Great Goddesses: Crash Course World Mythology #13

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today, we're gonna talk about symbols and dreams and a couple of very busty figurines. It's the great mother goddess. You excited, Thoth?

Yeah, I know, you don't have a mother, you created yourself, but come on, she's the best, unless, of course, she doesn't exist, and if that's the case, what do I do with all of these great goddess Mother's Day cards?

[Opening music]

The mother goddess is an archetype. Psychology fans will know about archetypes from the work of Carl Jung, who saw the repeated patterns in myths as emanations of what he dubbed humanity's collective unconscious, meaning the symbols and ideas that all humans share simply as a result of being human.

Archetypes can be used to explain why the same patterns emerge in different myths from different places throughout the world. Some of the archetypes that repeat all willy-nilly are the dying god, the destroyer god, the trickster, and the primordial pairing of the sky and the earth. Hey sky dad, hey earth mom.

The archetypes we'll be examining in the next few episodes are just those. The father creator and the great mother. Ugh, cosmic parents. I'm gonna guess the upside is that if you have to move back in with them after graduation, their basement is literally infinite. Downside being, of course, that it is also literally Hades.

We're doing an episode on female divinity before archetypal male divinity because there are some theories that earth mom actually did come first. As I pointed out, most human societies are patriarchal and have been for a long, long time. But certain historians, sociologists, archaeologists, literary critics, and mythologists have argued that in prehistoric times, human societies were more matrifocal, less violent, and more cooperative. The idea that human societies began as matrifocal and goddess-oriented goes back a long, long way, with scholars asserting that many, if not most, primitive societies featured a religion that was based around ideas of fertility and motherhood.

According to mythologists Scott Leonard and Michael McClure, "throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the literature of several disciples took for granted the existence of primal mother or great goddess and further assumed that her religion and the societies based upon it were part of the primitive past from which man happily escaped through the logocentric power of intellect." Yeah, that's right. We reasoned ourselves right out of peace, fertility, and harmony. Good going, human mind.

A leading proponent of the great goddess theory was Marija Gimbutas, who connected archaeology to the women's movement, and who probably would have liked it a lot if you put the Venus of Willendorf on your sign at the woman's march. Those involved with the goddess movement, of which Gimbutas was a leader, saw in this mother-centric religion an appealing alternative to the brutality, materialism, spiritual bankruptcy, and ecological shortsightedness of modern patriarchal social systems. Whuh. Tell us what you really think.

The goddess movement is a very cool idea, but it does have a couple problems. For one, it's based a lot on images like this one. Hey, there she is again, the Venus of Willendorf. Sort of makes you feel more fertile already, but here's the thing. The discovery of female figures like Venus of Willendorf was taken as evidence of religious practices that focused on the fertility aspects of the female, but there's no real proof that figurines like these were part of any worship or ritual at all. Maybe they were just sexy lawn ornaments.

There are problems with creating a picture of female-centric social organizations based on figures like this, that signified fertility and magical desires for successful births. Also, we've discovered lots of female figurines and not all of them have the attributes associated with fertility and not all the figurines are female. Many of them are male, a lot of them were even androgynous.

This lack of gender specificity points to what might be the biggest challenge to the goddess school: it relies on modern gender binaries and stereotyping. Supporters of the goddess movement reversed the values of male-dominated, Victorian-era science, which saw women as primitive, natural beings, separate from and inferior to, rational men, never questioning whether our prehistoric forebears imposed the same male-female polarities upon their world or held the same assumptions about the erotic and the symbolic as we do.

This is a good reminder that we always need to be aware of how we are of how we are imposing our own beliefs and values on history and prehistory, and if I can pose my own values for a second, yes, Victorian science is the worst.

So, maybe you believe in a fertile peaceful, paleolithic, matriarchal world order that spawned great goddess myths around the world. Maybe you don't. But there are stories of goddesses from everywhere, at all times, and they share some similarities. One of the most common literary ideas is that of the triple goddess, which Robert Graves wrote about in his book *The White Goddess.* An influential typology, the triple goddess sorts goddesses into one of three types: virgin, mother, and crone. If you find this virgin/mother/cronen thing troubling, you are not alone. It's a system that sees women through the eyes of men, and basically categorizes them on whether they're sexy. And since that is uncomfortable-making, we're gonna look at the basic roles of goddesses in myths in the terms used by Marija Gimbutas: life, death, and regeneration.

