

PREHISTORIC DOUBLE GODDESSES GIVING BIRTH

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(Abstract)

The stylistic canon of the steatopygic Upside-down Double Goddess giving birth has its roots in the Upper Paleolithic of Western Europe. Several instances point on the birth of a daughter. These representations strongly evoke the long lineage of women who gave birth before, and those who will give birth in the future.

A focus is on the interpretation of the majestic, naked, corpulent and fertile post-Paleolithic Generatrix painted in red at the Ranaldi Shelter (Southern Italy) in the act of delivering a new life among a herd of stags. I am in debt with Gheorghe Lazarovici for his inputs in reading and discussing the image.

Divine mother and daughter entwined from the Upper Paleolithic

The imagery of deities with human features displayed in the action of giving birth dates back to the Upper Paleolithic. The archetypical canon of the maternal form expressed in the twinning figure – the so called Upside-down Double Goddesses in birthing pose¹ – can be found in an astonishing temporal depth.

The best Upper Paleolithic instance is an enigmatic Gravettian carving from the cavern-womb sanctuary of Laussel (Dordogne, France), dated to around 25000–20000 BCE. It was discovered in 1911, during the first year of excavation, in the same year of the celebrated *Femme à la Corne*.² The figure was engraved by pecking a block of sandstone about 20 cm high. It was discovered ‘in the rubble’. We do not know if this bas-relief block was originally attached to the wall³ or if it was engraved after the detachment of the block from the wall.⁴

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¹ Gimbutas exploits the term “Goddess” to express an anthropomorphized perception of the interconnected sacredness of the “unity of all life in Nature” (Gimbutas 1989, 321). In her view, the corpus of sculptures produced throughout the Upper Paleolithic in Eurasia, the prehistoric Near East, and the Danube civilization served as personifying images, visual metaphors, of the dynamic forces that animate the cyclic processes of life (Gimbutas 1989. Haarmann 2013, 170).

² Delporte 1979.

³ Levy 1948, pl. VIIc. Giedion 1962, fig. 167. Leroi-Gourhan 1968, fig. 287. Guthrie 1984, fig. 18a and 18b. Delporte 1993, fig. 47. Duhard 1993, plate XX. Bahn-Vertut 1997, fig. 11.14.

⁴ The Upper Palaeolithic masterpiece is held in the Musée d’Aquitaine, Bordeaux.



Fig. 1. Laussel Opposite Double Goddess. The Opposite Double Goddess of Laussel (Dordogne, France). (Photo: Don Hitchcock 2015. Source: Original, Musée d’Aquitaine (Bordeaux, France). https://www.donsmaps.com/images33/img_7114to7118playingcardvenus.jpg. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini).

As in a playing card, two half figures are joined to the pelvis and have their two heads pointed in opposite directions thanks to the artist's planned conception and illusionistic expertise. The downward facing female has a similar shape, head, neck, breasts and abdomen than the other, but it is much less voluminous.⁵

The quality of the engraving is quite poor, the heads are just circles and are far less clearly demarcated than their 'body', the faces have no distinctive features. The most accurate description of the opposite divinities depicted at Laussel is still that of the Bordeaux physician Jean-Gaston Lalanne, who excavated the site since 1908. He described the figures mirroring each other as follows: "One of the figures is a woman, recognizable by her large, pendulous breasts. The belly is represented by a strong, central projection, less strongly marked. The thighs are raised. The arms extend the length of the body and the hands appear to be beneath the lower limbs. The second figure is in an opposite position but symmetrical to the figure already described. Only the chest is carefully sculpted; the rest of the body disappears beneath that of the woman".⁶

Leroi-Gourhan suggested that the second female character would have been introduced into the scene later, therefore this bas relief would have been carved twice.⁷

The ambiguity of this double image has fascinated scholarship since the discovery of the masterpiece. This icon of female twins depicted with different dimensions and in opposition to each other has been represented and interpreted in various ways, with variations related to the identification of particular characteristics in each case, as reflected in the dissimilar drawings that often accompany the description, to 'complete the picture' so to speak.⁸

Many scholars agree that the figure illustrates an active birth scene.⁹ According to James Harrod, the double figure of Laussel may represent two Goddesses, "facing and entwined".¹⁰ Residual interpretations understand it as a male-female mating act,¹¹ a mid-wife helping a mother, a woman

⁵ Delporte 1979.

⁶ Lalanne 1911, 258. Lalanne 1912, 55–56.

⁷ Leroi-Gourhan 1971.

⁸ Lander 2005, 179, 321, fig. 6.19.

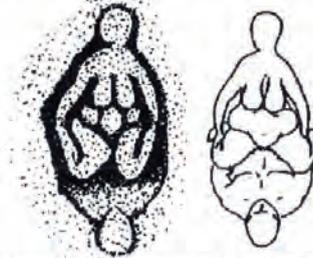
⁹ Lalanne 1911, 258. Duhard, 1991, 559. Janet Balaskas, founder of the Active Birth Movement, quoted by Noble 2003, 23 note 8.

¹⁰ Harrod 1997, 492. Harrod 2011, 1–14.

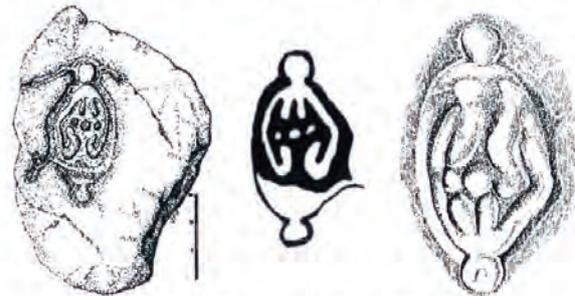
¹¹ The figure has been previously identified as a "clear" male-female copulating couple (Giedion 1962, 237. Klingender



Left: a. Laussel Double Figure (Bahn and Vertut 1997: Fig. 11.14); Right: b. Laussel Double Figure, drawing (Levy 1948: Plate VIIc)



Left: c. Laussel Double Figure, drawing (Guthrie 1979: Fig. 18a) Right: d. Guthrie's "interpretation" of Laussel Double Figure (Guthrie 1979: Fig. 18b)



Left: e. Laussel Double Figure, drawing (Duhard 1993a: Plate XX); Centre: f. Laussel Double Figure, drawing (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: Fig. 287); Right: g. Laussel Double Figure, drawing (Giedion 1962: Fig. 167)

Fig. 2. Presentations of Laussel Double Figure. Different presentations of Laussel Double Figure. (Lander 2005, 321, fig. 6.19.)

standing waist-deep in the water, a standing female figure making use of an earlier unfinished figure, an androgynous being,¹² or even a single standing woman in the absence of a second figure.¹³

By closely looking at the engraving, a childbirth scene is recognizable: a baby girl is appearing from the vagina.¹⁴ The female that is born is opposite

1971. Guthrie 1984, fig. 18a, b. Guthrie 2006. Hunger in Bahn 1986, 109. Taylor, 1996, 131). According to Clayton Eshleman, "the best interpretation is copulation: a woman sitting, knees raised, on a man whose lower body is beneath hers and thus, in the engraving, invisible." (Eshleman 2003, 270). Subsequently, Eshleman admitted that "This interpretation is not without problems, as the lower figure consists of only a head and upper chest" (Eshleman 2009, 241).

¹² Giedion 1962, 238.

¹³ Leullier-Snedeker-Levy 1948, 60 and pl. 7 (d). James 1959,

15. James 1961, 146. Bahn-Vertut, 1997, 186, fig. 11.14.

¹⁴ Caldwell 2010, 9.

but symmetrical to the mother. It has a similar shape to the parturient, but it is much less heavily incised and has smaller dimensions, not imposing breasts and no legs, because it is emerging from the womb.¹⁵ The woman in labor is shown head up. She has pendulous breasts, strongly pronounced belly, raised thighs, arms extended to the full length of the body, hands that appear to be beneath lower limbs.¹⁶ In short, the combined figure illustrates a heavily engraved principal woman that is merged with the slightly incised shoulders and the head of a second female being below. The egg-shaped mother's body is celebrated by inscribing it inside an oval cartouche made of deep incised lines.¹⁷ It is the dominant primal mother.¹⁸

The charming bas-relief is not a simple play of the artist, but an eminent example of the iconographic paradigm of the Upside-down Double Goddess. This imagery developed within a hunter-gatherer social context and in many successive cultures it was loaded with a deep symbolic and mythological meaning.

