

# The Rediscovery of the Landscape <sup>1</sup>

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## *The third option*

In Western media discussions (institutional) Christianity is often contrasted with (mechanistic) science: religious believers and scientific researchers seem to be engaged in a never-ending debate with each other. In those discussions it is often assumed that these two opposing fields cover the whole spectrum. The various crises that confront us today – whether they are financial, environmental, religious, or of smaller scaled proportions – illustrate, however, that choosing for one or the other has not brought us (and will not bring us) one bit closer to creating a better world. In fact these crises are just different manifestations of one large crisis, which we have to face at a deeper level of our being. I am not the only one who has come to this conclusion. To be able to face the current crisis at a deeper level it's important to know that a third option exists, which has been structurally ignored in the media and elsewhere, but has the potency to open our mind in this respect. In my view in this third option the Goddess heritage, and (sacred) landscape through which it expressed and still expressed itself, plays a central role.

To get a good idea about the rediscovery of the landscape, we must first say something about the Goddess heritage. For this, we have to dive deeply into the distant past, into prehistory. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century countless figurines and statues of Goddesses from different periods in prehistory have been unearthed by archeologists. This fact cannot have escaped anyone who has regularly visited archaeological museums. For a few decades now this has inspired many researchers with different backgrounds to write books to show that before the rise of the God-oriented religions there had been a widespread existence of Goddess worship. (We come back to this below.) What I call the Goddess *heritage*, however, must be distinguished from Goddess *worship*. This goes even further back in time: it is the spiritual experience of life which goes back to the roots of humanity and finally inspired people to create feminine deities in anthropomorphic form (that is, representations of the Goddess in human form). Originally the Goddess had

been present in a non-anthropomorphic sense – which means not represented in a human form – in the (sacred) landscape.

The Goddess heritage was rooted in lives that were spent mostly under the open sky, reflected in an *outdoor spirituality* <sup>2</sup>, which expressed the sense of being fully embedded in the surrounding landscape and remaining inextricably connected to it; of living *within* Nature that was *animated*, or ensouled in all its facets. Such an overwhelming life experience must also have had beneficial effects on the relationships between humans. Indeed, anthropological research has made it clear that hunter-gatherer societies, which probably have existed for hundreds of thousands of years – much longer anyway than few thousand years of agriculture and global urbanization –, mostly have been egalitarian and peaceful.<sup>3</sup> This is a big change from the image which has been popular for a long time, namely that the pre-agricultural world populated with uncivilized, warlike ‘barbarians’, in an ugly past that we managed to leave behind us and prefer to look at from a distance in museum. Fortunately we have become more aware that these ancient societies have something really important to teach us, something we have lost along the way.<sup>4</sup> This article aims to make it clear that researching them, opening up to their wisdom and connecting ourselves with it, can help us to rediscover the (power of the sacred) landscape. And, in fact, to get a better idea of who we actually are.

### *The anthropomorphization process*

Within the Goddess heritage a slow, but gradual anthropomorphization process (excuses for this word, I have not been able to find a better one) has manifested itself through the millennia. The Goddess heritage was originally a non-human natural phenomenon, but in time the Goddess got more and more human characteristics. The first signs of anthropomorphizing the Goddess can be seen in the use of symbols referring to the Goddess. Obvious in this case is the shape of the triangle representing the vulva, but other symbols like the circle and the spiral (which later evolved into the labyrinth) are also prime Goddess symbols. Marija Gimbutas was the first researcher who connected the use of symbols in the Paleolithic with the worship of the Goddess. She categorized them and qualified them as the oldest language of mankind – thereby bringing the societies in which the Goddess had been worshipped within the context of civilization.<sup>5</sup> Another step on the way to anthropomorphizing the

Goddess was also taken in the Paleolithic when people started to create female figurines. Then the female body was used to embody a sacred symbolism, but not to make realistic portrayals of Paleolithic women. Abstract symbols and animal features were often included in the way they were depicted in the Paleolithic and later. Again it was Marija Gimbutas who contributed a lot to understanding the Paleolithic 'Venus' figurines as representations of the Goddess, to connect them with the much later Neolithic figurines and statues, and to consider both part of an important ongoing cultural development.

Another sign of the process of anthropomorphizing the Goddess can be seen in the artificial, human-made shapes in the landscape: in the mounds, which were made in the shape of the womb, and in the tumuli (dolmens covered with earth), which were often made in the shape of the whole female body. The archaeological remains of mounds, tumuli and uncovered dolmens only go back to the Neolithic, but the idea of the womb in the landscape goes back all the way to the Paleolithic cave. Only much later, the anthropomorphization process was eventually completed in the Greek and Roman deities, whose statues were perfect copies of the human form, and whose behaviour was very similar to human behaviour as well.

### *The Neolithic stone circles*

Archaeologist and meteorologist Terence Meaden has shown that in the Neolithic the Goddess heritage was also expressed in a non-anthropomorphic way by the stone circles. He has argued convincingly that stone circles like Stonehenge and Avebury in England and the Drombeg stone circle in Ireland expressed the Sacred Marriage between the Goddess and the masculine God. He believes this to be the main reason why the Neolithic people constructed the stone circles. The circle represented the womb of the Goddess in which on specific days in the year a phallic-shaped shadow was projected, which was caused by a sunbeam on a stone outside the circle. Although this shows that both the Goddess and the God played a role in Neolithic religion/spirituality, in Meaden's view the Goddess was the prime deity in it.<sup>6</sup>

The conscious integration of the interplay between the sun and earth in the building of the stone circles indicates that in the Neolithic the sacred was still largely experienced in the form of an outdoor spirituality. Meaden's findings have made it also clear that many Neolithic people still

experienced their deities in a non-anthropomorphic way, and that in that era the intimate relation of the Goddess heritage with the surrounding landscape was still alive. When we come to discuss Henry Corbin's idea about the original meaning of the temple below, we will see that Neolithic people indeed purposively erected their temple structures (which in my view also include the stone circles) on carefully selected spots in the landscape. In this way they showed that their temples were not buildings that could be understood separately, but were only means to express their intimate experience of and connection to the sacred landscape.

### *Celtic outdoor spirituality and the Roman genius loci*

It is interesting that through Celtic culture both the non-anthropomorphic nature of deities and outdoor spirituality could even survive into the Roman era. The Goddess had managed to remain important in Celtic culture despite the strong Indo-European influence that had spread all over Europe. In the Irish Celtic tradition several Goddess names have been handed down to us, including Dana, Eriu, Brigid and the Cailleach. Under the influence of Roman culture some Goddesses were depicted in an anthropomorphic way, like Epona on the European mainland, Nehalennia in the Netherlands, and the triple Matres or Matronae particularly in the Rhine area. But before that, the Celts generally had not given shape to their Goddesses and Gods in an anthropomorphic sense. Besides that, they also preferably worshipped them at sacred sites in the open air. They were not used to building 'indoor' temples like the Greeks and the Romans had done. The open air context of Celtic spirituality even managed to survive under the Christian regime, as shown, for instance, by the many sacred wells in Ireland devoted to Mary, Saint Bridget or other Christian saints.<sup>7</sup>

The Goddess played a central role in this Celtic outdoor spirituality, and was originally worshipped in a non-anthropomorphic way. She was equated with the land itself, was closely associated with its fertility and with the health and prosperity of the people. The Goddess was first and foremost the Goddess of the Land, a powerful non-anthropomorphic being. The Irish Celtic scholar Proinsias Mac Cana has pointed out that the *sacred sovereignty*, represented by the Goddess as the personification of Ireland, is a permanent and fundamental element of the Irish tradition.<sup>8</sup> According to the Irish archaeologist 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).<sup>9</sup> In the Celtic world there was a tradition that the (local) kings could only rule after they had been ritually married to the Goddess of the Land, which brought fertility to the land and prosperity to their people. So she could either manifest herself locally through the landscape or could embody an entire country. Much later, this theme was still expressed in the Arthurian stories through the figure of the Fisher King: his suffering was directly connected to the emergence of the Wasteland, which would only come to an end after he had been cured.

Also outside Celtic culture there are also signs that outdoor spirituality managed to survive. Within Roman culture, for instance, there was a widespread respect for the so-called *genius loci*, the spirit of the place. E.V. Walter says the following about it: ‘On the deepest level, it symbolized the place’s generative energy, and it pictured a specific, personal, spiritual presence who animated and protected a place. (...) The Roman conquerors dominated people and seized property, but in religious principle they respected the independent spiritual sovereignty of the places they occupied. Where they camped they often erected a votive tablet to the spirit of the place. For example, an inscription found in 1771 in Scotland at the Antonine Wall, the frontier of the Roman domination, devotes a stone altar “*Genio Terrae Briannicae*” – to the spirit of the British land.’<sup>10</sup>

So the ancient roots of outdoor spirituality survived both in Celtic and Roman culture. This means that it still existed at the heart of Western civilization when it entered its historical development.

### *Portable figurines and statues connected to the landscape*

It is important to realize that the connection between the Goddess and the landscape did not disappear when people started to make figurines and statues of Goddesses. Despite the fact that these creations were portable, just like the Neolithic stone structures their meaning could often not be separated from the specific locality to which they belonged. We must bear in mind that this has primarily been the case with the individually created figurines and statues, in which something of the specific locality was included in the creation (and not so much with the mass-produced terracotta figurines that were produced in the Roman era). First and foremost they must be considered *icons* (and not idols), intermediaries to help bring people into contact with the power of the Goddess that was out there in the

world, in nature all around them, beyond the figurines or statues.<sup>11</sup> Once they were moved into a museum, they lost something important of their original power: the sacred power of the specific place where they were created or found and to which they belonged. The French Celtic scholar Jean Markale, who has also written a book about the Goddess heritage, has said the following about it: ‘If, in very ancient times, a statue had been erected in a carefully determined place, then its presence asserted itself there as an element of concentration, of crystallization, of different magnetic currents, telluric and cosmic. In this sense, the statue was indispensable to this precise spot. Once moved (...) this statue lost all its power. And if we follow this line of reasoning through to the end, we have to conclude that all statues, so-called pagan as well as Christian ones, that have been saved from destruction and sheltered in museums lost all spiritual or religious value. (...) Any statue exiled in a museum becomes a lifeless object.’<sup>12</sup>

The connection of figurines and statues with the landscape did not even disappear after the rise of Christianity. We can see this in particular with the worship of the so-called Black Madonna. Folk stories and legends about the origin of the statues of the Black Madonna reveal that many of them were discovered by accident in wild natural spots, sometimes near a well, sometimes on a hill or sometimes near a forest. Often this happened to be a spot which had been used by pre-Christian cultures. Legends have often reported that people have tried to take the discovered statue to the civilized world, but that the statue kept returning to the spot in wild nature where it initially had been found. This eventually inspired people to worship the Black Madonna on or near the spot where the statue had been found and to build a chapel or a church there.<sup>13</sup> These legends show that in the Christian worship of the Black Madonna the ancient connection of the Goddess heritage with the landscape had been kept alive. This might explain why the church authorities never stopped being suspicious of Black Madonna worship and why through the centuries many statues have been destroyed.

### *The ancient roots of the Goddess*

To put the connection of the Goddess heritage to the landscape in perspective, it is important to acknowledge that the Goddess has more ancient roots than the masculine God. Although this is not fully accepted yet by academic scientists, from the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

onwards research (in different scientific fields) has increasingly suggested that the worship of masculine Gods and of the monotheistic God of the Judeo-Christian heritage was preceded by Goddess worship.<sup>14</sup> Of course it is impossible to provide 'hard evidence' for this, but if we put several sources beside one another, it becomes at least very plausible that the Goddess has more ancient roots than the masculine God. We have four important sources for this: archaeology, psychology, mythology and history.

First, there are on the one hand the overwhelming number of Goddess figurines and statues that have been unearthed or found by archaeologists from the Paleolithic age on, and on the other hand the far fewer number of statues of masculine Gods that have been found and are generally of a more recent date. Although there is still a debate going on among the scientific researchers whether some of the figurines and statues are indeed representing Goddesses and it is argued they might be just representing flesh-and-blood women, for me understanding them as ways in which our distant ancestors have tried to give expression to their experience of the sacred world makes a lot more sense.

The second source, psychology, can help to make this more plausible. It has become clearer that the human ego is probably not much older than 6000 years. The English psychologist Steve Taylor has provided a lot of evidence for this in this book *The Fall*.<sup>15</sup> It implies that when we are studying the life of our prehistoric ancestors, we are usually also dealing with people whose conscious experience of life must have been very different from our modern sense. Without the availability of the ego perspective they could not yet separate themselves from the world in which they lived, like we modern people are used to be doing. It is only after the ego had evolved that we could make ourselves believe that life and the world around us could be observed (rationally) from without. The Goddess heritage was a reality for our distant ancestors because in their ego-less state of mind they experienced quite naturally an intimate connection to the landscape. At the end of this article we come back to the evolution of the ego, which Taylor has called the *ego-explosion* because of its overwhelming nature.

Third, research into comparative mythology has revealed that the Goddesses at one point in time have been consciously degraded to a subordinate position with regard to the masculine Gods. Mythologically

speaking, the first appearance of the masculine God was in the Neolithic as the son/consort of the Goddess. There is evidence of many of these kinds of divine pairs, that continued to appear in later periods as well: Inanna with her son/consort Dumuzi, Astarte with Tammuz, Cybele with Attis, Isis with Osiris, Venus with Adonis and so on. But when patriarchal societies rose, apparently the men in power were not too pleased with this son/consort under the reign of the Goddess. So the son/consort got engaged in a competition and struggle against her. And in line with the men in power, the masculine Gods also gradually managed to expand their own power. We can see how in ancient Mesopotamia the Goddess Tiamat was slain by the God Marduk – which resulted in Marduk turning himself into a creator God, who created the world from her dead body. In Classical Greece Zeus became the absolute ruler on the Olympus. In the Bible God had become the sole Creator and traces of the presence of the Goddess can only be detected in hidden form.

The American mythologist Joseph Campbell has termed this large scale cultural changeover to patriarchy and the rule of the masculine Gods *The Great Reversal*. Echoes of it can be observed in the negative reputation of the female contribution to life or even a complete denial of it. Pandora had a jar which contained all the evils of the world. God created Eve from Adam's rib. Zeus gave birth to Athena from his head. Heracles' reputation consisted primarily in being 'the glory of Hera'. Philip Slater has seen in Heracles the prototype of the Greek God who was 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.<sup>16</sup> Other masculine mythological heroes like Python and St. George continually had to prove their superiority and control by fighting the power of the dragon – who represented the Goddess heritage in a threatening and hidden form.

Fourth, history has generally supplied us with a rather limited record of 'civilizations', which all appeared to be organized in a patriarchal way. We owe it to feminist-oriented researchers to get a much clearer idea about why they were organized in this way, and also about what sort of civilization had preceded them. Riane Eisler shows convincingly in her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, that these patriarchal societies, which she collectively considered the manifestation of a *dominator culture*, had been preceded by a *partnership culture*. In a partnership culture women and men, and the related feminine and masculine, were valued equally; and in the



later dominator culture men and the masculine came to dominate over women and the feminine. She had consciously avoided calling societies organized in this partnership way *matriarchal*, but preferred to call them *gylanic* instead – to stress the fact that women and men were valued equally in them. Important for our story is the fact that in this earlier partnership culture Goddess worship had been central, and in this later dominator culture the masculine God rose to a position of absolute power at the top of a hierarchy, thereby suppressing the age-old power of the Goddess heritage in the process (as much as possible). While the partnership culture had been largely peaceful, in the dominator culture the central focus shifted to struggle: hence the symbols of the chalice and the blade.<sup>17</sup> Below we go a bit deeper into the phenomenon of struggle, which – in the way it has taken shape in human societies – essentially was a *dualistic* struggle, and still is.

### *Creation by a Goddess*

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford have pointed out in their book *The Myth of the Goddess* that creation by a Goddess must be clearly distinguished from creation by a masculine God, like the creation in the Genesis story. A masculine God creates the world from without, like the Biblical God did from his Heaven, and always remains separated from his creation. A Goddess, however, creates life from her own (spiritual) being, and therefore remains inextricably connected to her creation and is always present in it. She *is* her creation. This insight is very important here, because it can help us to understand why in the Goddess heritage the sacred has been (and still is) an inherent quality of nature, and so of the landscape. Evidence for the existence of the Goddess heritage is given by the fact that in the distant past all kinds of natural phenomena – mountains, hills, rivers, wells, forests, in fact entire landscapes – were associated with the power of the Goddess and were all equated with the Goddess herself. The people recognized the presence of the Goddess in the world around them because she had not created the world from without but from within – and had never stopped creating from within, as for her creation was an ongoing process. The sacred quality of the natural world has survived until today in many names of mountains, hills, rivers, wells and forests, which are still called after a Goddess or perhaps a later Christian saint. Sometimes her former presence can also be suspected indirectly, hidden underneath the veil of Devilish or Hellish names.

Baring and Cashford show that within the Goddess heritage there is room for both the feminine and the masculine: the realm of the Gods is included in it as well. They identified the Goddess with *zoe* and the God with *bios*. *Zoe* refers to the whole of animated nature, encompassing all cycles of life, the invisible and timeless World soul; and *bios* refers to her tangible manifestations in the temporary world. The Gods, like the grains and the fruits, were these temporary manifestations, born out of the womb of the Goddess.<sup>18</sup> The tradition of the Goddess with her son/consort, referred to above, expressed a similar mutual relationship. And echoes of this can still be heard in our traditional concepts of *Mother Earth* or *Mother Nature* and *Father Time*. The combination of *zoe* and *bios* turn nature into animated nature, in which the invisible is always present in the visible.

### *Matrix developments*

Sometimes the impression is given that the religions in which a masculine God was centrally worshipped have been able to fully integrate earlier Goddess worship, simply by transforming it into a new shape. In this transformation, which sometimes included a changeover from Goddess to God, however, the most essential thing of the Goddess heritage was lost in the process: the awareness that all life forms – human life included – owe their life to continually being fed through one or more matrices. A matrix – a word related to ‘matter’ and ‘mother’ – is an organic but invisible container that Nature temporarily provides on various levels, providing (material or immaterial) food and allowing for (fragile) beings in it to grow. An obvious example of a tangible manifestation of a matrix is of course the womb in which a baby can grow for 9 months. But of course the landscape, the larger womb in which we are embedded, also has this matrix quality. In this respect Valerie Andrews’ statement that ‘The land is truly the larger body that contains us, it is our second skin’ is very appropriate here.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps it is even better to say that the land is our first skin.

According to Joseph Chilton Pearce a womb or matrix offers three things to new life: ‘a source of possibility, a source of energy to explore this possibility, and a safe place where this exploration can take place’.<sup>20</sup> Pearce argues that these matrices continue after birth, allowing us to grow further, not only biologically but also psychologically and spiritually: for instance, through the matrix of our family, friendship, school, political party, sports club, or university. They are all temporary: like the womb, at some point

they turn negative and we have to leave them behind. (Sometimes matrices are negative from the start: a bad family upbringing, the wrong circle of friends, and so on. Of course, then we do well to leave them behind as quickly as possible and exchange them for more beneficial ones.) Our whole life cycle is also embedded in a gigantic matrix: the Mother Earth matrix, which includes the atmosphere around us – the air that we breathe – and the invisible energetic fields that continually shape and influence our lives. That's why the Goddess sense of Creation is not something which has happened only once, but is a continuing process. Through the landscape the Mother Earth matrix manifests itself locally.

Both institutional Christianity and mechanistic science have been largely ignorant of the power of matrices and were founded on the idea that life can be created, observed and controlled from the outside. God had created earthly life from His place in Heaven, and after that kept His involvement in life very limited. And from the Enlightenment on materialistic, mechanistic scientists took over the role of God, in the sense that they also believed they could observe, analyze and control the world from without – an attitude that unfortunately is still quite widespread today. Closely connected to this is the dualistic world view, which was passed on from Christianity to mechanistic science.

### *Searching for the Holy Land*

In a negative sense the importance of the Goddess heritage is shown by its absence. When the indoor religion of institutional Christianity on the one hand had convinced people that the sacred order only existed outside this world, far away in Heaven, and mechanistic science on the other hand had convinced them that the material world was the only reality that could be proven to exist, there was no room left any more in the people's minds to make an inner connection to the sacred landscape around them. People did not forget this entirely though, because this connection, however unconsciously, had to remain a part of their life. They could not escape from the fact that they were not only born from their mother's womb, but in their life process they were also continually fed (biologically, psychologically and spiritually) by the larger body of the landscape that surrounded them. Although they might consciously have started to consider themselves elevated above nature, independent from it, on an unconscious level they kept sensing that something essential in their life was missing.

Not knowing that what they had lost was in fact internal, they experienced this as a vague kind of restlessness, which drove them to go searching for the missing element somewhere externally on this planet. This is what inspired people to search, and hopefully find, the earthy paradise – to rediscover ‘paradise lost’. This generated, for instance, the Christian idea of the land of Israel as the Holy Land, which by Christians was presumed to be the only material embodiment of the sacred landscape on this planet (just like they believed that Jesus Christ was the only Son of God). But this was a mere substitute to replace the ‘real thing’ – existing in their direct vicinity – that they had lost contact with...

This kind of restlessness has also been one of the driving forces behind the imperialistic ‘voyages of discovery’, like those of Columbus. Many Europeans at the time felt driven to escape from the world in which they were living and to sail off to unknown far-away places, with the hope that they could create a better world in the newly found habitat, to which they collectively referred by the telling name ‘the New World’. They were blind, however, to the fact that the indigenous people they came in touch still felt the inner connection to the sacred landscape (as has been expressed, for instance, by the now famous Native American Chief Seattle, see below). As is well-known they were driven to destroy these indigenous cultures and simultaneously they transformed the place they had found into a very similar one to the one they had restlessly left behind. In short, their restlessness remained. It had to wait to our time to make us realize quite painfully that an enormous opportunity was missed in those colonial days to reconnect with our own lost roots!<sup>21</sup>

### *Re-evaluating the power of the landscape*

Fortunately the experience of being embedded completely in the living landscape, being enveloped in the ongoing cyclical processes of life, is not just something of the distant past: despite a millennia long struggle against the Goddess heritage, it survived and can still be experienced today.<sup>22</sup> In some (sacred) places it can be experienced more powerfully than in others. It can hardly have escaped a visitor to Stone Age sites that the people who created these constructions preferred locations with majestic views over a wide area. A wonderful insight of Henry Corbin, a 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar of Islam and Sufi culture, is very helpful here. I quote him from a book of Robert Sardello: ‘Corbin says that the word ‘temple’ originally referred to a

high structure from where one could see all around, for great distances. It also included the sense, however, that the ‘all-around, far distant’ was seeing you.’<sup>23</sup> In other words, the temple originally was part of an outdoor spirituality or religion which helped to raise the people’s awareness of the sacred environment and – importantly – there was a reciprocal process between them and the environment. This environment was not dead, but very alive, even taking notice of our presence!

I have seen many good illustrations of Corbin’s original temple conception in the wet hilly and mountainous areas of Stone Age Ireland. For instance, I came across a very nice example in County Sligo, at the megalithic site of Carrowmore. Dolmens and stone circles are placed here on a high place, a hill, providing spectacular views over a wide valley on to the surrounding mountains on most sides. Interestingly, all these mountains have megalithic constructions on the highest points. Most of them are hardly visible in the far distance, but the cairn of Meave’s Tomb on the nearby mountain of Knocknarea is clearly visible. It was quite obvious to me that consciously the temple complex had been extended to include the whole surrounding landscape. And on top of that we must realize that ‘the all-around, far distant’ was also taking notice of our presence! What better way is there to make us more environmentally aware?

An archeologist at the site explained that there is evidence that bonfires were lit at night on all the surrounding mountaintops, which were visible from the site of Carrowmore. This means that for Stone Age people being embedded in the landscape included the overarching night time sky.

### *Indigenous cultures and modern science*

Reports from still living indigenous people all over the world suggest that this kind of experience of an environment that is aware of our human presence must once have been a widespread reality, and not limited to specific sacred temple sites. In the documentary *Innsaei*, for instance, it is mentioned that the Polynesians up to quite recent times felt intimately connected to their environment. They could sail over large stretches of the Pacific ocean without ever getting lost, only using the knowledge that had been passed on to them orally. Even more importantly, their skills depended on a sensitive and reciprocal communication with surrounding nature – a kind of communication that most modern Western people have lost.<sup>24</sup> Another telling example is given by Laurens van der Post, when he talked

about his experience with the South-African Bushmen (nowadays called the San): ‘There was nowhere in the vast wastelands, forests and mountains of Africa where he felt alone, unaccompanied or unobserved. (...) I remember how often the Bushman I knew in the central desert had come to seem to me rich in a way in which we were poor, and how they moved, though practically naked, clothed and vivid in their own immediate experience and apprehension of life. Wherever they went, they seemed to feel not as strangers but known in a way in which we have long ceased to feel known.’<sup>25</sup>

Chief Seattle’s view of life, which was recorded in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, indicates that also the Native American tribes at that time were still aware of this reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment. As is well-known, he pointed out to the *White man* that he did not weave the web of life himself and that whatever he did to the web he would do to himself. All these examples make it clear that the reciprocal relationship with the environment has a great *survival value*.

It’s worth mentioning that the Stone Age conception of the sacred has also been rediscovered by modern scientists. Duane Elgin, for instance, has argued that the newest scientific insights in a surprising way confirm the spiritual views of life from the ancient wisdom traditions. They are opening our eyes once again to the fact that we are actually living in a *living universe*, and so not in a dead one as mechanistic science has made us believe for a long time. Knowing what tremendous effect this has on our self image, he comes to the following central statement: *who we are depends directly on where we are*.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Berry’s well-known powerful statement that ‘the universe is not a collection of objects, but a communion of subjects’, expresses a similar view. In other words, we relate to the universe in a reciprocal way.

### *The Triple Goddess and Taoism*

We should realize that Elgin’s statement refers to a *here-and-now* experience, to being aware of our place in space as well as in time. The space and time quality of the matrix is beautifully and powerfully captured in the ancient concept of the Triple Goddess. It tells us that Mother Nature, including our own individual life, is always cyclically moving through Her seasons, but also that dualistic tensions arising within life – between light

and dark, mind and matter, good and evil, etc. – are always transcended by a third factor, uniting both poles.

Adam McLean has argued that the importance of the triplicity of the Goddess should be seen in this capacity of uniting opposites or dualities.<sup>27</sup> It's ironic, but also very sad, that the masculine religions of the Judeo-Christian heritage, which – in their institutionalized form at least – all seemed to have missed this capacity and were very much shaped and burdened by dualistic thinking, through the centuries have never stopped trying to eradicate all traces of Goddess worship. Apparently they have been unaware that this very heritage actually could have helped them to transcend the burden of their own dualistic thinking!

It's interesting that the concept of the Triple Goddess has also found expression in the East, in Taoism. In the well-known Yin-Yang symbol the poles of the feminine and masculine are born from, but also held together by, a third factor: the Tao or Dao. Sukie Col egrave has made the connection between Taoism and the Goddess heritage quite clear in her book *The Spirit of the Valley*. She describes how originally life was governed by the Great Mother or Great Goddess. In the writings of ancient China this Goddess was designated as the Tao, the indescribable principle that is usually translated as *the Way*: 'The Goddess is the vessel which contains and generates the Cosmos, the Dao, or unifying principle, which guards and guides the infant consciousness of humanity.' This Goddess or Great Mother included both the feminine and masculine: 'Morphologically the Goddess is usually personified as female and yet, quite clearly, She is also male, or, at least, contains the seeds of an undeveloped masculine principle. In Chinese mythology She is Yin-Yang before their separation into Yin and Yang.'<sup>28</sup>

This principle is powerfully expressed in chapter VI of the Tao Te Ching:

The Valley Spirit never dies.  
It is named the Mysterious Female.  
And the Doorway to the Mysterious Female  
Is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.  
It is there within us all the while;  
Draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry.<sup>29</sup>

I think this kind of spiritual experience fits in very well with Henry Corbin's description of the original temple mentioned above: from the high place in the landscape we look over the valley, and are contained in its all-pervading feminine spirit. Like the Goddess heritage, the spirituality of Taoism puts the attention first on outdoor life, on the surrounding landscape on which we depend, and connects it then to our life within. But, of course, in reality life that exists without and within are never separated from each other.

### *The dualistic struggle*

It is no coincidence that the dualistic view of life came to the foreground in Western culture when the Goddess heritage was pushed to the background. The roots of the separation of absolute opposites go back to the Mesopotamian myth of Tiamat and Marduk that we have mentioned earlier. Good managed to elevate itself above nature, and from this elevated perspective absolute Evil was associated with Nature which hierarchically also existed on a much lower position. There was an obvious patriarchal element in it as well, as the Good was equated with the masculine and Evil with the feminine. Then the foundation was made for the view – that has managed to survive until today – in which the absolute 'hard' qualities like independence, competition, struggle and taking from others were considered masculine and 'soft' qualities like dependence, cooperation, care and giving were considered feminine.

It is well-known that this dualism later even more prominently manifested itself in the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, in which the central focus was on the battle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, representing absolute Good and absolute Evil. It is also well-known, that the ideas of this religion have exerted a great influence on the dualistic outlook of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

At this stage the dualistic struggle had really lost contact with its deeper source in Nature, and has driven groups of people to a perpetual struggle with other groups of people, in which both sides project their own negative feelings onto one another. Then the phenomenon of large-scale warfare, as we know it from the history books and still from the news of today, was born. After the rise of the secular worldview, this dualistic view of life was continued and even legitimized in 17<sup>th</sup> century by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes who equated the 'natural state' of humankind with a war of all



against all. And from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards our natural state was confirmed by (neo)Darwinism – shaped by the followers of Darwin – as a ‘struggle for existence’. If they are right, then there is little hope for a better world. By suggesting that struggle has always been a major part of our human nature, secular philosophy and this form of science are in fact telling us that any attempt to transcend it – to become peaceful – must be quite fruitless. But I hope that in the preceding pages of this article it has already become clear that the Hobbesian and Darwinian theories have not told us the full story.

It is interesting that the English biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who is known from his ideas about the morphic fields, connected the materialistic scientific view and Darwinist ideas to the Goddess heritage, albeit in a negative sense. He believes that since matter was declared dead in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Goddess heritage survived in materialistic science as ‘an unconscious cult of the Great Mother’. According to him within this kind of science a religious tension was present, one in which the role of the masculine God had been denied and the Goddess heritage had survived unconsciously: ‘It’s a religion that denies entirely the role of God the Father – the Sky God, the Celestial Creator – and puts the whole of the basis in matter, or Mother Nature. This is particularly clear in Darwin. His theory of evolution involves quite a strong and explicit rejection of the idea that God the Celestial Engineer made and designed all the forms of life. (...) If one personifies nature, as Darwin said he did, then she is the Great Mother.’<sup>30</sup> According to Sheldrake the Darwinists and social-Darwinists have one-sidedly emphasized the destructive aspect of the Mother Goddess.

We should never forget that this materialist and Darwinian struggle of existence once originated in a struggle against the forces of animated Nature: against the Goddess heritage which expressed itself through the human body and the larger body of the landscape.

### *Balancing our dual nature*

It should be clear that the dualistic view of life should not be equated with our dual nature. Dualistic thinking is only born when the existence of our dual nature is denied. To get full access to dual nature again (as it is expressed in the Yin Yang symbol) we first have to understand and transcend our destructive dualistic attitudes. The Dutch anthropologist Jan van Baal has argued that this dual nature is something essentially human:

on the one hand we are inextricably connected to the universe, because we are born from it, and on the other hand as a subject we are confronting it, opposing it.<sup>31</sup> In the first place all human beings were connected beings, just like all the animals and plants, but then quite recently in history as subjects we started to believe that we could separate ourselves from the whole. This has turned out to be an erroneous belief, of course, but somehow it keeps popping up in our minds and we have to keep dealing with it.

Another (psychological) word for the subject opposing the world is of course *the ego*. Steve Taylor has argued persuasively that the human ego is probably not older than 4000 BC, when it came to dominate our lives through what he calls *an ego-explosion*. He has shown that it has caused Western people to increasingly lead very unbalanced and restless lives, whose destructive results are becoming critical in our time and are in urgent need for change.<sup>32</sup> In this respect we pointed out above that this restlessness has disconnected us from the surrounding landscape and has driven us to searching for ‘paradise lost’. This is in essence the crisis that is facing us today in its various forms. The conviction that we can lift ourselves above Nature, in an attempt to control it from the outside, is really an expression of this egocentric world view and is central to the crisis.

According to Rebecca Orlean women have always experienced their dual nature much more intimately than men because of their monthly cycles and therefore can deliver an important contribution to awakening a new, balanced consciousness in all humans. In this respect she thinks there is a direct link between the female monthly cycle and the process of breathing, both constantly renewing life, letting out the old and allowing the new to flow in.<sup>33</sup> In this regard the current popularity of mindfulness and meditation, in which there is a lot of attention on awareness of the breathing process, a hopeful sign!

Balancing our own dual nature and living in harmony with surrounding Nature and the Universe are mutually connected. We can start either way. Contrary to (still popular) thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, who believed – as we’ve mentioned earlier – that in our natural state we are creatures at war with all others, the contemporary English spiritual writer William Bloom thinks that in our natural state we are inclined to do good and to give to others, because this is in line with the essential benevolent nature of the surrounding Universe: ‘Notwithstanding the terrible suffering and fear

endured by some, and notwithstanding nature's occasional harshness, there is something essentially good about the whole process of existence.'<sup>34</sup>

More and more people appear to be getting convinced of the innate goodness of human beings. The Dutch researcher into 'sustainability from within' Annick de Witt describes her positive vision of humanity as follows: 'I do not doubt that people are intrinsically good beings – also not in the face of the almost-inconceivable horrors that we do to each other, all over the planet, at all times. (...) Evil in the world is not an expression of our true nature. It is an expression of that which is in between our true nature and our daily, worldly self – the ego.'<sup>35</sup>

The American psychologist Dacher Keltner has devoted a book, entitled *Born to be Good*, to this theme.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that he also acknowledges the power of the landscape. He considers the feeling of 'awe' (a word which phonetically expresses speechless moments to which we can only react with 'oohhh') – which we can experience in many different contexts but also sometimes when we are confronted with a majestic landscape – psychologically very significant. According to him: 'Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world.' He adds that scientific studies have shown that awe 'leads people to cooperate, share resources, and sacrifice for others, all of which are requirements for our collective life. (...) Being in the presence of vast things calls forth a more modest, less narcissistic self, which enables greater kindness toward others.'<sup>37</sup>

### *Reaching beyond the crisis*

I think this experience of awe can be equated with the matrix experience that we talked about earlier, as it manifested for example as the experience of being fully embedded in the landscape. Together with other positive matrix experiences, they can be a great help in reawakening the deeper part of our minds that has been more or less dormant for millennia. Not only does it help to complete our humanity by finally including the neglected Goddess heritage of early humans into our concept of 'civilization'. More importantly, in these dark days in which mechanistic science and institutional Christianity seem unable to stop debating and struggling viciously with one another, it shows us a way out and offers us hope for a sustainable future. It can help us to transform our egocentric sense of separateness, restlessness and competition into a sense of connectedness,

empathy and peace – a positive, inclusive sense that not only reaches out to all fellow human beings but also to the rest of Nature. It might change us from environmentally arrogant people into environmentally humble people who are grateful for the gift of life. When this happens to enough people worldwide, we will finally be able to make Mother Earth our true home!

Leiden, May 2018

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier, much shorter version of this article was entitled ‘In the Beginning was the Landscape’. This title was of course a paraphrase of the well-known Biblical statement ‘In the Beginning was the Word’. Attempts have been made to give this statement a new meaning by explaining the Word as referring to how life in the universe had once started by vibration. But in my view, however, it cannot be separated from the context of ‘the religion of the book’, in which the emphasis has always been on written words that were considered sacred in themselves. With this title I stressed the fact that life originated long before spoken or written language evolved – and that we have always remained fully embedded in it. In our time we are rediscovering this fact and what it entails.

<sup>2</sup> I use the word ‘outdoor’ here, being aware that the door had not been invented yet in the Stone Age. But I think it is an appropriate short term to refer to a spirituality that is experienced outside buildings, under the open sky, in contrast to the later indoor religions.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Taylor, *The Fall. The Insanity of the Ego in Human History and the Dawning of a New Era*, O Books, Winchester 2005. I notice again and again that people living in small communities surrounded by overwhelming power of nature generally are far more friendly and cooperative than people living in urban areas. Such experiences may not provide any scientific evidence, but for me they question the idea that people who once lived at the tribal level ‘closer to nature’ would have been warlike ‘barbarians’.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: Jared Diamond, *Dthe World until Yesterday. What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*, Viking Press 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess. The World of Old Europe*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco 1991; Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco 1991.

<sup>6</sup> More about this theme you can find in my article *The Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age*, which can be downloaded from my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl>. A selection of Meaden’s books: George Terence Meaden, *The Goddess of the Stones. The Language of the Megaliths*, Souvenir Press, London 1991; George Terence Meaden, *The Stonehenge Solution. Sacred Marriage and the Goddess*, Souvenir Press, London 1992; Terence Meaden, *The Secrets of the Avebury Stones. Britain’s Greatest Megalithic Temple*, Souvenir Press 1999. Through the internet a good selection of his articles can be downloaded.

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- <sup>7</sup> See: Walter L. Brenneman, Jr., 'The Holy Wells of Ireland', in James. A. Swann (ed.), *The Power of Place. Sacred Ground in Natural & Human Environments*, Gateway Books, Bath 1991, p. 134-153.
- <sup>8</sup> Proinsias Mc Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Chancellor Press, London, 1997, p. 19, 25 en 92-93.
- <sup>9</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World*, BCA London, 1992, p. 72.
- <sup>10</sup> E.V. Walter, *Placeways. A theory of the Humans Environment*, The University of Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1988, p. 14-15.
- <sup>11</sup> Annine van der Meer, *The language of MA the primal mother*, Pansophia Press 2013, p. 44.
- <sup>12</sup> Jean Markale, *The Great Goddess. Reverence to the Divine Feminine from the Paleolithic to the Present*, Inner Traditions, Rochester 1999, p. 36-37.
- <sup>13</sup> Annine van der Meer, *De Zwarte Madonna van Oer- tot Eindertijd. De Moeder van Donker en Licht en haar dochter Maria Magdalena*, Pansophia Press 2013, p. 59 and further.
- <sup>14</sup> There are a large number of – primarily feminist-inspired – books which in my view have convincingly shown this to be the case. You can find a selection of them on my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Books-about-the-Goddess-heritage.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> Steve Taylor, *The Fall. The Insanity of the Ego in Human History and the Dawning of a New Era*, O Books, Winchester 2005.
- <sup>16</sup> Philip Slater, *The Glory of Hera. Greek Mythology and the Greek family*, Beacon Press, Boston 1962, p. 337 and further.
- <sup>17</sup> Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade. Our History, our Future*, Pandora, London 1990.
- <sup>18</sup> Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess. Evolution of an Image*, Penguin, London 1991.
- <sup>19</sup> Valerie Andrews, *A Passion for This Earth. Exploring a New Partnership of Man, Woman & Nature*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1990.
- <sup>20</sup> Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Magical Child. Rediscovering Nature's Plan for Children*, Bantam Books, New York 1980, p. 18 and further.
- <sup>21</sup> In my book *The Survival and Revival of the Goddess Heritage* I have written more extensively about the theme of the search for the Holy Land and its more secular forms of expression. More information about this book you can find on my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl>
- <sup>22</sup> I have written more extensively on the survival of the Goddess heritage in my book: *The Survival and Revival of the Goddess Heritage*, Leiden, 2017. More information about this book you can find on my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl>
- <sup>23</sup> Robert Sardello, *Love and the Soul. Creating a Future for Earth*, Goldenstone Press, Heaven and Earth Publishing & North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 2008, p. 132.
- <sup>24</sup> Hrunn Gunnsteindottir and Kristin Ólafsdottir, *InnSaei. The Power of Intuition*, 2016.
- <sup>25</sup> Laurens van der Post, *The Voice of the Thunder*, William Morrow and Company, New York 1993, p. 74 and 132.
- <sup>26</sup> Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco 2009.
- <sup>27</sup> Adam McLean, *The Triple Goddess. An Exploration of the Archetypal Feminine*, Phanes Press, Grand Rapids USA 1989, p. 10-12.
- <sup>28</sup> Sukie Colegrave, *The Spirit of the Valley, Androgyny and Chinese Thought*, Virago, London 1979, p. 31.
- <sup>29</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power. The Tao Te Ching and its place in Chinese thought*, Mandala Book, London 1977, p. 149. (Originally published in 1934.). Another interesting

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translation of this chapter I found in the book *Dao de Jing. A philosophical translation*, with translations and commentaries by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (Ballantine Books, New York 2004):

The life-force of the valley never dies-  
This is called the dark female.  
The gateway of the dark female-  
This is called the root of the world.  
Wispy and delicate, it only seems to be there,  
Yet its productivity is bottomless.

Their translation focuses more on female sexuality than on the outdoor world of nature. This is their comment: 'In chapters 4 and 5, we have the Daoist celebration of the fecundity of emptiness. The underdetermined nature of experience, like a self-emptying flask or a pair of bellows, makes it inexhaustibly productive. In this chapter and pervasively in the text, the image of the vagina is used as an analogy for this fertility.'

<sup>30</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, 'Evolutionary Habits of Mind, Behaviours and Form', p. 211

<sup>31</sup> Jan van Baal, *Man's Quest for Partnership. The Anthropological Foundation of Ethics and Religion*, Van Gorcum, Assen 1981, p. 312.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Taylor, *The Fall. The Insanity of the Ego in Human History and the Dawning of a New Era*, O Books, Winchester 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Orleane, *The Return of the Feminine. Honoring the Cycles of Nature*, AuthorHouse, Bloomington 2010, p. 43, 48, 107.

<sup>34</sup> William Bloom, *The Power of Modern Spirituality. How to live a life of compassion and personal fulfillment*, Piatkus, London 2011, p. 34-15, 186.

<sup>35</sup> Froukje Jansen and Annick de Witte (and others.), *Duurzaamheid van binnenuit. Hoe een nieuw, bruisend bewustzijn de wereld verandert*, Prometheus/Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2015, p. 88-89.

<sup>36</sup> Dacher Keltner, *Born to be Good. The Science of a Meaningful Life*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2009

<sup>37</sup> Dacher Keltner, *Why do we feel Awe*, May 2016, downloadable from the website of 'The Greater Good Magazine': [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_do\\_we\\_feel\\_awe](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_do_we_feel_awe)