Goddesses of life are maternal, often associated with the life-giving Earth. The Greek Gaia is a prime example, although there aren't a lot of myths about her specifically. She's often supplanted by Demeter. Sometimes, these life-giving goddesses are associated with primeval creation, like Tiamet in the Sumerian creation stories or Cipactli, the great goddess of Mexico, who swam through the primordial waters of chaos in the form of an enormous crocodile, which seems like a pretty sweet way to travel.

Life-giving goddesses are occasionally seen as protectors as well as nurturers. An example is the Persian goddess, Anahita, who is sometimes depicted in armor, sometimes as a nurturing mother, and who is said to have power over the water. In dry as heck with two hockey sticks Persia, water mom brings forth and preserves life, and as moms often do, also probably reminds you to shower.

Goddesses of death were often seen as queens of the Underworld, like Persephone, whom we've met, and Isis, who was able to resurrect her husband, Osiris. In these roles, great goddesses control the cycles of growth, decay, and rebirth: the seasons. One of the goddesses we met in an earlier episode, Izanami, died and went to the Underworld after giving birth to fire. Her husband, Izanagi, went to look for her but finding her as a rotting corpse was terrifying, so he ran way. Can you blame him? Izanami considered this a divorce, which also seems reasonable, and so she returns to the Underworld.

On occasion, goddesses associated with death are portrayed as witches or seers. Often appearing as wise old women, like the Greek witch Hecate, who was sometimes said to have three heads: a snake's, a horse's, and a dog's, making her a one-goddess petting zoo. Death goddesses are also often associated with fate,

apportioning a person's life, ordaining health, disease, prosperity, and suffering. The Greek Moirai and the Norse Norns were the goddesses of this type.

And finally, goddesses of regeneration often relate to sexuality in myths, appearing as virgins or nymphs. Sometimes they're also responsible for creativity. According to Leonard and McClure, "their pulsing sexual energies impel mortal creation to renew itself, and thus their influence redeems individual mortality through beauty, passion, and offspring." Pulsing sexual energy, is it getting hot in here or is it just these mother goddesses?

One other interesting thing about goddesses of regeneration: they seem to have a tendency to bestow their favors on mortal men, and that just does not seem to work out. For example, we're gonna go somewhere we haven't visited yet, Ireland.

Take us there, Thought Bubble.

One Irish regeneration goddess is Niamh of the Golden Hair, whose name means beauty. Niamh was the daughter of the sea and Tir-Nan-Og, the Land of the Blessed. One day, Niamh stole the poet Oisin away from his people and brought him to Tir-Nan-Og, where they lived together as lovers for what turned out to be a very long time.

While he was with her, Oisin remained young and virile. Enchanted as he was, Oisin forgot about his people, who continued to age and to die as mortals tend to do. He stayed in Tir-Nan-Og for centuries. Really, it's tough to blame him. But Oisin became homesick. Eventually, Niamh grew tired of his complaining, so she sent him home on a magical horse, with a warning not to dismount. But as soon as the magical steed touched human soil, the saddle buckle broke and Oisin fell to the ground. In an instant, all of the centuries that Oisin had spent on the Isle of the Blessed caught up with him and he grew old and died.

Strangely, there's an almost identical story from Japan. In this one, the sea goddess Oto-Hime falls in love with a mortal fisherman and takes him to her palace under the sea. After a few days of romance, the fisherman starts to worry about the people he left at home. He begs Oto-Hime to let him return and she agrees, but only if he promises to carry a tiny box to the surface and never open it. So, you see where this is going? Hundreds of years had passed, not just a few days, guess what, he opens the box. All of the years that had passed surrounded him like a mist and his body withers into dust.

Thanks for that, Thought Bubble, that was uplifting?

So great mother goddesses can create the world and grant you fertility and peace and equality and all that other good stuff, or they can steal you away from your home, ravish you for a couple centuries, and then turn your body into dust. That's part of what makes great goddesses so powerful. No matter what form they take, usually multifaceted, unlike some gods I could name - *cough*Zeus*cough*. Great goddesses are almost always complex and contradictory, which is the way we like it here at Crash Course. I'm definitely sending that Mother's Day card now.

Thanks for watching, we'll see you next time.

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Thanks for watching, and if we've learned anything today, it's that those old mythic words ring true, "Don't look in the box, Chicago!"