According to James Harrod, the two Goddesses of Laussel may symbolize the germinative energy flowing between mother and daughter or between two women along the female lineage.¹⁹ In the last instance, I suggest that it possibly portrays an ancestral mother: the ancestor (the bigger figure) of the lady of the place (the smaller figure) in the female line.²⁰

Vicki Noble proposes that the 'Playing Card' of the Upper Paleolithic, with mother-daughter depicted with different dimensions in mirror reflection, perhaps also functioned as the two opposing points in a symbolic and sacred circular calendar based on the dark and light phases that succeed from the seasonal cycle of the solar year.²¹ The double figure possibly represented the changing of the seasons from the dark of winter (when that light is almost invisible) to summer and vice versa.²² By

¹⁵ Marija Gimbutas shares the perception of Jean-Gaston Lalanne that the lower body of the second figure seems to disappear under that of the first one (Gimbutas 1989, 172, caption to fig. 272).

¹⁶ Gimbutas 1989, 172, caption to fig. 272.

¹⁷ Lander 2005, 180.

¹⁸ Caldwell 2010, 8.

¹⁹ Harrod 1997, 492. Harrod 2011, 1–14.

²⁰ Paradigmatic is the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the most famous Greek Double Goddess, and their worship as "the Two Goddesses".

²¹ Traditionally it is conceived as a seasonal cycle based on eight major events: the winter and summer Solstices, spring and fall Equinoxes, and four cross-quarter days that fall in between.

²² This holiday in the calendar year, long celebrated around

interpreting the glyph of the Double Goddess in mirror reflection as a sacred calendar, it is possible to recognize the bigger head as a representation of the Full Moon/Summer Solstice and the smaller head as the New Moon/Winter Solstice. The first head illustrates the light at its strongest bright, the days are at their extreme length, the energy is at its maximum extent, but the Sun begins to turn back towards darkness as the long days begin to shorten. The second head exemplifies hibernation, low energy and darkness, but it is when the light begins to express its potential to be born from within the powerful darkness.²³

A double nude female statuette from Lespugue, coeval to the 'playing card' bas-relief from Laussel, follows the same iconographic paradigm: it reveals a second character when it is flipped upside-down and at 180°.

The "Venus of Lespugue"²⁴ was discovered in the world as the time of the birth of the Sun, has been adapted to the "birth of Christ" by Christianity.

²³ Noble 2003, 23–24. Recognizing the myth of the most famous Greek Double Goddess as a remnant of this ancient seasonal calendar, the sterility of Demeter (the Goddess of life and fertility) symbolizes the withdrawal of the life force in winter, frozen and devoid of fertility, when the seed is underground and the night is long. The return of Persephone in spring represents the powerful acceleration of life as the solar energy grows towards its apogee at the Summer Solstice when light explodes. A comparable mother-daughter pair was worshipped in the Anatolian region of Phrygia, Thrace, and the island of Samothrace, according to the ancient tradition recorded by Mnaseas of Patera (Jacoby, III, 154, f 27). Like Demeter and Persephone, Axieros and Axiokersa/Axikersa were dark and light, doubles of each other: the mature earth of autumn and the young earth of springtime; the fulfilled matron and the young woman of promises (Monaghan 1990, 24). See also Eduard Gerhard (Gerhard 1868). These two goddesses of female duality may be a late version of what was poetically represented in ancient Sumer as the Goddess Inanna descending into the underworld at the call of her dark sister, Ereshkigal, who reigned there (Wolkstein-Kramer 1983, 52; Perez-Jane 2021).

²⁴ René de Saint-Périer presented the Lespugue figurine as a "statuette of a steatopygia woman", yet in the conclusion he labels it as the "Venus of Lespugue" (Saint-Périer 1923: 379). Many other scholars followed him uncritically, using the statuette with a prototypical role (in comparison with the Willendorf statuette) for the wide category of "Venus figurines". See for example, MacCurdy 1924, 259–260; Burkitt 1934, 116, 121; Luquet 1934, 437; Absolon 1949, 205; Graziosi 1960, 48; Eisenbud 1964, 145; Clark 1967, 56; Koenigswald 1971, 137; Harding 1976, 271; Gamble 1982, 94; Tattersall *et al.* 1988, 422; Soffer *et al.* 2000, 515, caption to Fig. 2, 520. Marija Gimbutas (1989, 1991) made a significant contribution to revisioning the nude female figures of the Upper Paleolithic art indiscriminately and incorrectly termed as "Venus figurines" from the Roman goddess of love. She demonstrated that images of enlarged vulva, prominent breast and steatopygic buttocks are not representations of

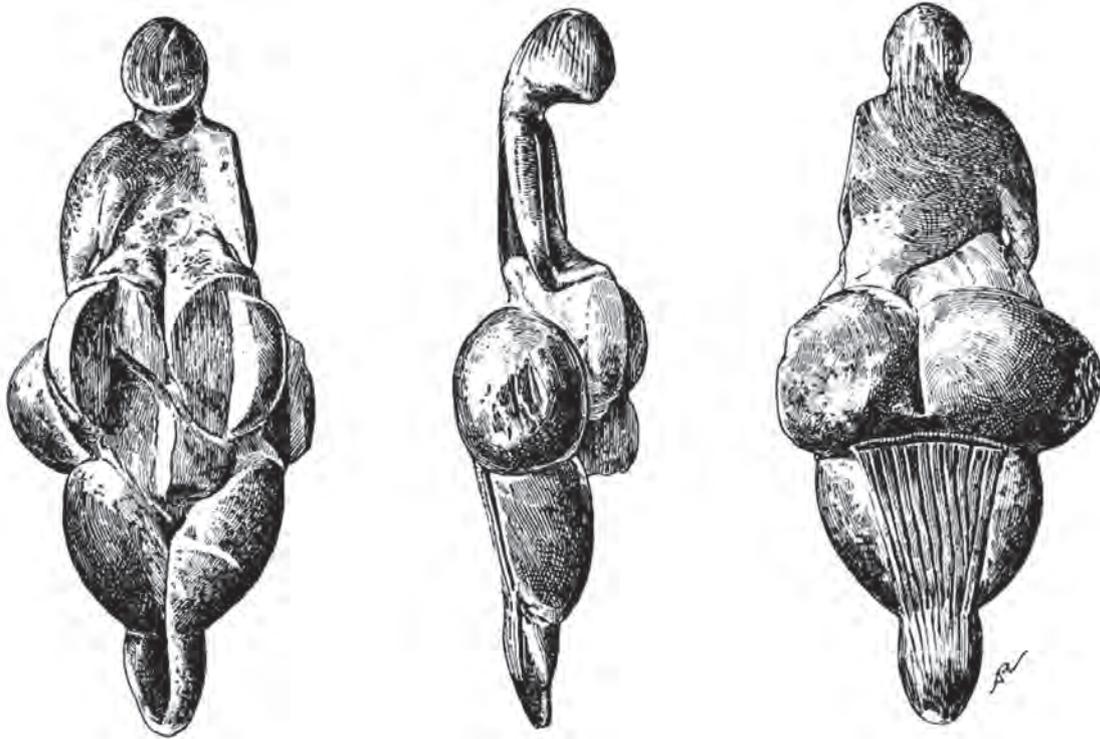


Fig. 3. *Lespugue, Upside-down Double Goddess. The Opposite Double Goddess of Lespugue (Haute-Garonne, France). (de Saint-Périer 1924. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini.)*

1922 in a hearth at a depth of about 15 cm, under a fallen rock, in the Rideaux cave at Lespugue (Upper Garonne).²⁵ Its style is assimilable to the Gravettian canon.²⁶ This stunning sculpture is carved from mammoth ivory, and unfortunately it was smashed during excavations by a mattock.²⁷

The statuette is characterized by a tendency to abstraction²⁸ evidenced by the lack of modelling of facial features.²⁹ According to Gustav Heinrich Ralph von Koenigswald, it has a head like an egg, no mouth or nose is indicated.³⁰ Grahame Clark

an erotic or aesthetic ideal analogous to modern-day “sex symbols” or “pornography”. They are instead philosophical and religious symbols to express aspects or functions of the Goddess Genetrix, the Giver-of-All, the Great Goddess, the female cosmogonic principle (Harrod 1997, 485). The misapplication of the label to a class of archaeological material is even more evident for the figures I present, which are all involved in childbirth. For an investigation on the use and abuse of the Venus terminology in the literature, see Lander 2005, 33 ff.

