subtopics have been discussed – including the possible origin of this Goddess worship and the relationship of Goddess worship with the principle of connectedness and through this principle with the land(scape) – which certainly deserve a further and deeper investigation. A question that has not been discussed is whether there are indications that Goddess worship in the Netherlands has survived one way or another, for instance in the worship of

⁷⁹ Nico Roymans, lecture about the Celts in the Netherlands, RMO Leiden, 14-02-07.

⁸⁰ Leo Verhart, *Op zoek naar de Kelten. Nieuwe archeologische ontdekkingen tussen Noordzee en Rijn*, Uitgeverij Matrijs, Utrecht 2006, p. 33.

Christian saints or in folk tales or customs. That is an interesting theme for further research.⁸¹

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⁸¹ In a much wider context I have researched this theme – the survival of the Goddess heritage within the context of Western civilization – in my book *The Survival and Revival of the Goddess Heritage*. More information about this book you can find on my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl>