

Sacred Nature experiences in the Low Countries

**Reflections about a forgotten Goddess heritage
with indigenous, prehistoric roots**

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Getting to know our place and ourselves better

Opening our minds to our distant ancestors who once lived in the place where we are living our daily lives now, opening our minds to the worldview of its indigenous inhabitants, can help us to know this place better and make us feel that we belong to it. Thereby we can get to know ourselves in a deeper, more holistic way. And from that position our minds will also be ready to experience the Sacred dimension of the surrounding natural world.

In this essay I want to investigate this more specifically for the Low Countries, the area in Europe in which I was born and in which am a still living. I want to show that the world of the prehistoric inhabitants here, of our distant ancestors in pre-Roman times, their experience of reality and their worldview, are much less removed from our modern world than it might look at first glance. And I want to show that we learn a few few things from this, with which we can greatly enrich our current lives.

There are, of course, big differences between the world they lived in and we live in at the moment. The most important are that they lived in a thinly populated land, whereas in many places we live in an densely populated land; that they spent most of their time in the outer world, whereas we often spend a lot of time indoors; and that they felt the presence of the natural world everywhere around them, whereas many of us live in an urban environment that is dominated by human presence (and everything it implies). But apart from that, they are actually not that far removed from us. It is known that people who until recently had lived isolated in ‘primitive’

conditions in an indigenous community, within one generation could change over to life in 'modern' society. Although for people like us, living in a modern society, naturally there are blockages preventing us to imagine life in an indigenous community (that I will also discuss later). Nevertheless, it is still important that we try to build a bridge towards them.

In this respect, I think the following statement of the American writer Duane Elgin is relevant here: 'Who we are depends directly on where we are.'¹ It implies that not only our inner and outer world are inextricably connected to each other, but also that before we can get to know ourselves (better), we must get to know the place where we are living in such an intimate way that we start feeling that we belong to it. Then we know again that this feeling of belonging to it is the opposite of owning it. Because our knowledge of this place, and our sense of belonging to it, has been distorted by a long period of cultural, historic and prehistoric developments, it is important to investigate these developments as well, so that we can open our mind again to the deeper reality of this place. This sense of belonging to the place is a sense of truly being here, being fully present both in our own body and in the body of the surrounding landscape. In other words, feeling both embodied and embedded. This is closely connected to experiencing the Sacred dimension of the natural world, the theme of this essay.

By bringing the world of our distant, prehistoric ancestors closer to us, by bringing it more to life and by feeling more connected to them, we can rediscover this sense in ourselves of belonging to the place where we are living our daily lives – even when it is in an urban area – and, thereby, also rediscover our sense of feeling at home in the outer world – in the surrounding natural world, from which in any case we have always been an inextricable part. It can help to heal our sense of separation and alienation caused by life in a modern society, and to give life a deeper meaning. It can inspire us to take better care of our surroundings, by making as much space as possible for a rich diversity of other beings (people, animals and plants).

The value of the Goddess heritage

I have become more and more convinced that we can bring this world of our distant ancestors closer and that we can heal our sense of separation by opening ourselves more for the forgotten, and sometimes consciously avoided or suppressed, Goddess heritage. Many people do not even know

that such a heritage has once been widespread across the world and has even existed in the Low Countries. And also not that for the people, who have lived here in pre-Roman times, it must have had a deep meaning for their sense of connection to their living environment – for their sense of belonging to the surrounding land. It must have been an essential element in their Sacred Nature experiences. In the current process of growing awareness of the damage that our collective sense of separation for centuries has caused in various fields – not least of all to the spiritual development of ourselves – a revaluated Goddess heritage can once again get that important meaning.

A while ago, in 2008, I have written an article about ‘The Goddesses of the Low Countries’.² In it I drew my attention to the archaeological finds in the religious/spiritual field from the Gallo-Roman period in these regions. A large majority of the altar stones (and terracotta figurines) found from that period appear to be dedicated to indigenous Goddesses of our pre-historic ancestors, who through the principle of *interpretatio romana* were depicted in a Roman way. Nevertheless, if we can see through the Roman veneer, indirectly they do give us a picture of the indigenous spiritual experience that existed in these regions before the arrival of the Romans. At the time, I was not only concerned with showing that the worship of Goddesses appears to have been much more widespread in these regions than the worship of Gods. Much more important, in my opinion, was that the related experience of reality by our indigenous ancestors had not yet been sufficiently recognized and valued by most other researchers. I think that, about eighteen years later, this is still the case. Therefore, most of the current inhabitants of the Low Countries are not aware of it either.

The fact that in our regions, as in many other places in the world, a Goddess had once been central to the religious experience (or rather: to the spiritual experience, see below) of our prehistoric ancestors, provides us with an important insight into how we once approached life – an approach that we need to recall and from which we can still learn a lot today. This has everything to do with our relationship with nature and its Sacred quality. Because our distant ancestors obviously felt embedded in the natural world, they experienced it first and foremost as *Sacred*. In fact, they did not experience the natural world as a *thing* – or as a collection of isolated things – that existed somewhere outside of them and from which they felt

completely detached, but as a *She*, a living feminine presence that they felt entirely embraced by. They considered themselves an inseparable part of the surrounding landscape. With their small bodies – together with all the other animal, plant, forest, river, sea, hill and mountain bodies – they felt completely included in the larger landscape body.³ In fact, this landscape was experienced by them as boundless: it was a local manifestation of the enveloping matrix of Mother Earth, and in the clear nights they saw that it extended further into the vast universe.

I have been speaking here in the past tense, but the reality and the power of feeling embedded in the surrounding natural world has of course never disappeared. This experience is not only something from the distant past, but is still open to everyone, even in the cultivated and urbanised river area of the Low Countries, bordering the North Sea. As far as our being embedded in Sacred Nature is concerned, I will primarily limit myself in this essay to the earthly context.

Animated, conscious subjects with an inner life

To get a good overview of the subject of this essay, we must first have a closer look at the different characteristics of the Sacred Nature experience. The Sacred quality of Nature implied that our distant ancestors naturally regarded all living beings in the natural world – including themselves – as *animate* and *conscious subject* – entities that were always connected to each other in a web of reciprocal relationships and also communicated continuously with each other. They still experienced the surrounding natural world, in the words of the American priest and cultural philosopher Thomas Berry, as ‘a communion of subjects’ – and not yet as ‘a collection of objects’, like we in the western world in the past millennia have increasingly begun to look at the world around us and also at ourselves in a materialist way.⁴ In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that subject-oriented beings consider all the other beings with which they come into contact also as subjects. And contrary to the object-oriented view of the world, the subject-oriented view is never focused on separate beings: it does not consider each life separately from the entire context in which it takes place and by which it is fed in different ways. This distinction still resonates in our terms ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’. In this respect, it is also worth

mentioning that Berry's worldview was inspired by the culture of the indigenous peoples in North America, the so-called *Native Americans*.

We should realise that for our distant ancestors all these subjects also had an *inner life* – something that we in our Western culture, due to the prevailing materialistic, mechanistic view, have increasingly forgotten over time. Because we began to look more and more at everything from without and thereby began to consider them objects, we also started to assume that only we humans have a rich inner life. But fortunately, we are gradually seeing some change coming in this field. The German biologist Andreas Weber has argued, for example, that all living beings have an inner life and that subjectivity and feeling form the basis of this inner life.⁵

With regard to the conscious and animated quality of nature, and how it once generated Sacred Nature experiences in us, Henry Corbin – a French philosopher, theologian and scholar of Islam and Sufi culture – has given us a valuable insight. He has argued that the word 'temple' originally referred to a high structure from which we could look around, far away across great distances. According to him, from this place we once did not just look out across the environment, but we also felt that the environment looked back at us – that the 'all around, far away' also saw us.⁶ This implied that environment was not considered dead, but very much alive, and that it even appeared to be conscious of our human presence in it! It shows that the surrounding natural world (just like our own body) has originally been an inextricable part of our spiritual experience. Sacred Nature experiences have always been part of an earthly spirituality, in which we direct our attention not just upwards to the cosmos – and to a Heaven that is supposed to exist in another dimension beyond space and time – but also around us, to the surrounding landscape, and also to our own body. In the Sacred Nature experience the sensual material world cannot be ignored, bypassed or transcended directly, but it is an essential part of the experience.

This also makes it clear that for our distant ancestors the communion of subjects has not only existed with regard to relatively small living beings like plants and animals, but has also existed on a large scale with regard to the entire surrounding landscape. The landscape itself was also a subject. That this reciprocal communion stretched out even further than the earthly landscape becomes clear further on in this essay, when I am going to discuss the phenomenon of the *Sacred Marriage* – which originally

expressed a non-anthropomorphic exchange between the powers of earth and the sun, and only later got an anthropomorphic quality. In this regard, I have noticed during my visits to megalithic constructions from the New Stone Age – like stone circles and artificially built mounds – that from these constructions there is often a fantastic view across a wide, surrounding landscape. Research has shown that our distant ancestors consciously positioned these constructions very precisely in the surrounding landscape. This must have had something to do with that reciprocal exchange that they experienced with the ‘all around, far away across great distances’ – with experiencing a deep, Sacred connection with the surrounding natural world that was always cyclically in motion.

Gift exchange, interconnectedness and gratitude

I mentioned reciprocal relationships as part of the Sacred Nature experience. Reciprocity has always been closely connected with considering other living beings as subjects. This principle was on the foreground in our communities when we still communicated with animals, plants and the entire surrounding landscape as subjects. But it was even there before humans arrived on the scene. All life in the natural world is always involved with various ongoing reciprocal relationships. In this respect, indigenous people all over the world – and this includes our distant ancestors – have always known that life in the natural world was not first and foremost based on competition and struggle, but on cooperation and gift exchange (or gift giving). To express their sense of being embedded in that natural world, their intimate connection with it, they simply copied this way, based on a communion of subjects, as good as possible in their own communities. In this way, they shaped what is called a *gift economy*. By practicing gift exchange they confirmed their place in the larger whole.

The American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer has shown that Native Americans, including the community that she is part of herself, have always known this as well: ‘In the Anishinaabe worldview, it’s not just fruits that are understood as gifts, rather all the sustenance that the land provides, from fish to firewood. Everything that makes our life possible – the splints for baskets, roots for medicines, the trees whose bodies make our homes, and the pages of our books – is provided by the lives of more-than-human beings’ (...) ‘When we speak of these not as things or natural resources or

commodities, but as gifts , our whole relationship to the natural world changes'⁷

Like the communities of still living indigenous people, the communities of our distant ancestors were still largely built on the principles of a gift economy (although, of course, they haven't used this term for it). In a similar way it reflected life in the surrounding natural world in which they felt imbedded. In a gift economy the emphasis is on the other and giving to this other is central. By receiving gifts people are urged to give something back – not directly, but at some point in the near future. These 'return gifts' could be very different in nature – for instance, immaterial instead of material, or the other way around – and can also come from an unexpected angle. In this way interhuman bonds are created and on a larger scale the cohesion of a community, of a society is created – something a market economy can never. Special with this gift exchange is that there may be no expectation or anticipation about a return gift from the other. The reciprocity principle is built on giving without any expectations or anticipations. It is built on mutual trust. That's why some researchers consider 'gift giving' a better term than ' gift exchange'.

It is also important to know that givers can only truly give to someone else after *they themselves first must have been able to receive* and are also aware of this: they must have the deep conviction that life itself is a precious gift, for which they feel a deep gratitude. From that gratitude they can put the other central, and they know that by caring for others – for plants, animals or humans, whether immaterially or materially – their own life will also be enriched, because they are always inextricably connected to each other.

Kimmerer has emphasized that the feeling of gratitude has played an important role in Native American communities, and still does: 'This kind of gratitude is so much more than a polite "thank you". Not an automatic ritual of "manners", but a recognition of indebtedness that can stop you in your tracks – it brings you the realization that your life is nurtured from the Body of Mother Earth.'⁸

Perhaps it is hard to imagine that the prehistoric inhabitants of the Low Countries – and our distant ancestors in general – have not been uncivilized barbarians, but respectable people who have known mutual trust and gratitude, and held giving to others in high regard. But then we should not

forget that we are still born with a deep trust in our fellow human beings and with a deep gratitude for the gift of life: as children we have all known this in our own life. That is why keeping this trust and gratitude alive should have been central in the art of raising children. But when we have lost our feelings of trust and gratitude anyway (as unfortunately has often been the case), we can always rediscover it later in life. Reviving forgotten or suppressed cultural elements can always be helpful with this. I hope, of course, that this essay about Sacred Nature experiences in the Low Countries, and the Goddess heritage connected to it, can contribute something to that.

A holarchical reality

The last important characteristic of the Sacred Nature experience that I want to pay attention to is the fact that these kinds of experiences have always taken place within a holarchical reality. Just like it is absolutely true that our distant ancestors have never known terms like *reciprocity* and *gift economy*, this is also the case with the term *holarchy*. It has only been created in the 1960s by the Hungarian journalist Arthur Koestler.⁹ But, just like with reciprocity and gift economy, it has certainly helped me to get a better understanding of the kind of reality in which our ancestors have lived and experienced Nature in a Sacred way. With the term holarchy Koestler referred to a natural order that was completely different from the way the organizations in our modern society are hierarchically ordered. In a hierarchy, order is imagined in a pyramid-like way, with different levels separated horizontally from each other, and in which the levels at the top are considered the most important and the levels at the bottom the least important. In a holarchy the ordering is comparably different. This is why Koestler has created a new term for it.¹⁰

To get a good idea of a holarchical order, it is handy to keep the figure of the circle or a sphere in mind. A holarchy consists of so-called *holons*. A holon is a whole in itself that simultaneously is also a part of a bigger whole, and that bigger whole is also a holon, a whole in itself and simultaneously part of yet an even bigger whole, and so on. The order in our human body is a good example of the principle of a holarchical order. In this respect I pass by the subatomic world and start with the atoms. Every atom is a whole in itself and – together with other atoms – is part of a

greater whole, the molecule. Every molecule is again a whole, but together with other molecules is part of the greater whole of the cell. The next levels are tissues, organs and the organism, the body. From here we can of course expand the holarchy further to our body being part of the surrounding landscape, which is again part of the earth. In the end, everything is part of a universe that is organized entirely in a holarchical way. And we should not forget that this holarchical order is also at work in the immaterial side of life: for instance, we are also part of various communities.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the circle (or, in a three-dimensional sense, the sphere) is the central shape of holarchies. Everywhere in nature circles or spheres are present, not just with regard to place but also with regard to time: they are present in cyclical processes. In comparison with the imagery of an expanding order of circles or of three-dimensional spheres, the shape of a pyramid is quite artificial and static, something devised specifically by humans who are caught in a linear mode of thinking. I think we now start realizing that hierarchical orders devised by humans are in fact poor imitations of the holarchical orders in nature – they are artificial orders shaped by human minds that have completely separated their sense of identity from nature. When we have to relate the origin of both forms to the body, you could say that holarchical orders grow from the center, from the heart (or a little lower, from the womb or hara center); and that hierarchical orders are a product from the head, more specifically from the ego, the left hemisphere of the brain. Whereas holarchies are always clearly *inclusive* in nature, the hierarchical imitations from an egocentric sense of separation are always *exclusive* in nature. While holarchies have always existed as the structure of the natural world, hierarchies have only existed for about 6000 years, since the time when the first patriarchal forms of societies were established in Mesopotamia. And with these societies the basis was laid for the Western way of ordering the world that has managed to survive until today.

Sacred nature experience and the Goddess heritage

After this short explanation of the different characteristics of the Sacred Nature Experience, which I believe is relevant to generally understand the reality experience of our distant prehistoric ancestors, below I am going to turn more specifically to the life of our prehistoric ancestors in the Low

Countries. The presence of a deep-rooted Goddess heritage in the Low Countries, for which there is extensive evidence in the Gallo-Roman period, indicates that in that period the Sacred Nature experience was still a widespread phenomenon among the indigenous inhabitants of this region. This means that for all the people who living in this region today, which includes myself, there is a wealth of insights practically waiting for us on our doorstep – insights with which we can immaterially enrich our lives. And these insights are not only significant for the people who live in the Low Countries, because I am convinced that the rediscovery of the Sacred Nature experience is relevant for anybody living today on the planet. And as has been explained in the previous sections, behind this experience a worldview exists in which the natural world is considered conscious and animated, all living beings with an inner life, and relationships always reciprocal in nature; a worldview in which interconnectedness and gratitude are central, and we are in touch with a natural order that is shaped in a holarchical way.

It should be clear that putting the Goddess heritage in pre-Roman times on the map in the Low Countries is not only important for completing our historical and cultural awareness. Namely, the spiritual experience of our distant ancestors can help us to heal our individual and collective sense of separation from Nature – which is at the root of the crises we have ended up in today. It invites us to respectfully and reciprocally interact with the natural environment, and therefore also with each other! Why should we look far away for something that can also be found nearby? Of course, the traditions from distant countries that have been handed down and sometimes are still alive can of course help us to get a better picture of our own past. Therefore, below I will refer to them every now and then, to give our local culture a meaningful place in the the much larger cultural context of which it is a part.

Religion, mythology and spirituality

In history and archaeology, the worship of Goddesses and Gods is usually placed in a religious or mythological context. For me, a religion has an organized structure with sacred texts and rituals recorded for believers, based on the spiritual experiences of the founder – which often took place in a distant past. And if we are dealing with religions of other peoples, or from

a past that we think we have left behind, then – from our religious or scientific outlook – we place their Goddesses and Gods in a mythological context, supported by the notion that ‘myths’ belong to an outdated vision of existence.

Mythological research has shown that mythical stories can actually reveal a deeper truth about our lives than so-called ‘facts’ and have certainly not lost their meaning for humanity today.¹¹ We must not forget that the mythological worldview already existed before the emergence of the so-called ‘world religions’, which also include Christianity. Mythology is in fact as old as humanity. Unlike religion, spirituality is mainly about the *direct, personal experience* of the Sacred dimension of existence – confrontations with the overwhelming forces of Nature that were (and still are) mythologically represented by Goddesses and Gods. In this respect, spirituality and mythology go well together. The spiritual experiences of human beings, or in a broader sense of an entire people, do not have to be recorded in writing.

I think that with the majority of the pre-Roman practices of worship – as they existed among the Celtic and Germanic tribes – we should not assume that they were organized and fixed, in whatever form. In that spiritual context we must place the indigenous Goddess heritage that existed in the Low Countries before the arrival of the Romans – and that may have been able to survive in these regions for a while afterwards. In these regions almost nothing has survived of the accompanying mythical stories, but fortunately we can still find clues for this in the surrounding countries – especially at ‘the edges of Europe’, in England and Ireland.

Although this heritage has manifested itself in various ways in different cultures, due to a comparable spiritual experience of reality they can be understood as part of one particular overarching heritage. Central to this was experiencing the Sacred dimension of existence in the surrounding natural world, which was imagined by people as the presence of the Goddess and Her power. That is why in this context I prefer not to speak in religious terms, but in terms of spirituality, of spiritual experiences.

For a long time, the majority of western people considered themselves ‘civilized’ and from this mindset labeled their distant ancestors ‘primitive’. Inspired by Christian ideas, from their perspective it was quite naturally assumed that ‘pagans’ could not have had religious experiences of any

significance. The possible presence of spiritual experiences among these ‘pagans’ was not even considered by them. For example, the Christian preachers who once came to preach Christianity in all the countries of Europe, such as Boniface and Willibord in the Low Countries, were convinced that they came to enrich the lives of the indigenous people with their new religious message, because in their view these ‘uncivilized savages’ ‘only’ worshipped nature. Much later, in the period of the Voyages of Discovery, the perception of the indigenous peoples with whom the European colonists had come into contact in the ‘New World’ was completely misunderstood again, from a similar perspective of superiority.

As has become increasingly clear in recent decades, most people in the Western world have not realized that the ‘pagan’ nature worship of their distant ancestors in fact has been a form of spirituality. This also applies to most people currently living in of the Low Countries. They seemed to be unaware of the fact that the pre-Roman residents of these regions have been spiritual people who considered the surrounding natural world Sacred. And they also do not seem to know anymore what that actually means – that it is something valuable with which ‘modern people’ today could still enrich their lives in an immaterial way.

Regional versus local significance

To understand that valuable element it is important to get a good idea of the local significance of the Goddess heritage. In my article about ‘the Goddesses of the Low Countries’, I pointed out that in archaeology a distinction was made between religious cults that had a regional significance and cults that were ‘only’ locally significant, a distinction between public and private cults.¹² The difference between the two cults can be seen in the size of temple complexes that were built for the deities. When it comes to extensive temple complexes, those of Empel, Elst and Kessel are often mentioned, locations where the God Hercules Magusanus was worshipped. From this reasoning, the worship of this indigenous God – in which the Romans had recognized their own God Hercules – had a regional and public significance.

Local, private cults would only have had significance on a limited scale, for people in the immediate vicinity. The Goddesses – who have been found on Dutch territory and who certainly in number of finds and of different

names far exceed the Gods – are usually counted among those local, private cults. Because Goddess worship generally had taken place in a local context, according to Dutch archaeologists Goddesses would have only played a subordinate role in the religion(s) of our distant ancestors. As I have indicated above, in this context I prefer to speak of spirituality and spiritual experience.

According to this archaeological view, the worship of Nehalennia – with two temple complexes in the province of Zeeland, in Domburg and Colijnsplaat and with traders who came from far as the most important worshippers (according to the altar stones) – should, by way of exception, be regarded as a cult with regional significance. But this status has been questioned by the Dutch archaeologist Ton Derks. He thinks that in the pre-Roman period Nehalennia has only been an unremarkable Goddess.¹³ Did he perhaps assume that, due to the attention that Roman traders had given her when they crossed over the sea from Zeeland, she had been upgraded from a local to a regional significance in Roman times? I suspect that the unremarkable status of Nehalennia in the pre-Roman period must have been derived from the lack of archaeological finds. But then it must be remembered that the indigenous Celts on the North Sea coast – like elsewhere in Europe – experienced the presence of their deities primarily in the surrounding natural world; that they were neither accustomed to worship them in temples, nor to depict them in stone anthropomorphically. As is often said, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

The archaeologist Leo Verhart has remarked that certain types of Goddesses cannot be qualified as Goddesses in the strict sense. In this context, he noted that the *Matres* and *Matronae* – well-known Gallo-Roman names for the Mother Goddesses, of whom many altar stones and terracotta figurines have been found, sometimes in the Low Countries but especially in the German Rhine and Moselle area – were only ‘ancestral mothers’.¹⁴ But even if they were to be qualified as full Goddesses, I think they would still not be attributed more than a local significance by archeologists. Further on, I will come back to this distinction between local and regional meaning.

The excessive attention for the Roman heritage

With regard to the Roman heritage in the Low Countries, we should, on the one hand, be grateful that the Romans once conceived the plan to expand their Empire into these regions. Writers such as Julius Caesar and Tacitus have left written accounts of their visit for us and have also said a few things about the views of the indigenous people they came across over here. And they have also left a far greater number of tangible, material things for us than our indigenous ancestors – in the form of settlements and villas, stone temples and statues of Goddesses and Gods. Through the view of the outsider and through the Roman cultural veneer, we can indirectly gain limited – but very valuable – access to the perception of our indigenous ancestors.

On the other hand, though, we should also be a little less happy. Because the Romans left so much in writings, buildings and other stone and metal creations that have stood the test of time; and because the knowledge of archaeology and history is based almost exclusively on those surviving writings, buildings and other creations, this has invited researchers to pay exclusive attention to the Roman heritage. This is, for instance, evident in the collection of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden (RMO), which with regard to the Roman period in the Low Countries largely consists of stone statues and objects from this period. Therefore the reality that in this period also other people have lived there remains virtually invisible. In the bookshop of the museum the attention of the visitors is also put on Roman culture through the large selection of books in that field.¹⁵ Some scientific books have been written and published about the pre-Roman, indigenous people in the Low Countries, but these are much fewer in number.¹⁶ Therefore, the number of books dedicated to this theme in the museum bookshop is (necessarily) limited to one or two books. Activities that are organized in the museum for children, to make them aware of the lives of their distant ancestors, are almost always connected to the world of the Romans.

In the exhibition about Dutch archaeology in the RMO, I saw a note that pointed out that the ‘Celts’ as such did not exist – that there were only loose tribes that shared some cultural heritage with each other. Since the Nazis began to identify themselves with the Germanic heritage in the twentieth century, and the Celtic heritage was also claimed by similar right-wing

radical groups, both the Celtic and the Germanic heritage have come to be cast in a suspicious light. Furthermore, both are often associated with a rather woolly esotericism, which makes scientists extra wary when they enter the field.

Although the Roman army, as part of an imperial power, destroyed indigenous culture on a large scale and exterminated entire tribes in the Low Countries and elsewhere, it is still widely assumed that their heritage has brought a lot of good to us. The Romans have a reputation for having enriched our society in many ways with things that we still benefit from today, such as writing, paved roads, stone houses, a legal system, and other elements that we associate with culture and civilization.

Intermezzo: my appreciation of archaeological research

To avoid misunderstandings, let me make it clear here that I do have great appreciation for the field of archaeology and for all the work that archaeologists have done over time and still do every day. Without their efforts, all these special finds would not have been extracted from the earth, or dived from the bottom of lakes and seas; they would not have been described in countless publications and would not be shown to the (wider) public in museums all over the world. And I would not have been able to write this essay. These finds have helped us a lot to get a better picture of our distant past.

I am not an archaeologist. I acknowledge that my knowledge in this field is quite limited. Just like on other fields of science, the development in archaeology has never stood still. Because science has never been separate from society and in this society large scale changes have manifested themselves in recent years, this has also generated developments in the consciousness of archaeologists. In this respect, the Dutch archaeologist Wil Roebroeks has described concisely the limitations that for a long time also the archaeological view has suffered from (in an interview in the Dutch newspaper NRC in April 2026): ‘Our Western worldview, also in archaeology, is simply determined by great religions a few thousand years old, that made us believe that humans stand above nature. And that’s how we look at the millions of years of prehistory. Also colonial thinking has had much influence, with that so-called difference between civilized and primitive people.’¹⁷

But despite these developments in the field of consciousness, the mainstream view of archaeology, just like that of other sciences, has – as far as I can see – remained largely dominated by the widespread materialist worldview in the Western world. Therefore, I think archaeologists are limited too in what they can say about their finds. They must adhere to the prescribed research methods. In the materialist view, matter is considered the ultimate basis of life, and a good research method is characterized by keeping an objective distance from the research object. This explains that in archaeology the focus is still primarily on material objects, on the archaeological finds, which are then carefully placed in the context of the site and the time period.

I know that in the last few decades archaeologists, like other scientists, have increasingly changed to a more interdisciplinary approach in their research. For instance, they often cooperate with the scientific discipline of physics and integrate the results of DNA-research into their research. This has led to new insights and is absolutely of great value. But this still doesn't change the very foundation of their materialist view. Importantly, this view is not limited to the analysis of the material finds – from altar stones to skeletons of people –, but is also extended to understanding the lives of the people from the distant past. It is assumed that with the secular, rational mind of the scientist, we can penetrate to the lives of our distant ancestors and understand their pre-rational, spiritual experience of reality.

To relate this to what I said earlier about objects and subjects: despite the expansion of the field, in archaeology the focus is still primarily on the world as a 'collection of objects', while our distant ancestors understood themselves and the world in which they lived primarily in terms of a 'communion of subjects'. With an object-oriented worldview, archaeologists try to understand the lives of our distant ancestors who had a completely different, subject-oriented worldview. I think that from their objective mindset they will never fully understand a world in which subjectivity was still very central. Let me repeat here that I treasure the work of archaeologists a lot. They do very important work that, from the 19th century until now, has already given us a lot of knowledge about our prehistoric past and has thereby also deepened and broadened our understanding of it. But I believe that, when they keep holding on too

exclusively to their objective approach, a large part of the reality of our prehistoric past will remain hidden for us.

That is why I think an even broader approach, which also gives space to subjectivity, can be very helpful to get a better understanding of our prehistoric past and make it relevant for our present life – not only by including insights from other sciences, but also by paying attention to the changing (scientific) view of *consciousness* and the contribution of *subjective, personal experiences*. I think we can also let the finds speak to our *imagination* and use our *intuition*. In order to get a better, more complete picture of the lives of our distant ancestors, I think it is also allowed to sometimes *speculate* about possible connections, without yet being able to provide ‘hard’ scientific evidence. This has helped me in any case to enrich the picture I have of our distant past, and its meaning for our present time. Perhaps it helps some other people too in this respect. I can understand very well that this approach may not be appreciated by some scientists and may even be strongly disapproved by them. But in this essay I am not claiming any scientific value. I am writing as an interested, autodidactic amateur.

The Roman term ‘Dea’

As mentioned at the start, by trying to penetrate through the Roman veneer we can get an idea about the culture of our indigenous ancestors. That is what I am going to do from here. In our regions, many different names of the Goddess have survived from the Roman period. In my earlier article ‘The Goddesses of the Low Countries’ I also paid attention to this. The best known of these is of course the Goddess Nehalennia already mentioned above, of which more than 300 altar stones or remains thereof have been found in the province of Zeeland near Domburg and Colijnsplaat. Few people know that in addition to her, many other indigenous Goddesses have been worshipped in the delta area of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt, whose names have sometimes been handed down to us only once or a few times on the Gallo-Roman altar stones. Some examples are: Arcanua, Hurstrga, Iseneucaega, Sandraudiga, Viradecdis, Hludana, Rura – and also the aforementioned Matres, which were distinguished from each other by the addition of a specific name.¹⁸

‘ In addition to the Goddesses whose names have been handed down to us, countless terracotta figurines of Goddess figures have also been found in our regions that have never been given a name. The majority of them represent a Mother Goddess, and in other cases a Roman name can often be traced from their representation. But we still have to remember that hidden under that Roman name there may have been an indigenous Goddess. The distribution of these terracotta figurines extends south far into France.¹⁹

It is striking that all the Goddesses that do have a name got the term ‘Dea’ or ‘Deae’ added to their name. This begs the question why this term was added to their names. After all, ‘Dea’ simply means ‘Goddess’. It seems a bit duplicative then to add ‘Dea’ to her name. We can assume that the indigenous people, with whom the Goddess worship had originated, knew very well that their Goddess was a Goddess. Was this perhaps meant specifically meant for the Roman ‘newcomers’ in the area?

Interestingly, with regard to Nehalennia the Dutch linguist Peter Alexander Kerkhof has argued that ‘Dea’ before her name in the altar inscriptions indicates that ‘Nehalennia’ was an attribute of the Goddess, a title, which referred to a local manifestation of the Goddess and thus did not reflect her ‘real name’.²⁰ In short, what we have always assumed to be the ‘real name’ of the Goddess, has in fact ‘only’ been a nickname – the nickname of a Goddess who has otherwise remained nameless. Of course, at the time the indigenous residents of the region people knew very well who she was and what her presence meant to them.

I think this is a plausible explanation, which also puts the Goddess heritage in the Low Countries in a new perspective. It indicates that in the entire river area of the Low Countries not so much different Goddesses were worshipped, but local manifestations of one and the same Goddess – who was therefore also worshipped over a much larger area. Her nicknames seem to tell us something about the nature of the location where the presence of the Goddess had manifested herself to the people who were settled there. Unfortunately, almost two thousand years later, usually we can only guess what the meaning of those nicknames might have been. But we can deduce that they must have referred to the special character of the place where she was worshipped. As far as I am concerned, it confirms her deep connection with the place and the important role she has played in the Sacred Nature experience of our distant ancestors in those regions.

It is worth mentioning here that, in a religious context, giving nicknames to Sacred figures with specific, local meaning has been a much more common phenomenon, and has been able to survive into our time. In Christianity, for example, Mary has been given numerous nicknames, including ‘Lady of All Nations’, ‘Mother of God’, ‘Star of the Sea’ ‘Immaculate Conception’, ‘Our Lady of Need’²¹ This is only a small selection. In the Low Countries alone, Mary has been depicted in hundreds of different ways, with specific nicknames linking her to the local context.²² With every local depiction and nickname of Mary, it was never assumed that she represented a separate, standalone Saint. Why would it have been different for every local presence of the indigenous, pre-Christian Goddess? Seen from this point of view, the title of my previous article on this theme from 2008 should have been ‘The Goddess of the Low Countries’...

I suspect that the reason for not mentioning the name of the Goddess on the altar stones was not only determined by the fact that the local people knew who she was – and what her name was. Her ‘real’ name could also have been deliberately omitted on the altar stones, because she was not allowed to be mentioned directly. Perhaps the local residents had deliberately hidden her name from the Roman outsiders who wanted to erect a Sacred altar in her honor.

Absence of indigenous Goddess depictions

The found altar stones with the various nicknames of the Goddess also raise the question why we have not found anything about that Goddess from the period that preceded the arrival of Romans in the Low Countries. The absence of depictions of this indigenous Goddess from pre-Roman times seems to indicate not so much a lack of craftsmanship among the indigenous population, but rather their belief that the presence and power of their Goddess was essentially experienced by them not in an anthropomorphic way, but directly in the surrounding natural world. I think that the absence of temple buildings from the pre-Roman period must also have been directly related to this.

This fits well with the image we have of the spiritual experience of the Celts. As is well known, our indigenous Celtic ancestors, like the Celtic peoples elsewhere in Europe, experienced the sacred dimension of life not in temple buildings but under the open sky in the natural world. This is also

the reason why I qualify their experiences rather not as part of a religion but as a form of spirituality. Our distant ancestors felt the Sacred dimension of existence, of the local manifestation of the Goddess, in the earth beneath their feet; in the rivers, plants and trees; in the forest, in the lake and the sea; in the animals, and also in the sky above them. For them, nature was an all-enveloping context, a Sacred Matrix in which all cyclic life, including their own, was embedded. The impact of the Sacred power of Nature differed according to time and place. In some places and at some moments in the year they experienced this power, and the associated contact with the underlying Otherworld, extra strongly. With Henry Corbin's observation in mind, I can imagine that – to contact that power – the people living in the flat river areas of the Low Countries had built an artificial hill: a high structure from which they could see all around, far away across great distances, and where in a reciprocal way the 'all around, far away' could also see them.

Because the essence of their spiritual experience did not take place in a building but outside in nature, I have more specifically qualified it as a form of *outdoor spirituality* – to distinguish it from the later *interior religions*, of which (institutional) Christianity was also a manifestation. It is of course conceivable that our distant ancestors sometimes observed anthropomorphic apparitions of the Goddess, like the later Marian apparitions that have occurred regularly in the Christian context. It is also possible that the local people made depictions from perishable materials, like wood, that have not survived the test of time. But it seems more likely to me that such appearances have not prompted them to depict the Goddess in an anthropomorphic way.

The anthropomorphic depiction of the Goddess, such as that of Nehalennia, expressed the way in which the Roman traders, who passed through Domburg and Colijnsplaat on their journey to England, experienced and shaped the local presence of the Goddess heritage. They did not pluck their depiction entirely out of thin air, because they have used local elements for it. I imagine that Roman merchants had observed certain indigenous rituals related to the worship of Nehalennia on the spot. In these rituals, in which the myths connected to this Goddess were brought to life, a basket with fruit and a dog would probably have played an important role. Perhaps a priestess was also present who acted as a medium to pass on the

messages of the Goddess to the people. I think it is quite conceivable that the observations of these indigenous rituals have determined the depictions on the altar stones, perhaps also supplemented by stories the merchants had heard about Nehalennia. This is of course highly speculative.

The spirit of the place

With regard to Sacred Nature experiences it is important to realize that the Romans have also been familiar with these kinds of experiences: their culture had the concept of the *Genius Loci*, the spirit of the place. They must have been aware that these kinds of powerful places also existed in the territories that they tried to conquer. It explains that they usually respected indigenous places of worship and the deities who were involved with these – including, of course, the many places in the Low Countries where the presence and the power of the Goddess was experienced.

Yet I think that the essence of Celtic outdoor spirituality, the non-anthropomorphic experience of the Goddess in the Sacred Landscape, must have largely escaped the Romans. We can deduce this indirectly from the altars stones of Nehalennia. The inscriptions represented her exclusively as a Goddess who protected the merchants during their voyage at sea, while the depictions have usually shown her as a Goddess who was primarily connected to the fertility of the land. With a few exceptions, she usually sat in a temple under a roof in the shape of a big shell, on her chair or throne with some fruit on her lap, and a basket of fruit and a dog beside her. The presence of this fruit shows that she was connected to fertility of the land and more specifically to the period of the harvest. The horn of plenty that was depicted on the side of some altar stones confirmed her connection to fertility. The shell referred to her connection with the sea. In this respect, it is conceivable that Nehalennia also played a role with the mythical journey, across the sea, to the Otherworld. The dog could symbolize the process of death and rebirth, both of the crops and of the people, and could have been a companion on the mythical journey to the Otherworld.²³ The different elements in the depiction show that the power of Nehalennia, like that of other deities, need not have been limited to one particular field.

I suspect that in the depictions of Nehalennia the focus – with the exception of the temple environment – has been primarily on the indigenous experience of her power in the field of fertility, while the inscriptions have

primarily expressed the Roman experience of her power: her help to merchants who had to make dangerous journeys across the sea to England. We must not forget that the writing of the inscriptions was a newly introduced medium, and that the representation of images, on the other hand, was already known and existed long before writing was invented.²⁴ Of course, these two areas do not necessarily exclude each other, because the worship and power of the Goddess can extend to different areas. We can be sure, that the indigenous peoples living in the coastal areas of the Low Countries were already involved in trading and crossing the sea by boat before the Romans arrived in their area. But because the Roman merchants were probably only quick passers-by in Domburg and Colijnsplaat, their focus has probably been on the journey across the sea, and not so much on the fertility of the land, on the spirit of the place. For that, they would have had to stay in that place for a longer period of time, to get to know it well.

The Menapians

Interestingly, there is evidence that the indigenous people, who were living in the Dutch province of Zeeland when the Roman arrived there, were already well acquainted with journeying across the sea. They belonged almost certainly to the Celtic Menapii, the Menapians. Until the arrival of Julius Caesar in the Low Countries (in 55 BC), their territory in the coastal area extended northwards to the (old) Rhine (near Leiden), and later this shifted southwards to the coastal area of Zeeland and Flanders. There are many indications that the Menapians have regularly crossed the sea.

This is what the researcher N.J. Sharkey has said about the Menapians: ‘Traditionally, the Manapii in Ireland have been linked to the Gaulish Menapii. They were seafarers and traders who lived in the forests of the Rhine estuary on the North Sea, where they were part of the Belgae federation of Gaulish tribes. They established a series of trading settlements on both sides of the English Channel and both sides of the Irish Sea starting around the 6th Century BC.’ In England they have settled, for instance, on the Isle of Anglesey, which was then called *Mona*, and on the Isle of Man, which was then called *Monapia*. In Ireland initially they settled in on the South East coast. On the map of Hibernia – as Ireland was known in Roman times – made by the Greek astronomer, geographer and mathematician

Ptolemy around 140 AD, the region in South-East Ireland where the Menapians settled was called *Manapii*.²⁵

The name of the Menapians still resonates in various placenames in South East Ireland. Later some of them moved northwards, where two Irish counties still bear their name: Monaghan and Fermanagh. In Irish mythology a colonizing tribe called the *Fir Managh* is mentioned, and this name probably refers to the Menapians. This tribe was part of a bigger, overarching group of tribes, known as the *Fir Bolg* – a name that probably refers to the Belgae, the federation of Gallic tribes that is already mentioned above.²⁶ It shows that even before the Roman period there have been intensive contacts and exchanges between the regions of the Low Countries and England and Ireland. And because this also shows that the Menapians have been experienced navigators at sea, whereas the Romans not have been known for that, it is even conceivable that the Romans were taught about this by the indigenous people they encountered at the Northsea coast..

With regard to the pre-Roman inhabitants of the country, the focus in this Netherlands is still on the Bataves. Few Dutch people know that once a seafaring Celtic people has lived in the coastal area that had contact with places in England and Ireland and even established settlements there – with a lasting influence on their culture. Because the people of the Netherlands, and in a wider context of the Low Countries, have left such a big mark on Western history with their experience as shipbuilders, as navigators at sea and as colonizers in countries all over the planet, I suspect that in this respect they might have inherited more qualities from the Menapians than from the Bataves – who after all had originated from an inland area along the Rhine in today's Germany. In this regard it is also not unimportant to mention that at a certain moment the Bataves formed an alliance with the Romans and – in exchange for protections and tax exemption – supplied troops to the Roman army. The Menapians have never formed such an alliance. Therefore, we may wonder whether the relationship between the indigenous inhabitants of Zeeland and the Roman merchants has been that good. There is a good chance that this can no longer be traced from the scarce writings. With a timespan of almost two thousand years between them and us, we probably have to accept that we do not know.

The shift from a gift economy to a market economy

An important part of the travels from the Low Countries to England and Ireland by the indigenous peoples in the pre-Roman era, and the founding of new settlements elsewhere, was obviously trading between the two areas. That has also been the case with the activities in this field by the Menapians. I think the central presence of the fruit on the lap of Nehalennia and in the basket beside her in the depictions on the Gallo-Roman altar stones, show that in the indigenous communities in the pre-Roman era also the gift economy still played an important role. The fruit was not part of commercial transacties between people, but was essentially a gift of nature to the people, and through Nehalennia the people expressed their gratitude for it. In the inscriptions of the Roman merchants there was also an expression of gratitude (in words), but this is a gratitude that was just connected to the safe journey of the merchants across the sea. In the inscriptions the significance of Nehalennia was exclusively connected with trade. Does this indicate that with the arrival of the Romans the focus increasingly shifted from a gift economy to a market economy?

At the start of this essay I considered the presence of a gift economy part of the Sacred Nature experience. When our distant ancestors acknowledged the gifts they had received – not least the gift of their own life, for which they had felt a deep gratitude – this meant they also experienced the Sacred dimension of Nature, the reciprocal exchange with Her that continuously happened and the deep inextricable connection that had resulted from this. By the shift of the attention to the market economy, to an intereaction that primarily happened between people, it is obvious that there remained less attention for de reciprocal exchange between the people and the surrounding natural world. Perhaps we can deduce from this that the coming of the Romans to the Low Countries, with their increasing emphasis on trade, has also promoted a collective decline of the Sacred Nature experiences in these regions. When a few centuries later Christianity was later spread by the missionaries – from the 7th century onwards –, which included fierce attack on the still existing indigenous practice of ‘nature religions’, a further collective decline of the Sacred Nature experiences was promoted. At the same time this helped – probably unintentionally – to make even more space for an exclusive focus on trade between people. Below I will return to the impact that the Christian missionaries have had on our lives.

From reading the land to reading words

The distinction between the depiction of Nehalennia and the Roman description of her role also shows something else that is interesting for the current theme of the Sacred Nature experience in the Low Countries. The American philosopher and ecologist David Abram has pointed out, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, that the the invention and spreading of the written word has generated a shift in human consciousness. Due to the spreading of the written word, our innate sense of ‘reciprocal perception’²⁷ shifted from reciprocal communication with, listening to and reading the living, animated land and all its beings to reading and understanding the pages in a book, to turning letters into vivid images in our mind: ‘Only as the written text began to speak would the voices of the forest, and of the river, begin to fade. And only then would language loosen the ancient association with the invisible breath, the spirit sever itself from the wind, the psyche disassociate itself from the envisioning air. The air, once the very medium of expressing interchange, would become an increasingly empty and unnoticed phenomenon, displaced by the new medium of the written word.’²⁸

In this respect, it is also worth mentioning that the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has pointed to the fact that people who practiced writing mostly wrote about themselves: they wrote about the human story of the rise and fall of empires. And people who did not (yet) have writing, who passed on their culture orally, according to him, had a vast lore about plants and animals.²⁹ This is interesting with regard to the difference between the Roman and Celtic culture. The Roman writers did indeed focus primarily on human activities in relation to their empire, whereas in the Celtic world there was much more attention on the natural world, and on the plants and animals that were part of it.

It has, of course, not been the case that this shift in consciousness to the written word has happened directly with the arrival of the Romans in the Low Countries. We can assume that it took centuries before the (power of the) written word began to spread more widely. It has been a slow process that has been set in motion with the introduction of the written word by the Romans. It has in any case also contributed to pushing the Sacred Nature experience in the Low Countries collectively to the background. Incidentally,

Abram has repeatedly pointed out that the spreading of the written word has certainly also brought something wondrous and even magical to humanity. According to him the transformation of reading written words to vivid images is an alchemical process that happens in our mind spontaneously in a quite magical way. And, of course, through the written word we have been able to enrich our lives with knowledge of cultures from all around the world. But this doesn't alter the fact that, as a result of the use of the written word, something important has been lost as well. We increasingly lost touch with the spiritual depth of the surrounding natural world. And it must be clear that the exclusive use of written words – including the words of this essay! – is not enough to restore that loss.

Indigenous Goddesses with no Roman equivalent

It is known that the Romans often linked the names of indigenous Gods to a Roman equivalent. In this respect, Hercules Magusanus has already been mentioned. For the indigenous Goddess, however, they almost never found a Roman equivalent. A well-known exception to this is the Goddess Sulis, who was worshipped in Bath in England and in whom the Romans recognized their Goddess Minerva. But the Roman use of the Interpretatio Romana apparently has also had its limitations, because usually no Roman equivalent has been found for the indigenous Goddess. This has been the case with the nameless indigenous Goddess who was worshipped under different nicknames in various places in the river area of the Low Countries. This is a significant fact that we should not be too quick to ignore. It can give us a better insight into the reality experience of our distant ancestors.

I have always had the impression that archaeologists and historians have often been uncomfortable with the presence of an indigenous Goddess. How can they understand her worship? Through our upbringing, school and later university education, it has been well instilled in most of us that in every religion a male God is, and always has been, the most important deity. In this respect, of course, everyone knows God as the Creator in Christianity and Jahweh in Judaism, and the closely related Allah who acts as the Creator in Islam. These forms of divine imagination should transcend male and female associations, but have nevertheless been given a strong masculine interpretation. In Germanic religion there were several Gods and also Goddesses, but the focus has always been on the supreme Gods Wodan

and Donar, who were sometimes also called Odin and Thor. The German-born American psychologist Ralph Metzner has argued that these Gods rose to the top of the divine hierarchy in Germanic mythology at a relatively late moment – when under Indo-European influence the older Vanir deities were replaced by the Aesir deities. In the older Vanir mythology, the Goddesses occupied an much more important place. But despite the existence of this older heritage, Wodan and Donar have remained central in our (school and university) education about Germanic mythology.³⁰

In our image of Greek mythology, a male God has also always been at the top, namely Zeus as the ruler on Olympus. Again, there are indications that Zeus' top position on Olympus was the result of Indo-European influence in Greek culture. In the pre-Indo-European period, the Goddesses had been much more respectable and powerful. Nowadays there has been increasing attention for this undervalued feminine side of Greek mythology. But this has not yet changed the popular image in which Zeus holds sway from Olympus. In our image of Roman mythology, also a male God has always been at the top, namely Jupiter. Even in the rich collection of Goddesses and Gods of Hinduism, the God Brahma is seen as the creator who stands at the top of the pantheon. In Buddhism there is no longer a pantheon of Goddesses and Gods, but the male figure of the Buddha is still central. The depiction of him, sitting in a meditative position, has determined to a significant extent the image of Buddhism.

With this cultural education, what can we do then with a religious/spiritual heritage in which this central male figure is missing – in which a Goddess with an unknown indigenous (nick)name has been central? From this background, it is understandable that archaeologists and historians – when they tried to map the spiritual/religious heritage of the indigenous people in the Low Countries – preferred to focus on a Romanized indigenous God such as Hercules Magusanus and put him forward as the supreme god of the Batavians – the tribe that is still considered the most important representative of the pre-Roman indigenous heritage of the Netherlands. In this respect, it is ironic that in the name Hercules there is still a reference included to the Goddess heritage: in the Greek version of this God, Heracles, the name of the Goddess Hera clearly is included. Heracles considered Hera an opponent against whom he has

also fought very hard – a difficult struggle that he eventually won. The word *hero* is derived from Heracles/Hercules.

Gallo-Roman and other divine couples

It is interesting, and important for the present story, that the indigenous Goddess was often, but not always, depicted or mentioned alone. In the Gallo-Roman culture of Western Europe, she was sometimes also linked to a male God, to form a godly pair, a divine couple. Examples of these Gallo-Roman divine couples are Nantosuelta and Secullus, and Rosmerta and Mercury. Although the archaeological finds of divine couples are scarce in the Low Countries, we must not forget that in the Gallo-Roman period the cultural area extended across the borders that we know today. We can assume that the divine couples must also have formed an important element in the spirituality of our distant ancestors in these regions. And importantly, they add something very valuable to our understanding of Sacred Nature experiences. In the spirituality of divine couples, there was not an exclusive focus on the feminine. An important, inclusive place was given to the masculine, to the value of its contribution to the whole, but nevertheless the emphasis remained on the feminine.

In our Western culture – with a Christian sphere of influence of two thousand years in which God has naturally been sole ruler – we are not only uncomfortable with the central worship of a Goddess, but also not with the existence of divine couples. With regard to the relationship between the feminine and the masculine elements in our western culture, we carry a long patriarchal heritage with us – a heritage in which the masculine is evidently considered superior to the feminine.

The history of this dominance of the masculine over the feminine, has been described very well by the Austrian/American researcher Riane Eisler in her book *The Chalice and the Blade*.³¹ In this respect, she has qualified our current Western culture as a *dominator culture*, and has contrasted it with the much older *partnership culture*. Divine couples fit very well into that older partnership culture. They express the fact that the Goddess and the God maintain a reciprocal relationship with each other, work together continuously, exchange and complement their powers, so that a balance can continue to exist between the feminine and the masculine. It reflects a form of society in which the focus was also on reciprocity, connection, balance

and cooperation. These are qualities that in themselves are not specifically tied a gender or a sex, but have often been considered more ‘feminine’ – while qualities like competition, independence and struggle have often been considered more ‘masculine’. In this sense in the partnership culture the emphasis has been more on the Goddess than on the God, but based on the view that both deities are absolutely *equivalent* to each other and cannot function well without each other’s contribution.

For our current story it is important to mention that in the partnership culture there was a widespread awareness that human life was not existing independently, but was always fully embedded in and dependent on the surrounding natural world. The minds of the people who were part of this cultural were open to receive Sacred Nature experiences. With the advent of the dominator culture the people increasingly began to feel separated from the surrounding natural world, and thereby also from each other. This meant that they also increasingly closed off their minds to Sacred Nature experiences and became less receptive to them.

It will not have escaped anyone’s attention that at this moment in the Western world we are still living in a dominator culture. Yet we can still find surviving elements from the earlier partnership culture. The reciprocal exchange in the religious/spiritual field between the feminine and the masculine has not completely disappeared and even seems to gain strength again. As is well known, within the Christian context, for several decades Mary Magdalene has been increasingly put forward as the long-misunderstood partner of Jesus. Although this is substantiated by drawing attention to long-suppressed and (re)discovered texts, this has generally led to a lot of outrage and resistance among the church institutions. As far as the representation of the feminine within religion is concerned, the Virgin Mary has historically been given an important place in the Catholic tradition. But for now no important role can be accepted in this tradition for Mary Magdalene as partner of Jesus – a relationship in which both represent equivalent powers that have cooperated with each other. Behind the resistance against Mary Magdalene as a equivalent partner of Jesus quite obviously lies the patriarchal heritage of the dominator culture. This does not alter the fact that the partnership of Jesus and Mary Magdalene has increasingly been appreciated outside the church institutions.

Perhaps this link between Jesus and Mary Magdalene unconsciously evokes something in us that we once also have known in the distant past. And by that, I do not just refer to the divine couples that in the past have existed in our own regions, but in particular to the divine couples that have existed in the country where the roots of Christianity lie – in Israel. Since a few decades it has become increasingly clear that Yahweh was accompanied by the Goddess Asherah among the original, Canaanite inhabitants of Israel. Actually, in this respect, the roles were even reversed, as originally the focus was on Asherah – who was accompanied by Yahweh.

This divine couple of Asherah and Yahweh was part of a rich culture that existed in the countries around Israel, which have known Divine couples under various names. In these divine couples, the male God was both the son and the partner of the Goddess. A lot has been written about those different divine couples, but let me mention a few of those here. In Mesopotamia, Inanna was linked to Dumuzi, and a little later Ishtar was linked to Tammuz in those regions; in ancient Egypt there was Isis and Osiris/Horus; in Anatolia there was Kybele and Attis. And, of course, the tradition of the divine couple has also gained acceptance in Christianity, albeit in a somewhat veiled way. In this tradition, the Goddess heritage was split into Mary with her son, the child Jesus, and into Mary Magdalene with the adult Jesus as her partner. With the current revaluation of Mary Magdalene and her partnership with Jesus, in addition to the already existing bond between Jesus and his mother Mary, the dual role of the son/partner of the Goddess is in fact restored.

Divine couples have also existed in other cultures – for instance, in some indigenous communities that have been able to keep their cultural heritage alive to this day. In this context, the American anthropologist Patricia McBroom cites the research of Barbara Alice Mann, who has argued that in the culture of the North American Iroquois, who are also called Haudenosaunee, both genders were responsible for the creation of the universe. She has called this coupling of female and male forces together into a divine couple ‘Twinning’. This vision differed fundamentally from the monotheistic vision of the European settlers with whom they once came into contact. Unfortunately, these settlers did not recognize this indigenous spiritual experience, misinterpreted it and generalized it to a worship of a

‘Great Spirit’. McBroom has pointed out that the vision of ‘Twinning’ is not built on the rejected representative of Evil or the Devil to explain the complexity of nature, as has been the case in the monotheistic religions. With ‘Twinning’, the complexity of nature was fully embraced. According to McBroom, the indigenous belief system fits in beautifully with ‘the modern ecological needs to bring back a sense of sacredness in nature’.³²

The local connection of the Goddess heritage

I thought it was meaningful to briefly sketch the widespread distribution of the culture of divine couples, to show how the Gallo-Roman version fits in a much larger cultural story. But let’s return here to the Gallo-Roman divine couples of our distant ancestors. In these divine couples, the partner of the indigenous Goddess could be an indigenous God, but also Roman God. In this regard I have already referred to Nantosuelta and Secullus, and Rosmerta and Mercury. Other divine couples were: Sirona and Apollo Grannus, Damona and Apollo Borvo, Nemetona and Mars Loucetius or Lenus Mars. Conversely, a Roman Goddess forming a couple with an indigenous God, I have not (yet) come across anywhere.

The Roman soldiers and merchants had brought their Roman Gods and Goddesses with them when they spread across Europe. It is striking that generally their Roman God, sometimes with an indigenous nickname attached to him, was linked to the indigenous Goddess – for which they apparently had not been able to find a Roman equivalent. I think the culture of the divine couples shows that this indigenous Goddess was apparently strongly connected to the local environment, and was already worshipped when the Romans arrived in these regions. Presumably, the indigenous Goddess worship had been so strong among the local people that they insisted on continuing that worship, while retaining her own (nick)name. As indicated earlier, there are exceptions to this, such as Sulis who was identified with Minerva in Bath, in England.

In any case, it seems to indicate that (the imagination of) the Goddess heritage was strongly connected to (the spiritual experience of) the local natural world. Compared to the heritage of male Gods, the Goddess heritage appears not to have been very mobile. For male gods, including those from the Roman pantheon, local connection with the surrounding natural world seems to have played a much less significant role. Despite the fact that the

worship of the Gods could cover a very large area – which reached all the way from Rome to the Low Countries and thus had even more than a regional significance – we should not deduce from this that they therefore also were more important than the indigenous Goddess.

The disguised presence of the masculine

It is good, I think, to point out that – even when there is little evidence of divine couples in the Gallo-Roman period in the Low Countries and the Goddess seems to have been primarily worshipped here on her own – the masculine was still present in a disguised way in her depictions. As already mentioned, in the depictions of Nehalennia fruit took an important place: it lay on her lap and in a basket beside her on the floor. It referred to the agrarian background, and more specifically to the period of the harvest. This fruit represented the temporary, material manifestation of creation, the result of the ongoing cyclical process of creation. The Goddess herself represented the unmanifested realm, the Sacred Matrix from which all life has arisen and continuously keeps arising.

In the earlier agrarian culture of the Neolithic period (the New Stone Age), the Goddess was depicted with her son/partner in a similar way: she was usually depicted with her child on her lap, instead of fruit. This was the culture of the divine couples that I already paid attention to. She cherished her (masculine) baby on her lap, the son that later also became her partner. Both the fruit and her son were born from her womb.

In the Gallo-Roman period the Goddess was not just depicted with fruit on her lap, but also with one baby or two babies on her lap that she nourished from her breasts. These depictions of the Goddess have become known as the *Dea nutrix*. From this period primarily small terracotta figurines of this Dea Nutrix have been found, both on the European continent and in England. Furthermore, also larger altar stones of this Dea Nutrix have been found – of her alone, or as part of the triple depiction of the Mother Goddess, the Matres.³³

No sex was attached to the babies of the Dea Nutrix (as far as I know). But as I have mentioned already above, in the agrarian culture of the Neolithic the Goddess was depicted with her son on her lap. The son/partner was the masculine ‘Yeargod’ connected with the agrarian cycles, with the process of sowing seeds and harvesting. This implies that the fruit on the lap

of the Goddess can be associated with the masculine. Therefore, in the fruit on Nehalennia's lap, and on the lap of any other manifestation of the Gallo-Roman Goddess, we can see a disguised presence of the masculine.

Sacred Marriage in Celtic Culture

Divine couples are closely connected to the concept of *Sacred Marriage*. This concept focuses the attention on the intimate relationship between the Goddess and the God in his role as her partner. To get a better idea of the deeper meaning of the Gallo-Roman divine couples, and the Sacred Marriage between the two deities, we can have look at what has been handed down to us from Celtic culture. In Belgium the presence of Gallic tribes in their pre-Roman past is acknowledged and therefore the relevance of Celtic heritage. In the Netherlands, however, the pre-Roman past is often still associated quite exclusively with the Germanic heritage. Research, however, has shown that the Celtic heritage has also existed on Dutch soil.³⁴ In this respect, it is important to acknowledge that the Celtic heritage has more ancient roots than the Germanic heritage. And acknowledging the presence of Celtic culture in the Low Countries opens the mind to the rich Celtic heritage that has been preserved in England and Ireland.

The English archaeologist Miranda Green has pointed out that in Celtic religion it is difficult to determine who was the central deity in the divine couples and who should be referred to as the partner. But, in this context, she has also referred to Celtic culture in Ireland, in which the 'territorial goddess' took a 'mortal sovereign' as a partner. So here is the temporary, mortal king or chief of the tribe, as the representative of the God – just like with the divine couples elsewhere – the partner of the Goddess. According to Green, the Sacred Marriage between the two could be the basis for the presence of the divine couples.³⁵

It is also important to note that, according to the Irish archaeologist Barry Cunliffe, all the Goddesses in the Irish tradition of Celtic mythology are reflections of the 'Mother Earth Goddess' and all the male Gods of the 'Tribal God', the God who was connected primarily with the tribe.³⁶ This could explain why in the Low Countries the Goddess has become known under various nicknames: it confirms the fact that the Goddesses were not considered separate entities, and in essence, as reflections of the Mother Earth Goddess, all had the same origin. Although all Gods are also

considered to be reflections of the one Tribal God, there is an important difference with the Goddess. The presence of the Goddess was associated with the place where the tribe was settled. She was deeply rooted in the surrounding natural world. The Tribal God, on the other hand, was not so much connected to the place where the tribe was settled, but to the tribe itself, and therefore also often received a name related to that specific tribe. I imagine that, when tribes or communities decided to move to settle elsewhere, they would simply take their Tribal God with them, while at the new location they would have to reconnect again with the local presence of the – indivisible – Mother Earth Goddess.

In addition to the insight of Cunliffe, the Irish Celtic researcher Proinsias Mac Cana has indicated that Sacred Sovereignty, represented by the Goddess as the personification of Ireland, was a permanent and fundamental element of the Irish tradition. And according to him, there are indications that similar religious views have existed on the European continent.³⁷ Therefore, it is quite conceivable that the Celtic ideas about the Sacred Marriage and the link between Mother Earth Goddess and the Tribal God – just like the Gallo-Roman divine couples that I discussed earlier – must also have existed in the Low Countries. In the experience of the Celts, in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, the Goddess was everywhere the personification of the surrounding landscape, with whom the local king or chieftain – as a representative of the Tribal God – had to connect intimately through a Sacred Marriage ritual to acquire sovereignty, the right to rule. By this Sacred Marriage both the fertility of the land and the well-being of his people were ensured. We may assume that this strong bond between the people and the surrounding land(scape) was also beneficial for the Sacred Nature experiences of the people.

In the later King Arthur stories about the (search for the) Grail, which were also known in many countries on the European continent, including the Low Countries, this Celtic heritage still resonated. They show how dramatic the consequences have been (and still are) when the – apparently simple – concept of the Sacred Marriage had begun to lose its meaning and appeal. In these stories the figure of the wounded Fisher King symbolized the loss of this marriage bond. It resulted in the emergence of the *Wasteland*, a state of the land in which the land itself had become infertile, and simultaneously an end had come to the prosperity and well-being

among the people. It shows that in the Middle Ages, like in the earlier Celtic culture, the state of the land and that of the people were still inextricably linked – and that servant leadership was the most important quality the king/chieftain had to have and also continually had to practice. His inability to serve the land and the people in this way led inevitably to the Wasteland. It also meant the loss of the intimate connection with the surrounding natural world, closing the minds of the people to Sacred Nature experiences. Finding the Grail was related to restoring the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people. And indirectly finding the Grail also meant that the minds were opened once again to be able to receive Sacred Nature experiences. I hardly need to point out here that these ideas are still very relevant for the world in which we are living today.

That the phenomenon of the Sacred Marriage has been able to manifest itself so strongly in Celtic culture could have been related to the fact that the ‘ordinary’ Celtic marriage between two partners was much more egalitarian in nature than in other European cultures. In this respect, the Dutch archaeologist Alexander van de Bunt has pointed out that Celtic women enjoyed freedoms ‘that their Greek and Roman sisters could only dream about.’ They could, for instance, choose their own husband and also leave him when she had a good reason for this. In the Celtic marriage the power did not lie exclusively with the man.³⁸ In the Sacred Marriage the masculine form of external power, exercised by the king or chieftain, was even transformed to a servant leadership by his inextricable connection with the realm of the feminine, with the surrounding living land.

For the sake of completeness, I would add that the concept of the Sacred Marriage cannot be attributed exclusively to Celtic culture. Celtic culture, like any other culture, built on older, pre-existing cultural elements. This has also been the case with the Sacred Marriage, as Jessie Weston – an English researcher of the Middle Ages and folklore – had already discovered at the beginning of the 20th century.³⁹ In all the divine couples I have mentioned above, the Sacred Marriage has played a central role. So this cultural phenomenon has once been widespread over a very large area.

Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age

In this respect, the concept of the Sacred Marriage appears to have roots on European soil that even go all the way back to pre-Celtic, Neolithic culture,

the culture of the New Stone Age. The English meteorologist and archaeologist Terence Meaden has written about this in several books and articles. I have devoted an article to his interesting research, entitled 'The Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age', which can be downloaded on my website.⁴⁰ Meaden has shown that this Sacred Marriage was already expressed – in a nonanthropomorphic way – by the lay-out of stone circles, using Stonehenge as a prime example of this. When the sun rises on the summer solstice, the sunrays hit the Heelstone outside the circle, creating a long, phallic shadow that falls exactly into the centre of the stone circle, on the Altar Stone. This phallic shadow represents the masculine principle, and the round, womblike shape of the circle represents the feminine principle. According to Meaden, similar interactions with the sun are part of the lay-out of many other stone circles. Other moments of cyclical change during the year are integrated into these stone circles as well.

In the Neolithic period circles were not only created in stone. People also used wooden poles for them, which of course in many cases have not stood the test of time. But fortunately a few of those 'woodhenges' have been found. In 1998 such a circle of oakwood poles has come literally to the surface on the coast of Norfolk in England, which has been given the name 'Seahenge'. And in the Netherlands in 2017 also remains of such a wooden circle has been found – a find that has only been made public in 2023. Alexander van de Bunt has pointed out that these wooden circles also appear to be 'aligned with horizon positions of the rising and setting sun on keydays of the year, namely the summer and winter solstice, and also the so-called cross quarter days that occurred halfway in the seasons.' According to him, this confirms that 'the residents of the Low Countries did not form an isolated community, but were part of a complex, interregional world of exchange and shared insights.' In 2025 such woodhenges were also found in Denmark. Van de Bunt concludes that with this more and more evidence is being provided 'that monumental circles of wood and stone were a deeply rooted phenomenon in prehistoric Europe.'⁴¹ I think, it also confirms that in the Stone Age the nonanthropomorphic experience and lay-out of the Sacred Marriage must have been widespread in Europe.

In other megalithic structures from the Neolithic period, for instance the artificial mound of Newgrange in Ireland, a similar nonanthropomorphic lay-out of the Sacred Marriage can be recognized. Here at the sunrise on the

winter solstice a phallic sunray falls into the inner chamber of the mound, by a narrow tunnel created consciously for that purpose. The three-dimensional shape of the rond mound gives even a better expression of a feminine womb than the stone circle – and refers of course to the Matrix of Mother Earth, the Sacred Womb from which all earthly life is born. At other mounds of that period, like Maes Howe on the Orkney Islands, a similar marking of the exchange of feminine and masculine powers is part of the lay-out.

When elsewhere in the world in this period the Sacred Marriage was already depicted anthropomorphically – for instance, by divine couples Innana and Dumuzi or Ishtar and Tammuz in Mesopotamia – in the west of Europe this Sacred Marriage was still expressed in a nonanthropomorphic, cosmic way. The Neolithic depictions make it clear that the concept of the Sacred Marriage originally emerged from societies in which the experiences of outdoor spirituality were still central. These were societies in which the people felt inextricably connected with the larger natural world; in which it was obvious for the people that the human world cannot exist that larger context of ‘the more-than-human world’ (to use the terminology of David Abram).⁴²

Although in the later anthropomorphic depictions of the Sacred Marriage this connection with the surrounding natural world might have been less on the foreground, this connection has certainly remained present in it. This is still clear in the Arthurian Grail stories, in which the loss of the marriage bond between the king/chieftain and the Goddess of the Land resulted directly in the emergence of the Wasteland, a terrible state in which the fate of the land and of the people were still inextricably connected with each other. In the Wasteland, the infertility of the land was directly connected with the suffering of the people. And this is – as everyone can observe in his or her own life – still the case, to this day.

Warnings and wise insights from indigenous communities

The connection between fertility of the land and the well-being of the people – and between the loss of both – therefore has very old roots. These roots are so deep that indigenous communities have even been able to keep them alive until our time. In the 19th century the ‘Native American’ Chief Seattle already expressed it when he stated: ‘Mankind has not woven the

web of life. We are just a thread in it. What we do to the web, we do to ourselves.’ Although these words were already spread in the 19th century, the meaning of his message only seems to penetrate well in our time and only now we are becoming collectively more aware of the relevance of his words.

In this respect, the Kogi – a still living indigenos tribe in Colombia – warn us in the western world ones (in the movie *Aluna* from 2012) for the damage that we have caused, and still cause, to the earth: ‘You mutilate the world, because you don’t remember the Great Mother. If you don’t stop, the world will die’ (...) ‘If you knew She could feel, you would stop.’ The American cultural philosopher Charles Eisenstein, who has written a wonderful essay on this vision of the Kogi, adds the following comment: ‘For the Kogi matter is manifested thinking, the thinking of the Mother.’⁴³ The Kogi remind us that we do not have a good relationship anymore with the Goddess of the Land and let us know that healing the Wasteland is essentieel for our survival – and that we can start with this close to our home: by taking good care for the surrounding landscape. Because compared to our human body the surrounding landscape is the bigger body in which we are all embedded, restoring the health of the land will have a healing effect on our own individual health and on our relationships.

The Irish architect Nuala King, who examined indigenous Australian settlements, has found an interesting connection between the worldview of the aboriginals and the worldview that has existed in ancient (pre-)Celtic Ireland. In this respect, she has pointed to the aboriginal concept *Kanyini*. This is a Sacred principle of ‘caring and practicing responsibility for all beings and for the land that sustains them.’ (...) ‘To live Kanyini is to live as if your breath matters to the trees, the stones, the waters, the winds: it is to be responsible for keeping the whole fabric of being intact through acts of attention and reciprocity.’⁴⁴ In this principle I notice a similarity with the Celtic concept of the Sacred Marriage between the king/chieftain and the Goddess of the Land, by which also responsibility, attention and care for the land and the people was generated. The fact that a similar worldview has existed on the other side of the planet and has also managed to survive into the present, is very hopeful.

Indigenous communities have always known that we can only come into contact with the Great Mother by being fully present in the surrounding

natural world, to experience the reciprocal communication with Her first hand. The American anthropologist Keith Basso suggested an interesting term for this. While researching the Apache community Cibeqe, he noticed that contact for the people consisted of much more than a simple *face-to-face* contact that the people had with each other. The local places also proved to have a special personal meaning for them, which was at least as important as the relationships between the people. Therefore, Basso suggested the term *face-to-place* contact to describe the intimate relationship they had with the place where they were living their daily lives, the intense reciprocal contact they had with the natural world around them.⁴⁵ This term also emphasizes that for a Sacred Nature experience you have to be personally present in a place to fully experience the power of that place.

These kinds of warnings and wise insights are made public these days by many indigenous communities from all over the world. They seem not to have forgotten yet how powerful and important the ancient concept of the Sacred Marriage is – a concept from which the people with all their deeds are continually urged to take into account the larger context of the natural world – and also how important it is for our current world, to help us restore the disturbed balance on various levels.

Experiencing the presence of the Goddess heritage

I have already shown above that the spirit of the place is closely associated with the Goddess heritage. In fact, the face-to-place contact where Basso has talked about, is an essential aspect of such an experience. In the face-to-place contact with the surrounding natural world the presence of the Goddess was experienced – in the landscape itself, or in parts of it, like the river, the sea, the forest, the animals. That in this respect the relationship of the Goddess with the surrounding natural world is (and has been) very different to the one of a masculine God, the Jungian researchers Anne Baring and Jules Cashford have made clear in their – still impressive – study *The Myth of the Goddess*.⁴⁶ They have argued, that the Goddess has never created life from without, like the masculine Creatergod has done – as we know Him from the monotheistic religions. This Goddess creation is also not an event that has just taken place somewhere in a distant past, but is a creation that continuously has kept taking place in the here and now. From

the cosmic to the local level She envelops all life in her Sacred Matrix and creates life from within this matrix – just like that happens in the womb of the human mother. It is a mysterious process of an unimaginable scope. It shows that life is always animated and entails much more than its material manifestation. That's why She remained, and still remains, palpably present in Her creation(s). This Goddess way of continually creating life from Her Sacred Matrix forms the basis of the animated reality in which Sacred Nature experiences can take place.

Her presence was experienced by people in a nonanthropomorphic way in the surrounding natural world. For our distant ancestors She *was* the river, the forest, the lake, the sea, the animal, the plant – the whole of animated nature, in which human nature was also wholly enveloped. That is why, for example, many rivers in Europe still bear the name of a Goddess: like the Boyne in Ireland (named after the Goddess Boann), the Seine in France (named after the Goddess Sequana), and the Roer in the Netherlands (named after the Goddess Rura). In this animated experience of nature, the local environment was directly connected to the universal, cosmic dimension.

It is important to realize that through the intense form of face-to-place contact in the Goddess tradition we have always been in the position of *belonging* to the surrounding natural world. And this is an inverse relationship to the one that the majority of people in our modern world have become used to, namely a natural world that obviously belongs to us, that we as owners can take into possession. In the original way of belonging the natural world comes always first – and due to our sense of belonging to the natural world the Sacred dimension opens itself for us. By inverting that relationship, and placing ourselves in the position of *landowners*, the land is reduced directly to mere matter, to a 'collection of objects' and loses the natural world its Sacred quality. In short: you can never own something that you feel an inextricable part of. Therefore, Sacred Nature experiences and landownership have never gone well together.

The struggle against local spiritual experiences

It is wonderful to know that the worldview that goes with the Goddess way of creating life has been part of the various manifestations of the Goddess worship that has existed in the Low Countries until the Gallo-Roman

period. This also included caring for her creation through the Sacred Marriage principle, and experiencing a deep sense of belonging to the surrounding natural world. It is not widely realized yet that with the finds of the many altar stones from the Gallo-Roman period representing the worship of the Goddess, something very ancient and of great value was preserved in the river area of the Low Countries: from a pre-patriarchal era in Europe, from the partnership culture that has preceded the dominator culture in which we are living our lives until the present day. The rise of the dominator culture was a result of the Patriarchal Shift – a cultural process of profound change in western culture that began around 6000 years ago in Mesopotamia and from there gradually spread across Europe, and from the period of the ‘Voyages of Discovery’ further across the world. I have written extensively about this in my (Dutch) book *Het helende verhaal* (‘the healing story’).⁴⁷ This process of change is also closely connected to the collective decline of Sacred Nature experiences and the increased struggle against these kinds of local spiritual experiences.

Since the introduction of the patriarchal form of society in European culture, there has been a continuous struggle in that culture against all kinds of local, indigenous forms of spirituality that had managed to survive from the pre-patriarchal era. On Dutch territory, this struggle also has a long history, which has been part of the introduction of Christianity in these regions in the 7/8th century AD. I have already mentioned the preachers Boniface and Willibrord involved in it. It is known how at the time they and other Christian missionaries, in their drive to proselytize people, had focused on destroying ‘pagan’ sanctuaries.⁴⁸ They fought against the local indigenous forms of worship they came across, including tree and well worship, and made a lot of effort to ‘christianize’ them. It is known that they cut down the sacred trees of the indigenous people. Elements that proved difficult to eradicate, such as well worship, were Christianized, in the hope that the associated ‘pagan’ deity would gradually disappear from human consciousness. Therefore, the wells were linked to the deeds of Christian Saints. To this day, Willibrord has remained a Catholic Saint and many Catholic churches are dedicated to him.

In the connection of a well to a Christian Saint, we can clearly see how an original non-anthropomorphic well worship – the direct worship of Mother Nature, of the Goddess – shifted to the anthropomorphic worship of

a human being – the worship of a Saint, who represented the (masculine) God of Christianity. The Christianization was to a large extent an anthropomorphization process, in which the focus also shifted from the feminine to the masculine.

Interestingly, Willibrord's fight against the indigenous worship practices also took place in the Zeeland region – the region where until a few centuries earlier Nehalennia had been worshipped. When Willibrord came there in the year 690 to preach Christianity, he still found elements of 'pagan' worship, including tree worship. It is recorded that he would have cut down a sacred tree there. Near Zoutelande there is still a well dedicated to Willibrord, which suggests that this 'pagan' well was once Christianized by him.⁴⁹ It is not too far-fetched to recognize elements of Goddess worship in this 'pagan' tree and well worship. Despite the fact that the two temples dedicated to Nehalennia, in Domburg and Colijnsplaat – with the many altar stones that were erected there in her honor – were swept away by storms and floods in the 2/3rd century, it is conceivable that after that period the indigenous people continued their worship of Nehalennia for some years – and perhaps even for some centuries. After all, this worship had also existed before the temples were built and before the altar stones were erected by Roman merchants in the Gallo-Roman period.

With the struggle against indigenous worship practices and the conversion of these to the worship of Christian Saints, not only a radical anthropomorphization process in the spiritual/religious field was set in motion. It also meant that the spiritual experience of the indigenous people, who had been specifically focused on the natural world in which they felt included, gradually gave way to a religious experience, which was linked to stories from the Bible – written stories that had taken place somewhere far away from the local environment. It generated a shift from experiencing outdoor spirituality to experiencing an indoor religion. It is well known that over the centuries the indoor religion of Christianity has gained more and more ground in the Netherlands. It meant that collectively there remained less space and understanding for Sacred Nature experiences, in which the people felt a reciprocal relationship between their own lives and that of the animated landscape around them.

After preachers such as Boniface and Willebrord had shown that, unlike the Romans before them, Christians should not tolerate indigenous worship

practices and should fight against them, such intolerance and struggle against 'pagan' views and practices continued to play an important role in institutional Christianity. It is telling that – after the altar stones and remains of a temple in honor of Nehalennia had been found in 1647 on the beach near Domburg – the Leiden professor Marcus Zuerius Van Boxhorn in a letter on the find has qualified Nehalennia as 'een afgodinne', a negative Dutch word for the feminine form of 'an idol'.⁵⁰ In short, from the prevailing Christian view (which had also shaped the academic worldview) a thousand years after Willibrord She was still written off as part of 'pagan idolatry', as a reprehensible cultural element that the people should not delve into too deeply.

From the 16th century onwards, the European colonists took this rather deeply rooted intolerance and struggle also with them to the places they colonized in the 'New World'. The English holistic physicist David Peat, who studied the connection between the vision of the Native Americans and the new insights in physics, noted that the governments of Canada and the United States banned the religions of the Native Americans – and that there are stories that even after World War II Catholic priests sought out and entered the location of the Sacred Sun Dance to disrupt it.⁵¹ In this regard, it appears that not much has changed since the first Christian preachers had begun cutting down the Sacred trees in the 7th century.

Within Christianity, a negative image of the surrounding natural world has persisted to this day. Recently, the Dutch theologian Magda van der Ende described how in her religious upbringing and theology study it was still emphasized that Christianity has nothing to do with the body and nature, and is even dismissive of it: 'Women were mainly wives-of; They served their husbands to the best of their ability. (...) There was little room for the body as part of nature, let alone a female body with its cycles. (...) The physical was considered to be of lesser, lower value. During the theology study I also heard that God is not to be found in nature. That was a characteristic of paganism. God was only to be known in the revealed word. All other roads were wrong roads.'⁵²

Of course, over time various attempts have been made to build a bridge between the Christian religion and nature. Mystics such as Francis of Assisi, and Hildegard von Bingen, a philosopher such as Spinoza, and more recently the aforementioned Thomas Berry and even the former Pope

Francis, have all tried to build that bridge. And over the centuries, Marian apparitions, pilgrimages and processions have tried to bring the Christian religion and nature a little closer together. See my article 'Feminine apparitions in nature' on this theme, which can be downloaded on my website.⁵³ Despite all these efforts, I don't think it has yet been possible to transform the mainstream vision of Christianity into a truly nature-friendly and tolerant religion. In the Christian worldview, a 'pagan' label remains attached to nature – a label that has been attached to it since the first preachers started fighting indigenous worship practices – especially when nature is associated with a spiritual experience and a Sacred quality is attributed to it.

The impact of colonization processes

To get a clear picture of the ability of people in Western or westernized countries – including the people who live on the territory of the Low Countries – to relate with the surrounding natural world, to have minds that are open to Sacred Nature experiences, we also need to have a closer look at the phenomenon of *colonization*. When we think about colonization, we quickly and exclusively think about the Europeans who, from the end of the 15th century, traveled on their 'Voyages of Discovery' to the 'New World'. Then we think about the fact that they founded colonies that were connected to their country of origin – about the imperialist 'empires' that were created as a result. We know that in that period the Low Countries (before they were split off into the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg) also have grown into such an empire.

In my opinion, too little attention is paid to the fact that the inhabitants of the Low Countries once also suffered from colonization by a power that came from elsewhere. A long time ago, this territory, at least up to the Rhine, was incorporated into the imperialist Roman Empire. As elsewhere, this colonization process has been accompanied by a lot of violence and many victims. Although there is more and more attention on the immense culture damage that the conquest to extend the Roman Empire has inflicted on other countries, including the Low Countries, we are still haunted by the idea that it has largely brought us civilization and cultural development. I referred to that earlier when I spoke about the view that is spread by archaeology, books and the displays of finds in museums. In this regard, the

focus is also very much on the Romanization process, the positive influence of the Roman conquerors on the indigenous culture. Although we speak about a Gallo-Roman culture, much less attention is paid to the fact that the indigenous people also influenced the Romans who settled here, through a process of celtization or a germanization process.

History is still often written one-sidedly from the perspective of the conquerors, in this case of the Romans. This we can still see, for instance, in the booklet *The Romans in Zeeland*. In it, little or nothing is said about the bloody Roman battle against the Menapien people. The Romans are sometimes called conquerors, but the main points are made about the advantages that Romanization brought to this region: they brought writing, introduced building with stones, enriched food with all kinds of new products, gave a boost to trade, etc. When combat is discussed, the emphasis is placed on the threat of other indigenous tribes: ‘We should see military activities in the coastal area mainly as a rebuttal to the regularly occurring raids from the sea by the Germanic Chauks. (...) Apart from the notorious invasions of the Chauki, the Roman conquerors certainly also had in mind a general consolidation of the strategically important region, both to secure some important land roads and to protect the vital trade routes along the coast.’⁵⁴ In short, according to this view, the Romans focused on trade.

As settlers around the world have always shown, they often manage to remain outsiders in their new habitat for a long time. The majority of Americans, despite having lived on American soil for generations, have still not reconciled with the indigenous people who, through their experience of outdoor spirituality, still felt embedded in the surrounding landscape – and were therefore open to the Sacred experience of nature. It is important to realize that something similar has happened long ago on in Europe when the Romans struggled against the the indigenous cultures they were confronted with. In this respect, the European people who were conquered at the time and whose cultures were romanized, including the distant ancestors who lived on the soil of the Low Countries, have always kept that outsider feeling a bit as well. Without being aware of it anymore, due to that trauma long ago, to some extent also the inhabitants of the Low Countries have always remained strangers in their own country, not really being able anymore to deeply feel embedded in the natural world around them. The way in which the land – in particular in the Netherlands – has increasingly

been transformed to our human needs through a centuries-long process of reclamation and urbanization, has of course not really helped either.