²⁵ The statuette is housed in the Musée de l’Homme, Paris.
²⁶ Grigor’ev 1993, 57. Images and drawings in Burkitt 1934, fig. 2; Passemard 1938, pl. IV; Maringer 1956, pl. 27 and 28; Graziosi 1960, pl. 3; Giedion 1962, fig. 294; Leroi-Gourhan 1968, pl. 52; Sandars 1968, pl. 13; Guthrie 1984, fig. 16c; Demoule 1990, 17; Delporte 1993, fig. 19; Soffer *et al.* 2000, fig. 10.

²⁷ Saint-Périer 1922, 363–364.

²⁸ Levy 1948, 57.

²⁹ Absolon 1949, 214. Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 95.

³⁰ Koenigswald 1971, 137.

asserted instead that the face is masked by the downward cast of the head.³¹ Johannes Maringer noticed that the artist was obviously not interested in the head and face of his creation. All individual and personal traits seem to have been deliberately suppressed. On the other hand, the sexual characteristics of the female body are strongly emphasized, if not exaggerated.³² Indeed, it displays the most exaggerated female secondary sexual features of the entire Upper Paleolithic. Particularly notable are the tremendously large and pendulous double-egg breasts full and ripe with nourishing milk,³³ the bulky buttock region, and the rounded abdomen pushed forward by childbirth.³⁴ The statuette also fuses breasts and buttocks into a zone of eggs circling the center of the figure.³⁵

The main female character (the parturient) is

³¹ Clark 1967, 56.

³² Maringer 1956, 109.

³³ Paolo Graziosi asserted that the breasts of Lespugue are “overripe gourds” (Graziosi 1960, 48). Karel Absolon dismissed them as “stupidly hypertrophic” (Absolon 1949, 218). The implications of such descriptions are so evident that they do not require comments.

³⁴ Saint-Périer 1924. Guthrie’s illustration of the Lespugue statuette adds even a marked vulva which does not appear in the fragmentary original (Guthrie 1984, fig. 16c).

³⁵ Gimbutas 1989, pl. 5, 162, 163, fig. 252. Gimbutas assumed the Venus of Lespugue as one of the best examples of the symbolism associated with the egg or double-egg (Gimbutas 1991, 12, 17 fig 13).



Fig. 4. Hermaphrodite Venus from Balzi Rossi. The so-called “Hermaphrodite Venus” from Balzi Rossi (Northern Italy), actually a childbirth with parturient and newborn in opposition. (<http://www.nihilum.republika.pl/>)

fine, elegant, perfectly drawn and modeled. The second female character (the slender newborn) is unexpected, magical, like a riddle, because it emerges from the “generous” lower back of her mother.³⁶ This apparent anatomical anomaly to the exact symmetry of the statuette, showing the child’s feet instead of the head or its face, has been interpreted by many scholars as a deliberate play or a mistake due to the artist’s carelessness.³⁷ André Leroi-Gourhan perceived an “anatomical heresy”.³⁸

However, the sculptor’s great technical skill is documented in the arms, which rest on the breasts, detached from the trunk in their lower third. She/he did not make a mistake, had no thoughtlessness, no lack of observation or disregard for reality, but achieved a wonderful result. The artist manifested an absolutely deliberate concern in accurately portraying a Gravettian mythological childbirth that

³⁶ Coppens 1989, 569.

³⁷ Luquet 1934. Delporte 1979.

³⁸ Leroi-Gourhan 1971.

expresses the pulsating and flowing life force until it blossoms into a gestating, doubling and twinning inner power.³⁹

It is necessary to turn upside-down and at 180° the image of the mother giving birth to a daughter as to focus from one character to another. It is not a game or a joke, but a symbolic rendering of two people in one during childbirth. According to Jule Eisenbud, this statuette is a “symbolic condensation”, which “I suspect also to have been a magical hand piece... This condensation gives a breasts-within-breasts effect” that one sees in other “Venuses”, nota-



Fig. 5. Hermaphrodite Venus from Balzi Rossi with the emerging head. The Upside-down Double Goddess in birthing pose from Balzi Rossi (Northern Italy). (<https://www.donsmaps.com/images24/detailsincisions.jpg>.)

bly those of Willendorf and Dolni Vestonice, which “happen to fit the hand perfectly”.⁴⁰

The nicknamed “Hermaphrodite Venus” by Édouard Piette,⁴¹ who acquired and published it, actually belongs to the paradigm of the Upside-down Double Goddess in birthing pose, with parturient and newborn in opposition.⁴²

The puzzling statuette, as the nickname clarifies, was subjected to countless speculations. And Louise Muriel Lander demonstrated how differential descriptions of it subtly recreated the archaeological material rather than simply representing it. The studies on this object are paradigmatic of the role of the authors in recreating sensitive variations of the original archaeological material.⁴³

³⁹ Coppens 1989, 571.

⁴⁰ Eisenbud 1964, 145–146.

⁴¹ Piette 1902, 774, fig. 3.14.

⁴² The statuette is held in the National Museum of Archaeology at Saint-Germain-en-Laye (France).

⁴³ Lander 2005, 159–160, 175.

The statuette belongs to the Gravettian culture (25000 BP) and was discovered in the Grotte du Prince at the Balzi Rossi (Liguria, Northern Italy).⁴⁴ It is made of translucent green steatite, with polished and worn surface showing repeated use. The figurine has female contours. The torso is flat, with slightly sloping all-nourishing breasts.⁴⁵ The belly is large, circular in shape, and clearly pregnant.⁴⁶ Under the stomach, two elongated subtriangular masses are considered the rough representation of arms and hands, almost shapeless projections, which press on the belly. The central swelling at the crotch, marked by vertical incisions and a trough that runs from the top of the bulge to the base of the protruding abdomen, was interpreted by Piette as a “huge, erect penis”⁴⁷ and testicles on a female bust, hence its name.⁴⁸ The author ventured to see a “suspensory” to protect the testicles, which is attached to threads forming a belt. According to him, the representation of the jockstrap provides the most obvious proof of the existence of the Boschman and Somali race at that time in caves, because this item was worn by “men of the adipose race”.⁴⁹ Timothy Taylor dedicates a section of his book on sex in prehistory to the piece, entitled “The Grimaldi Figure: Masturbator or Hermaphrodite?”⁵⁰ However, the interpretation of the statuette as a hermaphrodite is inconsistent,⁵¹ because it takes a lot of imagination to discern the masculine sexual attributes.⁵²

Peter J. Ucko and Andree Rosenfeld concluded their analysis on the statuette considering it “provisionally female”. Then, they decided to exclude it from their survey on human representations because it is not a realistic depiction of a human being, and because it shows “a non-representational recombination of elements” clearly identified on other figurines.⁵³

As already noticed by Jean-Pierre Duhard, the ambiguous attributes show a birth with the strictly feminine anatomical parts not emphasized,

because the parturient is a gracile, young woman. The crowning of the childbirth is evidenced by the bulge that is actually a child’s head that emerges between the thighs aided by the hands of the mother.⁵⁴ The lines on the small head indicate hair, which have red ochre traces. In conclusion, the two bodies that make up the “Hermaphrodite” are symmetrically opposite on each side of the round abdomen that is common to them forming a kind of double mythological figure after childbirth, being the round mass a second head.⁵⁵ Margherita Mussi interprets the two piriform masses as sinuses related to the second figure or, alternatively, her two arms.⁵⁶

The Venus of Savignano is possibly another playing-card type representing the mother-daughter pair.⁵⁷



Fig. 6. *The Savignano Venus. The Venus of Savignano found by chance on the banks of the Punaro River (near Modena, Northern Italy). (Photo © Marco Merlini.)*

The large, stylized statuette was found in 1924 by chance by workmen digging the foundations of a farmhouse on the banks of the Punaro River (near Modena, Northern Italy). It was at a depth of 1.4 – 2 m., within an alluvial deposit from the Upper Pleistocene Period. The artefact was not recovered in a distinct archaeological context and no other Upper Paleolithic remains were found in the area, so it was attributed by the diverse authors to different chronological phases. Based on a

⁴⁴ Mussi 2001, 259.

⁴⁵ Harrod 1997, 491.

⁴⁶ Graziosi 1973. Harrod 1997, 491. Martini 2016.

⁴⁷ Piette 1902, 774.

⁴⁸ White-Bisson 1998.

⁴⁹ Piette 1902, 774.

⁵⁰ The author suggested that the figure is possibly a woman inserting a dildo and that it is “equally possible” to see the sculpture as showing “someone else’s hands coming from behind, to insert a dildo into the vagina of the main body” (Taylor 1996, 130 and fig. 5.10).

⁵¹ Delporte 1993, 105.

⁵² Delporte 1993, 105, fig. 93.

⁵³ Ucko-Rosenfeld 1972, 176.

⁵⁴ Duhard 1987, 139–144. Duhard 1991, 555. Duhard 1993, pl. VIIIc.

⁵⁵ Mussi *et al.* 1999, 110. Mussi 2001, 262.

⁵⁶ Mussi *et al.* 2004, 25.

⁵⁷ It is kept in the Museo Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini” (Rome, Italy).

stylistic analysis, most scholars date it back to the Gravettian – Epigravettian culture.⁵⁸ Out of date analysis on typological grounds inscribed the statuette to the Aurignacian culture.⁵⁹ On the opposite pole, a hazardous ascription to the Neolithic has been suggested, not accepting the existence in Italy of an independent Upper Paleolithic.⁶⁰ The most recent chronological attribution, based purely on stylistic or morphological features, places the figurine within the Upper Paleolithic around 28000 – 21000 BCE.⁶¹

The so-called “Venus of Savignano”⁶² was carved out of a tender block of greenish-yellow soft serpentine stone, in order to be viewed from all four sides. The shape of the belly, the abundance of the breasts, the roundness of the hips and the generosity of the buttocks suggest a pregnant naked female humanoid. It can be inscribed within a diamond form, with the bust in the center and the joined together legs ending in a conical shape. The face is featureless.⁶³ “Puny” arms with “barely indicated” forelegs are folded over the breasts.⁶⁴ Head and torso are roughly carved in a similar but longer conical shaped pyramid. When reversing the statuette, the head suggests a second but longer pair of legs without feet, repeating the geometry of the lower extremities. This upside-down figurine design gives it an elongated, fusiform appearance and the shorter legs develop into a smaller figure emerging from the vulva.

The Venus of Savignano is not self-supporting in vertical position. However, it can be placed seated, with its spine slightly tilted backwards, thanks to a flat area in the center of the buttocks. Traces of red ochre are visible on the left front of the head, on the right arm, and on the lower back.⁶⁵

All the presented engravings and sculptures evidence how the sculptors of the Upper Paleolithic shared the same imaginary regarding melded interlocking female beings, all respecting a conventional interplay of geometric shapes and sharing the mythological genetrix-daughter symbolism. Some of the figurines depicting women in labor were exploited as birth talismans. A study by Randall White and Michael Bisson established that among

the Grimaldi statuettes from around 20,000 years ago, nine were pregnant and eight had dilated vulvas or an emerging baby’s head.⁶⁶

‘Playing Card’ figures in childbirth from the Mesolithic period

The iconography of the Upside-down Double Goddess in childbirth had a long success in the history of art, especially when it expressed the very special relationship between (primeval) mother and daughter and the “power of two”.⁶⁷ Substantial is a rock art instance from the Ranaldi Shelter,⁶⁸ one of the most significant sites of Southern Italy exploited by post-Paleolithic hunter-gatherer communities.⁶⁹ The shelter is located at 879 meters above the sea level, in the most inaccessible and high area of the “I Pisconi Anthropological and Natural State Reserve”, which is part of the large Lagopesole forest of oak (Basilicata region).⁷⁰ The inner wall of the shelter bears figurative paintings



Fig. 7. Merlini numbering. Ranaldi shelter, core area of the panel and figure numbering. (M. Merlini in collaboration with Gh. Lazarovici, 2021.)

⁶⁶ White-Bisson 1998.

⁶⁷ Gimbutas 1989, 151–154, 161–173.

⁶⁸ GPS coordinates: 40.82574, 15.78507.

⁶⁹ I would like to thank the Pro Loco of Filiano for the interesting visit to the Ranaldi Shelter. I would like also to express sincere admiration for their maintenance of the excellent open-air archaeological site and their promotion of the “Ranaldi Shelter Culture” towards the local community, schools, and curious tourists. Please, surf the website <https://www.prolocofiliano.it/>. The Pro Loco of Filiano collected in a booklet the most important articles on the rock art of the Ranaldi Shelter. See Sabia (ed.) 2016.

⁷⁰ The Ranaldi Shelter is generally known in literature and in Wikimedia as the “Palaeolithic site Tuppero dei Sassi”, but it is an incorrect name originating from a wrong topographical indication by the discoverer (Borzatti Von Löwenstern-Ingliš 1990, 75).

⁵⁸ Antonielli 1925. Antonielli 1926.

⁵⁹ Burkitt 1934, 118.

⁶⁰ Graziosi 1960, 52. Fugazzola Delpino *et al.* 2001.

⁶¹ Graziosi 1973. Mussi, Zampetti 1988.

⁶² Images and drawings in Graziosi 1960, pl 5; Giedion 1962, fig. 291; Delporte 1993, fig. 97.

⁶³ Absolon 1949, 214.

⁶⁴ Graziosi 1960, 52.

⁶⁵ Antonielli 1925. Antonielli 1926. Antonielli 1928. Palma di Cesnola 1993. Arnoldus-Huyzendveld 1996.

applied in red ocher by prehistoric artists using their fingers.⁷¹

The intricate painted scene involves around thirty motifs, mainly quadrupeds with branched horns (possibly stags) juxtaposed and contrasted with anthropomorphic figures.⁷² I have extracted the core area of the panel and numbered the key figures, in collaboration with Gheorghe Lazarovici. I also want to thank my friend Lazarovici for the input on the interpretation of the panel.

The most interesting polylobate figure is painted on the right side of the upper area of the tableau



Fig. 8. *The majestic towering figure. Mother Ranaldi. The identity of the majestic towering figure: Lady Ranaldi. (Photo © Marco Merlini.)*

(n. 6).⁷³ According to the discoverer of the paintings, Francesco Ranaldi, it is a large “male” being, 18 cm high, with head, arms and legs formed by three overlapping oval shapes. The archaeologist wondered: “Is it a male divinity or a sorcerer?” The archaeologist in charge then concluded by suggesting that an anonymous prehistoric artist traced red

⁷¹ Biancofiore 1965a. Biancofiore 1965b.

⁷² Arcà-Bozzarelli 2018.

⁷³ Please, see the numbered image.

paintings with his fingers to represent an organized tribal hunt probably related to propitiatory rituals celebrated by a sorcerer or under the benevolence of a male divinity depicted in big size.⁷⁴

Arcà and Bozzarelli noted that, in Iberian schematic art, the characters of this typology wear hats of various shapes, including plumed ones, to indicate their prominence as personages with mythological value, or high religious practitioners. According to their interpretation, the three upper lobes (two lateral and one apical) of the large polylobed human being might represent a wide-brimmed hat with a possible ceremonial function. Based on comparisons with movable art, they associated this figure to those belonging to the less ancient phases of the Iberian schematic art, in particular to the Copper Age (around the III millennium BCE).⁷⁵

However, why should this prominent anthropomorph be a man?

Let’s take another look at the figure. It has corpulent torso, limbs with rounded edges and a symmetrical shape like the other three polylobed anthropomorphs depicted in the panel. It shows a dome head and four bilateral lobes protruding from the central body. Two of them, starting from the top, are the long and rounded arms. The last two pairs indicate the plump thighs. A similar, but smaller, anthropomorph appears as emerging from its belly. It looks upside down to its chest.⁷⁶

In previous articles and based on parallels and correspondences in prehistoric rock art and mobile artworks, I have identified the majestic being as a woman at the peak of delivering, when the baby partially emerges from the opening of the enlarged vagina. The parturient is in labor among a herd of red deer stags and, in particular, supported by two of them: “Mother Ranaldi”.⁷⁷ I have circled the outgoing baby in the image. The mother is represented with a cylindrical-globular head; the

⁷⁴ Ranaldi 1966.

⁷⁵ Filippi 2017. Arcà-Bozzarelli 2018.

⁷⁶ As noted by Borzatti von Löwenstern and Inglis, the three vertical strokes under the small upside-down figure (a sort of large trident) are not part of the interpretation, because they give the impression of belonging to an earlier stage of the pictorial ensemble.

⁷⁷ Merlini, forthcoming. Merlini, in press.

offspring with a triangular head. Shape, dimensions, posture, and location on the panel suggest her identity as a female divinity caught in the act of giving life open air within a herd of deer.

Mother Ranaldi shares her iconographic canon with the Generatrix in prehistoric art. She is a majestic, naked, corpulent and fertile anthropomorph made up of three oval shapes (head, breasts, and wide thighs in spasmodic thrust). She is squatting to deliver a new life that is emerging from her vulva. The little head and arms of the newborn are spilling out between her generous thighs and legs.

Her enormous breasts, belly, buttocks, thighs, and shoulders convey ancestral ideas on beauty and health, believing that a chubby woman embodies the model of loveliness and, when she is fleshly below the waist, is always well fecund and rarely has troubles during childbirth with her pelvis.⁷⁸

Mother Ranaldi was painted in striking red, the pigment of the blood and of the nourishing life in touch with the earth. Color, symbolic posture, and position in the panel suggest that people who patronized the shelter viewed the birth as a magical-religious event and Mother Ranaldi as a Prehistoric Childbirth Deity depicted according to the stylistic canon of the Upside-down Double Goddess in birthing pose. This buxom and generous mother was depicted at the crowning of delivering in that very place and located at the top of the panel for ritual purposes. The depiction of the baby's head emerging from the vagina emphasizes the female's power to procreate.

In 1971–1972, Edoardo Borzatti von Löwenstern, who investigated the nearby archaeological sites of the Atella-Vitalba Valley (Basilicata) for years, carried out a stratigraphic excavation in the Ranaldi Shelter at the base of the painted wall.⁷⁹ Discussing the strong microlithization of the finds, the large number of geometrics, the occurrence of backed tool fragments, the presence of rare scrapers, scratchers and micro burins, and the absence of pottery, the archaeologist in charge attributed these finds to a prolonged, but not permanent, frequentation of the site by several human groups during the Tardenoisian phase of the Mesolithic Continuum.⁸⁰ Consistently with the occurrence of a final Mesolithic industry, Borzatti von Löwenstern

related the pictorial complex to the transitional period when Mesolithic communities began to exploit agriculture and domesticated animals (cattle, deer, and canids).⁸¹ In the scientific report of the Archaeological Superintendence of Basilicata, the finds are confirmed to be referred to the Italian Castelnovian lithic tradition (synonymous to the old-fashioned “Tardenoisian phase”),⁸² which is the most recent phase of the Mesolithic (dated in the area to between 7000 and 6000 BCE).⁸³

Birthing divinities from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic

The Anatolian Pre-Pottery Neolithic erected T-shaped pillars depicting some of the earliest birth scenes. The most significant for our survey is from the aceramic, pre-agricultural Neolithic site of Göbekli Tepe (located about 15 km Northeast of Şanlıurfa in South-Eastern Turkey). The place is the oldest artificially built place of worship yet discovered.⁸⁴ A monumental damaged limestone pillar is shaped like a large phallus with glans. It portrays three female figures in a vertical chain: a large character grabbing a smaller figure, which is grabbing a smaller one, which is grabbing an even smaller one. It was excavated in October 2010 from Layer II (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, PPN B)⁸⁵ and is dated to 8800–8000 BCE.⁸⁶

made on regular and slightly larger blade (Bogucki-Crabtree 2004).

⁸¹ Borzatti von Löwenstern 1971, 373–392.

⁸² Leonini 2016, 221–222. The typological composition of the Castelnovian lithic industry of the last hunter-gatherers included many blades, presence of thin lamellae with denticulated borders according to the Montbani style (community of Mont-Notre-Dame, Aisne), absolute dominance of the trapezoids within the armors, pre-eminence of long scrapers on short scrapers, and primacy of symmetrical trapezoids. In the Ranaldi Shelter, the Castelnovian Mesolithic industry (Trapeze facies) was characterized by laminar flaking and regular bladelets with triangular and trapezoidal section. The exploited techniques indicate hand pressure and indirect percussion. The lithic typology includes symmetrical and asymmetrical micro and hypermicro trapezes, notched blades, side-scraper on blade, and long end-scrapers (Lo Vetro-Martini 2016, 283, tab. 2).

⁸³ The Italian Castelnovian lithic tradition is dated to 8,500–7,300 years ago by Bogucki-Crabtree 2004 (climatic subdivision: Atlantic). Stefan Karol Kozłowski suggested that the Ranaldi Shelter can be attributed to the “Southern Castelnovian tradition”, a local variant of the Castelnovian phenomenon that appeared c. 7000 cal. BCE (Kozłowski S. K. 2010).

⁸⁴ Curry 2008, 278–280. Scham 2008.

⁸⁵ It was found in an area where the archaeologist in charge Klaus Schmidt did not plan to excavate. The totem is held in the Urfa Museum, Turkey.

⁸⁶ Schmidt 2010, 248, fig. 18. Hauptmann 2012, 22.

⁷⁸ Yurdakok 2015, 153–157. Piantadosi points out that obesity can be a distinct advantage for surviving periods of famine or cold (Piantadosi 2003, 20).

⁷⁹ Borzatti von Löwenstern 1971.

⁸⁰ Tardenoisian is a regional obsolete alternative name for Castelnovian (Kozłowski 1973). The Castelnovian industry is named after a site in France and is distinguished by trapezes



Fig. 9. Göbekli Tepe Totem figure giving birth. Some key features of the monumental pillar from Göbekli Tepe. (<http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread879200/pg1.>)

The archetypal totem was to be read from top to bottom. It shows three successive actions of giving birth, i.e., a mother giving birth to a mother giving birth to a mother giving birth. The posture and position of their hands indicate advanced gravidity ready for delivery. The hands push hard on the belly to help the labor and at the same time they force the opening of the vulva. Knees and legs are in the stance of birthing.

The personage at the top of the composition has the appearance of a stately crouching figure. Because of its eyes and ears, Klaus Schmidt suggested that it has the head of a bear.⁸⁷ It might also be a human with a bear mask. Woman and bear share the biological attributes of extraordinary birth-givers, fiercely protective mothers, and nurturers of the young who depend on mothers for their survival.⁸⁸ In ancient cultures this animal was reputed a powerful ancestral life-giver,⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Schmidt 2010, 248.

⁸⁸ Marler-Haarmann 2007: 57.

⁸⁹ Gimbutas 1989, 116.

therefore it often was at the service of the Birth-giving Goddess who, in a symbolic mirror, often incarnated into the primordial form of the bear to assist and protect human and animal birthing.⁹⁰

By being placed on top of the life-totem pole, it might thus be a Goddess of Childbirth with the semblance of a divine she-bear. It is possibly connected to the later Umay Ana (Mother Umay), the most sacred goddess of Turkish mythology and Tengriism, protector of fecundity, delivery, and infants.⁹¹ The merciful Birth Goddess Umay Ana protects the children to be born safe and is the owner of the tree of life.⁹² On the enigmatic Pre-Pottery Neolithic 3-D sculpture from Göbekli Tepe, the divine she-bear is associated with twin snakes. They are located on the lower part of her back, raise on her right and left thighs, and point straight to the last born.