As is well known, since a few decades a worldwide movement has started to face the cultural damage, which has been caused by the centuries-long process of colonization – like slavery, discrimination, repression, Apartheid –, and to restore it as much as possible. It would be good, by extension, to become also more conscious of the damage that has once been caused on European soil by colonization, by which the cultural wealth of our distant ancestors seems to have disappeared completely from our consciousness or often is still cast in a negative – barbarian, pagan or primitive – light.

The process of secularization and urbanization

The declining influence of the indoor Christian religion that has emerged in recent centuries – the secularization process – has not yet triggered a collective rediscovery of outdoor spirituality in the Low Countries. Unfortunately, the ultimate importance of this for the balance and meaning of our daily lives is not yet widely acknowledged. In this respect, it is striking, and actually also remarkable, that despite the fact that this secularization process has been gaining ground in recent centuries, in archaeology and history the appreciation for the regional significance of ‘religious cults’ has still remained much higher than that for those that have ‘only’ had a local significance. That is why the various ways in which the presence of the Goddess has manifested itself in the Low Countries – at least until the Gallo-Roman period, and probably even until much later – have not yet been properly appreciated.

We can see that there has been some renewed interest in the experience of outdoor spirituality, but it is still mainly limited to the so-called ‘esoteric circles’ and has certainly not yet become mainstream. Since we have increasingly detached and/or freed ourselves from the various institutional forms of Christianity, many people still seem to feel suspicious of everything that falls under the heading of ‘spirituality’. The mainstream media, science and politics still seem to avoid this field as much as possible. The advancing urbanization has given many the feeling that life revolves exclusively around our human society, that the landscape is not much more than a nice background decoration for our society; that it is completely

feasible, and can be adapted and redesigned one-sidedly according to our wishes. This mentality may be less prevalent in the rural areas of the Low Countries, but even there – especially in the regions referred to as the Dutch ‘Bible belt’ – most people have not come much closer to a rediscovery of the Sacred Nature experience.

Cultural continuations

But despite the far-reaching urbanization and continuous redesign of landscapes and the absence in the Low Countries of sparsely inhabited hills and mountainous areas – perhaps with the exception of some parts of the Ardennes –, the power of nature has never disappeared in these regions. In the first place, it is of course present in the sea and the rivers, which in many places in the Low Countries are quite near. The sea is a particularly powerful presence here. Except that she has always been a threat that people needed to defend themselves against for centuries, she can also still awaken Sacred Nature experiences. In this respect Anglo-Irish writer Lucy Pearce, who lives on the coast of East Cork in Ireland, has pointed out: ‘The idea of having a living relationship with something non-human or even ‘inanimate’ may sound strange to modern ears. But this has been the way of most humans who have lived by or worked on the sea since the beginning of our story.’ According to her, they had to develop a dynamic relationship with the sea, ‘that respected the vagaries of wind and waves, that followed the stars and honoured unseen forces.’(...) ‘They lived in reciprocity with her, knowing that as the sea would give, the sea could also take away.’⁵⁵ Despite the protecting dykes and the much safer navigation, because of the rising sea level due to climate change in the Low Countries we are reminded to this day that our relationship with the sea is essentially reciprocal in nature.

Actually, we don't even have to leave the house to experience the powerful presence of the natural world. Nature is really everywhere: in the gravity that allows us to ground ourselves in the place where we are, in a chair in which we can sit and in all the furniture that does not float through the room; in the electricity that makes our devices function by means of electric wires; in the invisible fields, which our mobile phones and PCs have access to; in our body that can continue to live through the constant process of breathing in and out, regularly drinking water and eating food. We have not even designed our own bodies – nature has done it for us. We

are always included in a gigantic web or network, as Chief Seattle already told us in the 19th century. We are everywhere and always an inseparable part of the Earth Community, in which, in addition to us humans, all plants and animals are included and are continuously connected to each other in a reciprocal exchange process.

It is also important to keep in mind that our ideas about what actually consciousness is, has been changing in the last decades. It has become increasingly clear that our consciousness should not be regarded anymore as an exceptional, human characteristic that arises from our brain cells, but that it is a primary characteristic that permeates all of nature on all levels. This makes us realize more and more that – through our conscious experience alone – we are already an inseparable part of nature. But all of this does not alter the fact that regular visits to ‘wild, untamed’ nature reserves are obviously helpful to deepen our experience of nature considerably, to feel our sense of being embedded in the surrounding natural world confirmed, and to become more aware of its Sacred dimension.

Fortunately, it has never really been possible to completely eradicate deep-rooted spiritual forms of experience from the landscape – although many people have had that intention over the centuries. Christian churches were often built precisely on the sacred sites of the pre-Christian peoples whose worship practices they wanted to destroy and replace with their own, and those pre-Christian peoples had previously made a similar attempt to integrate even older sacred places into their culture. In all cultural changes, elements from the previous cultures have always continued.

Also in terms of content, the worship practices, which pretended to bring something completely new, have shown a continuation of older worship practices. As indicated earlier, the Romans and later the Christians have made a great effort to eradicate indigenous or ‘pagan’ worship practices or to replace them with their own religious views, but in the meantime the older worship practices did not completely disappear and remained present under the thin layer of veneer.

Empathizing with our distant ancestors

With all the comforts of living in contemporary society, it is difficult for us to have a realistic idea about the lives of our distant ancestors. For instance, as ‘free citizens’ we can hardly imagine what it is like, after committing a

crime, to be locked up in a prison cell for many years. By spending a few days in a cell as an experiment we may get a bit of an idea, but we never forget that after these days we can go home again to enjoy freedom. The long-term prisoners do not have that privilege.

In a similar sense transporting ourselves to the life of our prehistoric ancestors has its limitations. By way of experiment, we can choose to live 'primitively' in a hut for a few days without any comfort and with the assignment to look for or hunt for our own food, but we always keep the awareness in the back of our mind that after a few days we will return to our comfortable existence. There are people who have chosen to leave modern society, including digital contact options, behind for a longer period, to live a simple life in the 'wilderness', in an attempt to reconnect with something we once have lost. In the 19th century there were already the well-known stories from America of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold. And today there are *wilderness experts* such as Bill Plotkin in the US and Martin Shaw in England, and many unknown people who are consciously seeking out an intense form of experiencing nature. We can probably also place the increased interest in walking long pilgrimage routes in this context. In the Netherlands some people travel to the beach during a heavy storm to personally experience the power of the wind. But no matter how much we immerse ourselves consciously in the powers of the surrounding natural world, usually we never fully forget that we can always return to our comfortable life.

According to the New Zealand anthropologist Peter Wilson we should be aware that looking back from our comfortable modern life to a more 'primitive' or even 'uncivilized' period can distort our view considerably: 'Anyone who writes today about tribal, peasant, rural, Neolithic, domesticated societies invariably does so from the perspective of membership in an urban, industrial society.' In this context, he points to a number of contrasts: those societies are 'pre-logical', while we are scientifically rational; they are 'pre-literate' and we are literate; they are 'pre-capitalist' and we are capitalist; they are 'pre-modern' and we are modern; they are close to nature and we are no longer because of our technology; they are collectivist and we are individualistic; they often lack privacy, while the right to privacy and freedom is central to our view of life.⁵⁶ The limitation of our materialist view of science to understand the

prehistoric life of our distant ancestors, which I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, is in line with the various contrasts recognized by Wilson between the life in our modern society and in the societies we have qualified as ‘primitive.’

When living our comfortable life in today’s society, we must constantly beware that our sense of separation does not predominate too much and get caught up in dualistic thinking: the more we consider our own lives as civilized, the bigger the chance that we oppose this to the uncivilized, or even primitive and savage, ways of life of our distant ancestors and feel superior to them. The idea that they were only concerned with survival, with fighting against all kinds of threats, and that they had little or no time for other things – like caring attention for themselves and for others, or spirituality – can also dominate. While we can imagine the life of our distant ancestors in a only limited way – as pointed out above – a serious attempt to try it anyway can at least help to dim and even heal the dualistic idea in our mind of being civilized versus being primitive and wild.

The link between distant ancestors and indigenous communities

Throughout time, there have regularly been thinkers who have made the link between the still living indigenous communities and the largely lost culture of our distant ancestors. In fact, the link between the heritage of our distant ancestors and the ‘discovered’ indigenous peoples in the ‘New World’ was made shortly after the first ‘Voyages of Discovery’. Through the culture of these indigenous communities, people began to form a picture of the life of our prehistoric ancestors in Europe. The dualistic view was also taken into account. On the one hand, it resulted in Jean Jacques Rousseau's well-known idea about the ‘Noble Savage’. And on the other hand, it also resulted in Thomas Hobbes’ idea of the ‘natural state’ of man, in which life would have been ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutal and short’. Therefore, it is understandable that there is considerable suspicion about making the link between indigenous communities and the lives of our distant ancestors in prehistoric times.

Indeed, we must be careful not to glorify, idealize, or reject, condemn the way of life and worldviews of indigenous cultures too one-sidedly. The Nazi ideology, in which the ancient Germanic heritage was idealized in a distorted way, has shown how harmful idealizing and identifying too

strongly with the heritage of our distant ancestors can be. Just as had been the case with the European colonists in the ‘New World’, it turned out that the dualistic, patriarchal worldview was still dominant. The lost heritage was simply included in it, and once again provided a theoretical justification for a gigantic bloody battle against imaginary enemies. Something similar can be argued about communism. In short, we must always be very careful with the heritage of our distant ancestors.

Nevertheless, the indigenous cultures that have managed to survive until our time can help us to get a better picture of the life of our distant ancestors, in order to give our Sacred Nature experience a new impulse. Now that it has become clear that the ways of life and worldviews of those indigenous communities in various different places on earth are very similar in terms of their vision of life, then we may also deduce that they have apparently preserved something that has increasingly been lost in the development of our – relatively young – Western culture. Therefore, we should not reject and avoid the comparison of indigenous and prehistoric cultures a priori, because we can certainly learn something from it.

Irish philosopher and ‘modern mystic’ John Moriarty rediscovered the Celtic culture of his own Ireland through the ideas of the ‘Native American Chief’ Black Elk and other indigenous communities. The title of his book *Dreamtime* referred directly to the culture of Australian Aboriginals.⁵⁷ The Dutch philosopher Ton Lemaire indicated with the title of one of his books, *De Indiaan in ons bewustzijn* (‘The Indian in our consciousness’), that in the culture of the American Indians, or the ‘Native Americans’, we can rediscover a forgotten heritage of our own existence.⁵⁸ In this respect, the American ‘herbal healer’ Loren Cruden has pointed out, that there is a similarity between the traditional Celtic culture and the culture of ‘Native Americans’ in various areas, including their high esteem for women and their experience of the Sacred in the surrounding land(scape).⁵⁹ In other words, the study of the culture of living indigenous communities can still help us enormously to get a good idea of the culture of our distant ancestors.

Indigenous wisdom to open our minds

As I have argued earlier in this essay, the presence of the Goddess heritage in the river area of the Low Countries in the Gallo-Roman period indicates that a deep sense of belonging to the surrounding natural world has been

central in the culture of the indigenous inhabitants who have lived there in the time before the arrival of the Romans. Through their sense of belonging Nature had a obvious Sacred quality, which they must have experienced regularly. It is no coincidence, I think, that in indigenous communities all over the world, the intimate connection with the surrounding natural world, with the living landscape, also has had – and often still has – a central place in their culture.

This is what David Peat has said about it, particularly in relation to the culture of the ‘Native Americans’: ‘Connection to the landscape is one of the most powerful things in an indigenous society (...). The Indigenous people I have spoken to refer to the land as their mother, and the Blackfeet say that walking on the land is like walking on your own flesh. The memory of this landscape transcends anything we have in the West, for trees, rocks, animals, and plants of the landscape are also imbued with energies, forces, and spirits. The whole landscape is alive and every person is related to it.’⁶⁰ Peat has indicated that the ‘spirit of the place’ can be so strong that it shapes, influences and ultimately even transforms people who settle on it.⁶¹ In the indigenous communities, people were still open to the spirit of the place.

Interestingly, Peat points out that his experiences at a ‘Sun Dance’ ritual of the indigenous Blackfoot brought back memories of his early childhood, a time when he had had intense experiences with nature. He realized that under the influence of Western upbringing and schooling, he had increasingly lost that intense experience of the natural world, but that the Blackfeet had managed to keep those experiences alive for themselves through the Sun Dance ritual.⁶² According to Peat, not only did he have such intense experiences of nature in his childhood, but that connection to the landscape is potentially present in everyone, and we have only lost access to it.⁶³ In other words, Sacred Nature experiences are still potentially present in everyone.

Listen to the land speak

If the Blackfeet were able to keep these intense experiences alive with their rituals, then we can actually assume that the indigenous communities living in the Low Countries in the Gallo-Roman period were able to do the same and really have done. The fact that so many altar stones and figurines have

been found there that were dedicated to the Goddess, indicates, in my opinion, that rituals in this field must have existed there as well. I imagine that our distant ancestors, just like today's indigenous communities, at the time also have made an effort through their rituals to keep their Sacred Nature experiences alive – that they were still open to the spirit of the place where they had settled, and allowed themselves to be shaped by it. As for getting in touch with the spirit of the place, David Peat pointed out that 'we have forgotten how to listen, or rather, how to create that silence within ourselves into which knowledge can speak.'⁶⁴ 'Silence surrounds indigenous peoples. Could it be that the voices of trees and rocks can only be heard in such silence? Maybe the voices are always present, but we in the West have forgotten what it's like to be still.'⁶⁵

More and more we are becoming aware of the fact that being deaf to the voices of the other living beings in the surrounding natural world – not just to the voices of the birds with their songs but also to the more subtle voices of the trees and the land itself – and thereby being cut off from the inherent reciprocity of nature, lies at the heart of the spiritual crisis of the modern world. To do something positive in this regard, we always have to start at home, in the place where we are living. Mother Earth is present everywhere. We don't need to travel far to find her. Our distant ancestors knew that as well.