The image of the smaller woman portrayed during labor is striking. She is opening her vulva and holding a human head representing the emerging newborn according to the meme of the Upside-down Double Goddesses in birthing pose.⁹³

At Göbekli Tepe, a crude carving depicting a naked woman in a crouching position for childbirth was engraved⁹⁴ on a stone slab between two pillars with rampant guardian lions,⁹⁵ i.e. two stone reliefs of a protective divinity.⁹⁶

Scholars agree in recognizing the graffiti as a c. 8000 BCE⁹⁷ maternity scene with a squatting Goddess of Childbirth delivering a newborn. She has bent arms, spread legs and a clearly depicted

⁹⁰ Gimbutas 1999. "Linguistic evidence connects the bear with the ability to give birth, as in the Old European root *bher-*, Germanic **beran* 'to bear children', 'to carry', Germanic **barnam*, 'child', and Old Norse *burðh*, 'birth'. In eastern Lithuania, a woman who has just given birth was traditionally called *Meška* 'Bear'" (Marler-Haarmann 2007, 69).

⁹¹ The mother goddess Umay is first mentioned in the Orkhon Inscriptions (written in Old Turkic alphabet in the early VIII century in the Orkhon Valley, Mongolia) as a female deity who protects mother and child. At the same time, she is the guardian of the Turkish tribes, making them strong, and their lands fertile. See Ercan 2014, 37–44.

⁹² "In the earliest north Asian representations of the Tree of Life, in the Okunevo culture, the figures [insofar as they are human] are female. Moreover, these women are often shown with protruding or pendant abdomens, i.e., pregnant or soon after giving birth" (Martynov 1991, 107).

⁹³ The round element might also render the idea of a bowl. According to this option, the round vessel is associable with the breaking water.

⁹⁴ It is held in the Urfa Museum, Turkey.

⁹⁵ Schmidt 2006, 235–237, fig. 104. Schmidt 2010, 246, fig. 13.

⁹⁶ Yurdakok 2015, 153–157.

⁹⁷ It was found in level II of the site (Schmidt 2006).

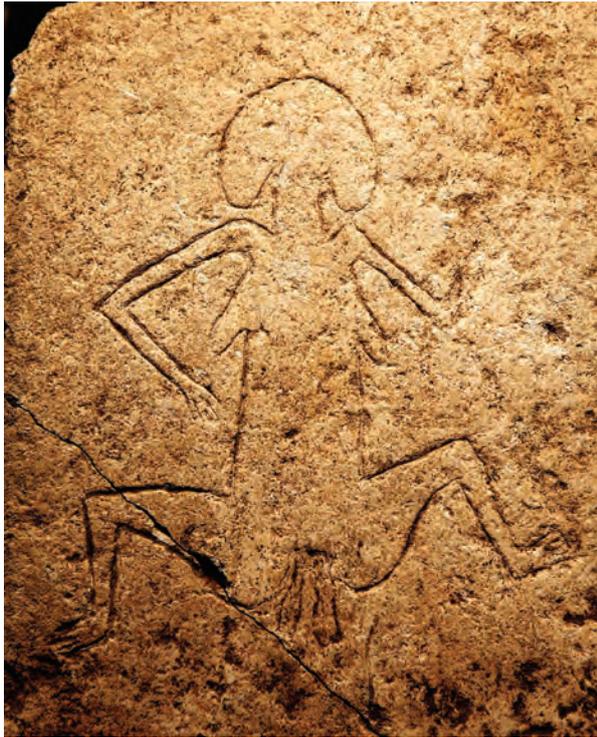


Fig. 10. Gobekli Tepe woman in a birth giving position. Woman carved in a crouching position for childbirth (Göbekli Tepe, South-Eastern Turkey). (<http://www.visiturfat.com/publicsite/uploads/muzeler/arkeoloji-muzesi-5960.jpg>. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini.)

vulva with enlarged labia. This figure is naked, made up of three oval shapes: circular head, breasts hanging on the sides of the body, and wide thighs in a spasmodic thrust. She is delivering a new life that is coming out of the vulva as the umbilical cord protrudes from the vagina.⁹⁸

This floor portrait does not belong to the original decoration, but more likely is part of a group of engravings classified by the archaeologist in charge as graffiti.⁹⁹ It is an emblematic engraving carved exactly in that place and location for ritual purposes. This evidence suggests that the building with the Lion Pillar was likely used by pregnant women to practice safe birth procedures under the protection of the Goddess of Childbirth and her surrounding divine stone lions, and perhaps to solemnly celebrate birth. Both actual and ritual birth-giving possibly took place there.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ The excavator, Klaus Schmidt, saw the figure on the stone slab more likely as a woman “ready for coitus” (Schmidt, 2006 235 ff., fig. 104). Miriam Robbins Dexter and Victor H. Mair instead interpreted this character as a female involved in a magical dance (Dexter-Mair 2010).

⁹⁹ Comp. pillar 10. See Schmidt, 2000 23, fig. 10b. Schmidt 2006, 235–237, fig. 104. Schmidt 2010, 246.

¹⁰⁰ Murat Yurdakok argued inconsistently that if this graffiti represents a woman during or after delivery, her breasts, and

James Mellaart reported from his excavations at Çatal Höyük about a twin goddess representation. A divine mother gives birth to a bull, which stands upside down as in mirror to her.¹⁰¹ This is the iconographic typology to which the Upside-down Double Goddess in childbirth belongs. As underlined by Cornelia-Magda Lazarovici and Gheorghe Lazarovici, Mother Goddess gives birth to the bull because it is her acolyte and is related to her fecundity and fertility.¹⁰² In the Middle Neolithic sanctuary of Parța, ritual offerings and blood sacrifices were offered to the Great Mother – Bull couple.¹⁰³

Next to the mother-bull representation, another large female figure is giving birth to a ram’s head. Çatal Höyük is located in the Konya Plain (Central-Southern Turkey, ancient Anatolia). It was a highly advanced culture, indicated by the level of its farming and the commercial exploitation of the region’s supply of obsidian.



Fig. 11. Çatal Höyük A mother gives birth to a bull. A divine mother gives birth to a bull, which stands upside down as in mirror to her (Çatal Höyük, Central-Southern Turkey). (Mellaart, 1967, fig. 26. Detail. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini)

even abdomen, should be depicted larger, and she wouldn’t be naked (Yurdakok 2015, 153–157). However, the image indicates giving birth, not postpartum. See also Verit *et al.* 2005, 208–210.

¹⁰¹ Mellaart 1967, fig. 26.

¹⁰² Lazarovici C.M.-Lazarovici Gh. 2016, 164, n. 89, 172. This special relation between the divine mother and the bull also occurs in the sanctuaries from the Upper Neolithic, for example in Parța, where the companion of the Great Mother is the bull, also seen as a divinity (Lazarovici Gh. *et al.* 2001, 271, 276, 278, 279, 282, 292). In the Late Neolithic, on the altar from Trușești the bull appears as a divinity next to the Great Mother.

¹⁰³ Lazarovici C.M.-Lazarovici Gh. 2016, 164, n. 89, 172. This special relation between the divine mother and the bull also occurs in the sanctuaries from the Upper Neolithic, for example in Parța, where the companion of the Great Mother is the bull, also seen as a divinity (Lazarovici Gh. *et al.* 2001, 271, 276, 278, 279, 282, 292). In the Late Neolithic, on the altar from Trușești the bull appears as a divinity next to the Great Mother.

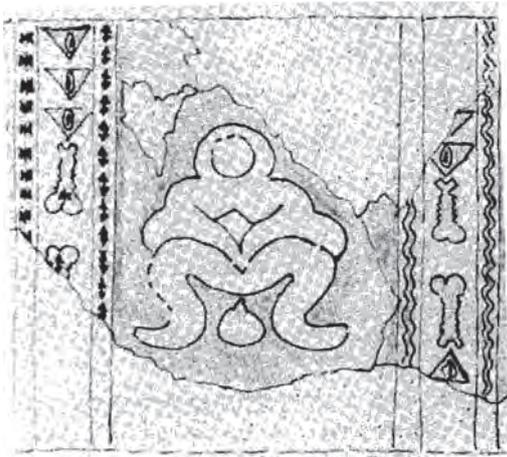


Fig. 12. *Catal-Huyuk parturient woman Mellaart. Naked, corpulent and fertile parturient goddess in Çatal Höyük.* (Gimbutas 1991, 224, fig. 7–1. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini.)

The icon of the naked, corpulent and fertile Upside-down Double Goddess in childbirth is repeatedly painted, around 7000–6000 BCE, on the wall of a special room in the site of Çatal Höyük. The room displays various images of birth painted in bright red. It was believed that the color of blood was the color of life. And red is also the head of the newborns depicted at Çatal Höyük. The stylized women giving birth repeatedly portrayed on the walls are surrounded by a frieze filled with circular shapes and wavy lines to symbolize the cervix, umbilical cord, and amniotic fluid.¹⁰⁴

According to Marija Gimbutas, the inhabitants of Çatal Höyük performed rituals related to birthing in this room. They painted the place (floor, ceiling, and walls) and the furniture entirely in bright red. The floor was a red-burnished lime plaster. A low plaster platform on it could have been used for actual birth. Color and visual symbolism in the room suggest that people viewed birth as a religious event, and that they accompanied it with rituals.¹⁰⁵

The Birth-giving Goddesses were modelled in relief over bull heads in other shrines at Çatal Höyük.¹⁰⁶ I have already

mentioned and displayed the relief with the divinity, shown with arms and legs raised, giving birth to a bull's head or a ram's head placed below the legs.

Çatal Höyük explored the symbolism of the Upside-down Double Goddesses in birthing pose not only in engravings or paintings, but also in 3D. The site yielded an extraordinary terracotta statuette with a majestic silhouette that portrays a mature, naked, divine Mother who gives birth to a baby while she is sitting on her birthing throne and is flanked by two female (?) felines (lioness, leopard, or panther).¹⁰⁷ It was found in level II and is dated to c.7250–6700 BCE.¹⁰⁸

The goddess's drooping breasts and belly, buttocks, hips, thighs and shoulders are huge.



Fig. 13. *Catal-Huyuk Seated birthing Woman + felines. Mature, naked, divine Mother from Çatal Höyük.* (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/Museum_of_Anatolian_Civilizations_1320259_nevit.jpg)

¹⁰⁷ Gimbutas 1989, 107 and fig. 177.

¹⁰⁸ The statuette is 20 cm height. It is housed in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations (Ankara, Turkey). When it was unearthed by archaeologist James Mellaart in 1961, its head and the rest of his right hand were missing. They are modern replacements.

¹⁰⁴ It is Shrine 31 found in level VIII. It was called the Red Shrine by James Mellaart (Mellaart 1966, 180–182). See Gimbutas 1989, 107.

¹⁰⁵ Gimbutas 1989, 107–108. Gimbutas 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Gimbutas 1982, 176, fig. 129.

Semicircles on her knees and belly indicate the folds of her obese skin. The head of the newborn (human or animal) is spilling out between her abundant thighs and legs.¹⁰⁹ The baby's nose and eyes are intact and visible.¹¹⁰ Her hands rest on the heads of the wild felines, which tails trail up her back and curl down over her shoulders, showing her power over them.¹¹¹ These beasts are supporting the goddess in her birthing task,¹¹² because the powers of the woman and the leopards are linked here.¹¹³ The statuette enacts and circulates their powers.

The stately figurine of a giving birth divinity on a throne assisted by ferocious felines was found in a home grain bin,¹¹⁴ suggesting a pivotal role for this ancestral hybrid mother (human-feline) in securing the harvest of this newly domesticated food supply or in protecting it in order to feed the community and sustain future generations.¹¹⁵ In a coeval statuette from the same settlement, the parturient is flanked by two leopard cubs, which are on her knees.¹¹⁶

A similar scene is illustrated by a corpulent enthroned divinity among wild animals. It is a fragmented statuette from the Late Neolithic Vădastra II culture, found in Hotărani (South-Western Romania, 5100–4800 CAL. BCE).¹¹⁷

She has a prominent gravid belly, a vulva in relief that swells in parturition, and a protruding back. She is delivering sitting on a stool-throne for birthing. A baby's head is emerging from between her legs. She is helping herself in labor by opening wide the vulva with her left hand. Signs of the



Fig. 14. Hotărani, Vădastra II birth. Corpulent enthroned birthing divinity among wild animals from Vădastra II Hotărani (South-Western Romania, 5100–4800 CAL. BCE). (Gimbutas 1989, 108, fig. 178)

Danube Script are incised on the feline's leg, perhaps to ritualize the event.¹¹⁸

A relief on a potshard from the late Starčevo-Criș (Körös) assemblage portrays an enthroned goddess in childbirth position. Two little arms, belonging to the newborn, plunge from the throne/altar.



Fig. 15. Donja Branjevina Starčevo goddess giving birth. A late Starčevo-Criș (Körös) enthroned goddess in childbirth position from Donja Branjevina (Republic of Serbia). (<https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/vessel-relief-donja-branjevina-236ccbcb58bf44d9bcfc9770d1d0c58f>)

¹⁰⁹ Mellaart 1963, 93.

¹¹⁰ Pirsig-Onerci 2000, 105–107.

¹¹¹ Mellaart 1963, 46, fig. 29–30, Pl. XXIII b-d.

¹¹² “Female leopards... are fierce, protective mothers and excellent providers. In this image, there is no separation between the wild and the domestic realms” (Marler-Haarmann 2007, 55).

¹¹³ Marler-Haarmann 2007, 54.

¹¹⁴ Mellaart 1967. Hodder 2006.

¹¹⁵ Marler 2003, 4.

¹¹⁶ Golan 2013, 384, fig. 466: 2.

¹¹⁷ Merlini 2009, 467. The statuette is dated by Gimbutas to c. 5000 BCE (Gimbutas 1989, 108, fig. 178). The Vădastra culture formed on a Vinča-Dudești basis, plus some Aegean – Mediterranean and Central European stimuli from the Linear Pottery culture (Lazarovici C.M.-Lazarovici Gh. 2006). Other scholars point to the influence of the Boian Marița culture on the Vădastra culture (Comșa 1995, 159). The reference area of the Vădastra culture included southwestern Muntenia, between Olt and Vedea Rivers (where the Vinča – Dudești culture had previously settled), and Northern Bulgaria between the Iskar and Ossum rivers (Mateescu 1962, 404–420. Merlini 2009, 601).

¹¹⁸ Gimbutas 1989, 108, fig. 178.

The fragment was found at the Donja Branjevina site, located between Deronje and the Danube River (in Vojvodina, Republic of Serbia). It was unearthed from the trench IX/91, spit 8/9¹¹⁹ and belongs to the VI millennium BCE.¹²⁰ The figurine does not sit on a throne, as often claimed, but on a birthing chair. A revision of the images concerning the so-called “Enthroned Goddesses” or “Enthroned Priestess” would ascertain many human or divine female on simple birthing stools or seats arranged as thrones to emphasize the magical, miraculous, and sacred act of giving birth.

Comparable Chalcolithic terracotta and marble statuettes have been found at the Canhasan archaeological site (in the Konya plain of Central Turkey). They have been modelled during the timespan 5500–3000 BCE. All the figurines are naked, with rounded and generous shapes, and in the position of birth. In the statuette I present, it is



Fig. 16. Canhasan, statuette with newborn emerging from the vulva. Chalcolithic statuette with the newborn emerging from the vulva (Canhasan, Central Turkey). (Photo © Marco Merlini)

¹¹⁹ Kutzián 1944, T. XX, 1a; T. XLI, 3; T. LXII, 2. Makkay 1971, T. I-T. IV. Karmanski suggested that it represents either a goddess giving birth or a goddess on a “throne” (Karmansk 2005, 87, plate V). Becker 2011, pl. 133/5).

¹²⁰ The fragmented vessel is kept in the Museum in Odžaci.

possible to glimpse at the head and an arm of the newborn emerging from the vulva.

From Cùccuru Arriiu (Sardinia, Italy) comes the extraordinary clay statuette, unfortunately fragmented, representing a giving birth woman.¹²¹ The figure is kneeling, with curved toe feet pointing back. She expels the fruit of her womb between the thighs wide open. The baby is still shapeless, stylized with a conical protuberance on the rounded head protruding by 4 centimeters. In the past, it was interpreted as a male sexual organ. The statuette belongs to the Middle Neolithic and represents a goddess, according to Giovanni Lilliu.¹²² The skilled artisan has fashioned the crossed feet to simulate a lily flower knot in the back of the figurine.



Fig. 17. Cùccuru s'Arriiu, female figurine in the act of giving birth. Figurine giving birth from Cùccuru Arriiu (Sardinia, Italy). Front. (Lilliu 1999, fig. 22)



Fig. 18. Cùccuru s'Arriiu, female figurine in the act of giving birth. Back. Figurine giving birth from Cùccuru Arriiu (Sardinia, Italy). Back. (Lilliu 1999, fig. 23)

The icon of a birth scene illustrated by a pair of twins depicted with different dimensions and in opposition in Central Asian Bronze Age and Iron Age

The archetypal icon of a pair of twins depicted with different dimensions and in opposition to

¹²¹ The figurine is located in the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari.

¹²² Lilliu 1999.

show an active birth scene was very successful in time and space. Let's take the Bronze Age and the Iron Age in Central Asia as an example.

The Kalbak-Tash I Petroglyphic Site (Ongudai district, Altai Republic) is quite small, but it includes some of the oldest and most interesting carvings for our enquiry to be found in Central Asia. More than 5,000 figures are engraved on the flat rocks of the hill overlooking the valley of the Chuya River. This unique monument of rock art offers a valuable and continuous repertoire of expressive imagery in the Altai region, from the Neolithic (VII millennium BCE) to the Old Turkic period (700–1000 AD). Mount Kalbak-Tash was worshipped since ancient times by the population living in the High Altai Mountains. There is also a sanctuary for women who ask gods to get pregnant and have a safe child-birth. In the images below, I have outlined the archaic, large, frontal birthing women in red.

On a fractured surface, a human with small head, wide open raised arms and hands, and legs spread apart is giving birth to a baby among uncomplete animals with horns (including deer), a partially lost 'bird-woman', and ithyphallic characters.¹²³ Her nature as a birthing woman is indicated by the emergence of head and arms of the infant and by her pendulous breasts.¹²⁴

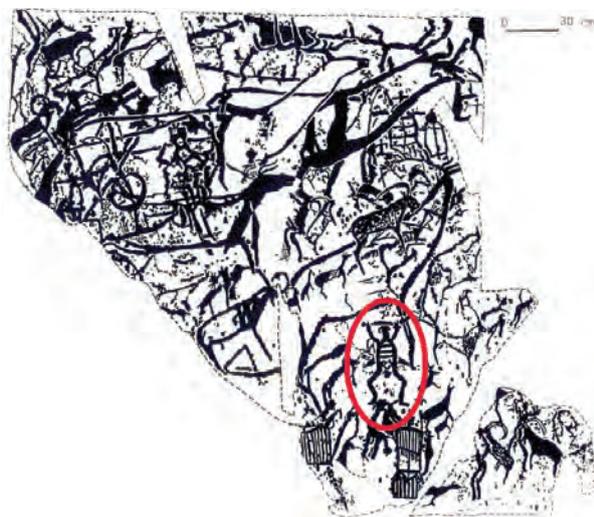


Fig. 19. Kalbak Tash I woman giving birth. A birthing woman, a 'bird-woman,' ithyphallic figures, and fragmentary animals from Kalbak Tash I Petroglyphic Site (Altai Republic). Vertical, south-facing surface, section V. (Kubarev-Jacobson 1996, figs. 338, 339. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini. I have underlined in red the parturient.)

The above-illustrated figure type of the woman

¹²³ Kubarev-Jacobson 1996, figs. 338, 339.

¹²⁴ Jacobson 1997, 41.

in labor is not missing in the other petroglyphs at Kalbak-Tash. It reappears on other panels. For example, a similar schematic birthing figure is included within tangled images representing 'bird-women', profile characters, deer, and wild goats.¹²⁵ She is characterized by a horizontally striped body and breasts that hung lower from the sides of the chest.¹²⁶ The baby is depicted being delivered with the head first.



Fig. 20. Kalbak Tash I woman giving birth. A birthing figure among 'bird-women,' profile figures, deer, and wild goats from Kalbak Tash I Petroglyphic Site (Altai Republic). Vertical, south-facing surface, section V. (Kubarev-Jacobson 1996, fig. 344. Graphic elaboration M. Merlini. I have underlined in red the parturient.)

Women in labor according to the stylistic canon of the Upside-down Double Goddess in childbirth are not absent in the imagery of the other Central Asian petroglyph sites. They often give birth among grazing wild animals and hunting trips. Relevant to our investigation are those in the archaeological landscape of Tamgaly Gorge amidst the vast Chu-Ili mountains (to the northwest of Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan). Here, a masterpiece of primitive rock art depicts a birthing scene amongst seven sun-headed deities, dancing men holding weapons, a sexual act, and some worshippers.¹²⁷ The panel is inserted within a Bronze

¹²⁵ Kubarev-Jacobson 1996, fig. 344.

¹²⁶ Jacobson 1997, 41.

¹²⁷ It is the vertical panel from the IV group, surface 118, on the western side of the gorge. This grouping is sited on the upper slopes and is clearly visible from the gorge. UNESCO

Age rock sanctuary. It could be interpreted as a representation of twelve human beings celebrating a birth by ritually dancing around a dancing parturient to gain protection from the solar deities whose symbolic presence is attested on the top of the hill.¹²⁸ In the presented drawings, I have underlined the parturient woman, because she recalls the typology of the double figure illustrating the ancestor who ruled the place in the female line.



Fig. 21. Tamgaly Gorge, Kazakhstan DRAWING birthing scene. Birthing scene amongst solar deities from Tamgaly Gorge (Kazakhstan). Drawing. Detail. (Mariyashev 1994, fig. 2. Graphic elaboration Merlini. I have underlined in red the parturient)

Further evidence comes from the Early Iron Age (1250–650 BCE) of Luristan (North West of the Zagros Mountains, present-day Iran).¹²⁹ A female



Fig. 22. Luristan giving birth. A female character is giving birth on a bronze pin from Luristan (North West of the Zagros Mountains, present-day Iran). ([https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lurestan_Fibula_\(4484325444\).jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lurestan_Fibula_(4484325444).jpg))

character is giving birth on a bronze pin. She has outstretched legs, raised knees, breasts held by her

2004, 26. Rozwadowski 2004, fig. 4. Rozwadowski-Lymer 2012, 156, fig. 10.5.

¹²⁸ Mariyashev 1994, fig. 2. Hermann 2011, 30. Clottes 2011, 54. There are at least three other representations of women in childbirth in the periphery of Tamgaly Gorge.

¹²⁹ It is dated to Iron III. The artifact is held in the Louvre Museum, Paris.

firm hands, in an Ishtar-like pose to link birth to nourishment.¹³⁰ She wears a conical headdress or hairstyle. The baby's head is on display. The mother has a heraldic animal, probably an antelope, at either side with their heads turned away. She is surrounded by floral ornaments (rosettes, actually the star of Inanna converted in an 8 petals flower).¹³¹

The disk pin was made of bronze using lost wax casting. It has no archaeological context, but is considered to be a votive object from the temple at Surkh Dum (Western Iran). It possibly portrays the Birthing Mistress of the Animals.¹³²

Conclusions

In the present article, I have explored the long-lasting archetypical canon of the steatopygic Upside-down Double Goddess in childbirth with evidence from the Upper Paleolithic of Western Europe to the Iron Age in Central Asia.

These images put special emphasis on the motifs of birthing and doubling connected to the “power of two”. They strongly evoke the energetic “flow” along the protracted lineage of women who gave birth before, and those who will give birth in the future.

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- ¹³⁰ The gesture could also be interpreted as a common act for a pregnant woman (Battini 2006, 4).
- ¹³¹ Goldman 1961, 18. Godard 1965, fig. 62. Jannot 1980. Muscarella 1981, 337, and note 64. Matthiae 1996, 200. Battini 2006, 5, fig. 4.
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