The American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, who always tests her scientific knowledge against insights from handed-down indigenous wisdom, has also argued that a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural environment has been central in the worldview of both our ancestors and still living indigenous peoples. So this applies to our distant ancestors in the Low Countries as well. In her teaching she always tries to make her students conscious of this reciprocity, by first asking them whether they love nature, and then ask them if they believe that nature loves them as well. She believes that we have lost the awareness that the earth is just as well communicating with us as that we are communicating with her, and is convinced that reviving this awareness has a healing effect.'⁶⁶

The Irish journalist and documentary maker Manchán Magan discovered at some point in his life, that the worldview of still living indigenous peoples that he had come across all over the planet were similar to the worldview of his Celtic and pre-Celtic ancestors in Ireland. In all of them the reciprocal

relationship was central and the Sacred Nature experiences that are an inextricable part of it. He wrote a book about it with the very appropriate title *Listen to the Land Speak*.⁶⁷ I think when we begin to understand the deeper significance of the presence of the many Gallo-Roman altar stones and terracotta figurines in the river area of the Low Countries – if we are going to hear what they are telling us about the local power of the Goddess heritage – , they can also help us to start listening again to the land speak.

Opennes to the past and the present

Too little attention is paid to the fact that really being open to the present – by which the speaking of the land can be heard and Nature can be experienced again as Sacred– only beomes possible when we first look with an open, unprejudiced mind to our own historical and prehistorical past, and are prepared to let go the (national) identity that we have derived from it. This eventually also means that we more and more have to let go of the idea of land ownership, to make space again for our sense of belonging to the land. As long as we keep clinging convulsively to that egocentric and possession-oriented identity, we also unnecessarily keep feeling separated from people who live elsewhere – on the other side of an artificially created border. And, of course, as long as the people on the other side of that border keep clinging to their different (national) identity – generated by the different image of their own historical past – they also unnessarily keep feeling separated from us.

Therefore, the story above about the Sacred Nature experiences in the Low Countries is also meaningful for people who live elsewhere in the world. Generally it show that everywhere in the world, even where people live in an urbanized environment, Sacred Nature and the experiences that she generates have never fully disappeared. They can find Her and reconnect with Her, if only they care to open their mind to their historical and prehistorical past, and thereby to their present. Also on other places there are people who have become, to a more or less extent, cut off from the Sacred Nature experiences. There are also people who due to their national, egocentrische sense of identity – linked to the image of their own historical and prehistorical past – have largely reducted the presence of nature in their lives tot a background décor for their human relations and activities. By researching their historical and prehistorical past with an open mind, they

can come to understand that, by letting go of the sense of identity linked to it, the artificial borders between the different places can disappear. This is less utopian than one might think. It can really ensure that a way is opened for the realization of a more beautiful, peaceful world, in which there is space for everyone and to which we can all feel that we genuinely belong.

Leiden, July 2026

Notes

¹ Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where Are We? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009; This statement is also central in my (Dutch) book *Het helende verhaal* ('The healing story'): Wim Bonis, *Het helende verhaal. Over het ontstaan en het helen van ons gevoel van afscheiding*, Uitgeverij Oorsprong, 2023.

² This article can be found (and downloaded) on my website, <https://eng.wimbonis.nl>, under the heading 'Articles'.

³ Of course, mountains are not really part of the landscapes in the Low Countries. In the east of the Netherlands and Belgium there are a few hilly areas, in which some hills are called 'mountains'. But in many other countries they would still be called 'hills'.

⁴ 'The universe is a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects.' Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Books Club, 1990; Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, Random House, 2000.

⁵ Andreas Weber, *Enlivenment. Towards a Poetics for the Anthropocene*, The MIT Press, 2019. Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder. Aliveness, Feeling and the Metamorphosis of Science*, New Society Publishers, 2016.

⁶ I quote Corbin from a book by Robert Sardello: *Love and the Soul. Creating a Future for Earth*, Goldenstone Press, Heaven and Earth Publishing & North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 2008, p. 132.

⁷ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry. An Economy of Gifts and Abundance*, Allen Lane, 2024, p. 8.

⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry. An Economy of Gifts and Abundance*, Allen Lane, 2024, p. 9.

⁹ Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, Hutchinson, 1967. Later Koestler developed his ideas about the holarchy further in: Arthur Koestler, *Janus. A Summing Up*, Hutchinson, 1978.

¹⁰ Other terms have been suggested, like *nested hierarchy* by Rupert Sheldrake, or *natural hierarchy* by Ken Wilber. But I think Koestler's term *holarchy* emphasizes better the fundamental difference with what we usually mean by a hierarchy.

¹¹ The research of the American mythologist Joseph Campbell has contributed a lot to the reevaluation of mythology, and inspired a lot of other people, including me. Mythology and folklore has helped several feminist researchers to make the suppressed feminine elements in our society more visible. I think the English psychologist and mythologist Sharon Blackie has done – and is still doing – important work in this field, by putting attention on the feminine elements in Celtic mythology and in folklore stories in general.

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 adopted this distinction between public and private cults in their study of the history of religion

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

¹³ Ton Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Places. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, AUP 1998, p. 119.

¹⁴ Leo Verhart, *In Search of the Celts. New archaeological discoveries between the North Sea and the Rhine*, Matrijs Publishers, Utrecht 2006, p. 166.

¹⁵ I give you a selection of the book titles I came across when I visited the shop in 2025. Most of these books were in the Dutch language. I translated their titles here in English *Border of the Roman Empire, Roman roads in the Netherlands, The Roman Limes, Romans along the Rhine, Roman Villas in Limburg, The Caesar route, Rome at the North Sea, The Golden Age of the Romans in the Low Countries, Emperor of Rome, SPQR, A history of the Roman Empire, A History of the Roman Empire in 21 Women, Mirrors of Rome, The Roman Empire in infographics, 24 hours in Ancient Rome*. In the bookshop you can also find books that are focused on other cultural fields – including Celtic, Viking en Greek culture – but these are not specifically related to the pre-Roman period of the Low Countries or to the indigenous cultures that managed to survive in these regions during the Roman period.

¹⁶ There are more Belgian than Dutch researchers who have written about the Celtic heritage in the Low Countries. Belgian authors in this field are for instance: Herman Clerinx (*De Kelten in de Lage Landen*, 2008), Ugo Janssens (*De Oude Belgen*, 2014), Sien Demunck (*De Galliërs*, 2025). In 2020 the Dutch author Alexander van de Bunt devoted his book *Wee de overwonnenen* to this theme.

¹⁷ Hendrik Spiering, ‘Neanderthalers rehabiliteren? Helemaal niet!’, Interview with Wil Roebroeks, *NRC*, 18/19 april 2026.

¹⁸ K. Zee, *Inheems-Romeinse Godinnen in Nederland*, (unpublished) doctoral thesis, Nijmegen 1987, p. 70.

¹⁹ 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; 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.

²⁰ Peter Alexander Kerkhof, ‘Nehalennia. Taalkundige oplossing voor een Zeeuws raadsel.’, in: *Neerlandistiek*, 25 October 2016; see also: Simon Brighton & Terry Welbourn, *Echoes of the Goddess. A quest for the Sacred Feminine in the British Landscape*, Ian Allan Publishing, Hersham 2010, p. 126; Apuleius already wrote in *The Golden Ass* that there was only one Goddess, Isis, and all the other Goddesses were in fact aspects of this one Goddess.

²¹ See for example the overview ‘De 108 namen van Maria’ on <https://pansophia.nl>

²² Jo Claes, *De vele gedaantes van Maria. Meer dan 500 afbeeldingen uit de Lage Landen*, Davidsfonds/Kok Publishers, 2011.

²³ Miranda Green, *Symbol & Image in Celtic Religious Art*, Routledge, 1992, p.28-30; H. Wagenvoort, ‘Nehalennia and the Souls of the Dead’, *Mnemosyne*, Series IV, Volumen XXIV, Fasciculus 3, Lugduni Batavorum, E.J. Brill 1971, p. 273-292.

²⁴ For an interesting study on the image and the written word in relation to the Goddess heritage, see: Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess. Male Words and Female Images*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998.

²⁵ N.J.Sharkey, *Myths, Legends and DNA, An attempt to reconcile the current Archaeological evidence and current Genealogical DNA evidence with Ireland's mythical origins*, 2022, Revised 2023. This research can be downloaded from the Internet:

<https://www.peterspioneers.com/mythslegendsanddna.pdf>

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- ²⁶ Norman Mongan, *The Menapia Quest. Two thousand years of the Menapii: seafaring Gauls in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man, 216 BC – 1900 AD*, The Herodotus Press, 1995.
- ²⁷ David Abram has borrowed this term from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.
- ²⁸ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books, 1997, p. 254.
- ²⁹ This observation by Claude Levi-Strauss is mentioned in: Clark Strand & Perdita Finn, *The Way of the Rose. The Radical Path of the Divine Feminine Hidden in the Rosary*, Spiegel & Grau, 2019, p. 125-126.
- ³⁰ Ralph Metzner, *The Well of Remembrance. Rediscovering the Earth Wisdom Myths of Northern Europe*, Shambala 2001.
- ³¹ Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade. Our History, Our Future*, Pandora, 1990.
- ³² Patricia McBroom, *Dance with the Deities. Searching for Our Once and Future Egalitarian Society*, Green Fire Press, 2020, p. 102-105.
- ³³ See the article 'To the 3 Almighty Mothers. On the Celtic Cult of the Nutrices (Nursing Mothers)' from the *Journal Celtic Studies in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor*, which can be read online on: <https://balkancelts.wordpress.com>
- ³⁴ I have paid attention to the presence of this Celtic heritage on Dutch soil in my Dutch article 'Lugdunum Batavorum en het Keltisch erfgoed', written and published in 2005. It can be downloaded from my Dutch website. Unfortunately I have not (yet) translated it in English. See <https://www.wimbonis.nl> under the heading 'Artikelen'.
- ³⁵ Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, Bramley Books, 1986, p. 95 and further.
- ³⁶ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World*, BCA London, 1992, p. 72.
- ³⁷ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Chancellor Press, London, 1997, p. 19, 25 and 92-93.
- ³⁸ Alexander van de Bunt, *Wereldreizigers. De ontdekking van Europa*, Uitgeverij Omniboek, 2026, p. 284.
- ³⁹ Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Cosimo Classics, 2007 – originally published in 1919.
- ⁴⁰ See <https://eng.wimbonis.nl>, under the heading 'Articles'.
- ⁴¹ Alexander van de Bunt, *Wereldreizigers. De ontdekking van Europa*, Uitgeverij Omniboek, 2026, p. 134-139.
- ⁴² David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a more-than-human world*, Vintage, 1997.
- ⁴³ *Aluna. There is no life without thought*. A film by Alain Ereira, 2012. Charles Eisenstein's essay 'Aluna. A Message to Little Brother', can be read online on the website of Charles Eisenstein: <https://charleseisenstein.org>.
- ⁴⁴ Nuala King, 'Holding the World Together: Myth, Language, and the Reawakening of Kanyini in the Irish Imagination', in *Studies, An Irish Quarterly Review*, winter 2025-2026, no 456, p. 508-521.
- ⁴⁵ Peter Nabokov, *Where the Lightning Strikes. The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places*, Viking Penquin, New York 2006, p. 108.
- ⁴⁶ Anne Baring & Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess. Evolution of an Image*, Penguin, London 1991.
- ⁴⁷ Wim Bonis, *Het helende verhaal. Over het ontstaan en het helen van ons gevoel van afscheiding*, Uitgeverij Oorsprong, 2023.
- ⁴⁸ Marieke van Vlierden, *Willibrord en het begin van Nederland*, Clavis / Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht 1995, p. 32.
- ⁴⁹ See for example the Canon of the Netherlands: <https://canonvannederland.nl/willibrord>
- ⁵⁰ GardenStone, *Die Rückkehr der Göttin Nehalennia*, 2008, p. 40-41.

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- ⁵¹ F. David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2005 ,p. 32.
- ⁵² Dr. Magda van der Ende, ‘Ervaringen van het ‘andere’, *Mantra*, nummer 24, herfst 2020, Edicola magazines, p. 23-24.
- ⁵³ See: <https://eng.wimbonis.nl>, under the heading ‘Articles’.
- ⁵⁴ J.A. Trimpe Burger, *De Romeinen in Zeeland. Onder de hoede van Nehalennia*, Provincie Zeeland, 1997.
- ⁵⁵ Lucy H. Pearce, *She of the Sea*, Womancraft Publishing, 2021, p.49.
- ⁵⁶ Peter J. Wilson, *The Domestication of the Human Species*, Yale University Press, 1988, p. ix.
- ⁵⁷ John Moriarty, *Dreamtime*, The Lillyput Press, 2009.
- ⁵⁸ Ton Lemaire, *De Indiaan in ons bewustzijn. De ontmoeting van de Oude met de Nieuwe Wereld*, Ambo, 1986.
- ⁵⁹ Loren Cruden, *Walking the Maze. The Enduring Presence of the Celtic Spirit*, Destiny Books, 1998.
- ⁶⁰ David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2015, p. 85-86.
- ⁶¹ David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2015, p. 107.
- ⁶² David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2015, p. 52-54.
- ⁶³ David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2015, p. 106-107.
- ⁶⁴ David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2015, p. 74.
- ⁶⁵ David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics. A Journey into the Native American Universe*, Weiser Books, 2015, p. 288.
- ⁶⁶ Elisabeth Gilbert, *Big Magic, Creative Living Beyond Fear*, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 201-203. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, Penguin, 2020.
- ⁶⁷ Manchán Magan, *Listen to the Land Speak. A Journey into the wisdom of what lies beneath us*, McGill Books, 2022.