

Section 2 – Moving Inland

Celestial Conception

From the point at which we realised that procreation depends on the union of female and male, this concept became the foundation of every theist cult.

Our ancestors observed the world and explained it in terms they understood. If, for life on the human level to come into being, a woman must have sex, then, for life on a global or metaphysical level to come into being, the Goddess Earth must also have sex. Since the Earth was so vast and powerful, her consort must also be. The mysteries of life would be explained by reference to astral objects that were invested with supernatural powers.

We know that the Earth orbits the sun, but the ancients did not. For them, the Earth was both more immediate and far larger. Its scale made it powerful and the relative difference between it and the sun made it natural to assume that the sun's movements were controlled by the Earth. This was so with the moon and the stars too. Since the Earth was identified with the Goddess, then she was controlling the movements of these objects, and thus time itself. Around these astral objects and their behaviour, complex mythologies were invented which related them to deities, and temples and observatories were constructed to allow the accurate observation of their movements.

The term 'solstice' means 'sun stands still', in the sense that it rises to the same height in the sky at noon. We know that this changes slightly every day; the sun does not 'stand still', so the term seems obscure. However, just because we know that this is so does not mean that we can see that it is; our knowledge comes from modern astronomical techniques which were not available to our ancestors.

For the ancients, the sun did appear to stand still for three days at the time of the solstices, and in a culture that measured time by the movements of celestial bodies, this meant that time also stood still. Christmas happens on the 25th of December, three days after the solstice, because it was on this day that the slow recovery of the sun could be observed. Similarly, the traditional Anglo-Saxon Midsummer Festival begins on the 24th of June, three days after the solstice, when the sun appears to begin to sink in the sky again.¹

¹ Wallis, Faith. *Bede The Reckoning of Time; translated, with introduction and commentary*. Liverpool University Press. 1998.

Discovering the exact date when the sun began to rise in the sky after the winter solstice came to be of enormous importance to the ancients. At first they would have lined the sunrise up with a reference point on the horizon, observed from a precisely marked position. Even this was not accurate enough for them, as is seen in the many elaborate devices for solar observation that they constructed. These devices allow a thin shaft of the rising sun's first light to pass between two uprights or through an aperture, onto a wall or a circle of stones. As the year comes to an end, this light will progress in one direction; then, as the sun begins to recover, it will go the other way.

Megalithic structures designed to establish the exact moment of the solstice, when life's annual cycle begins, are found all over northwest Europe. Newgrange, in Ireland, is one such monument. Inside a circle of stones is a megalithic building, which is both temple and tomb, built 5,000 years ago. The entrance is a long narrow corridor which is aligned exactly so that at sunrise on the days of the winter solstice, a shaft of light penetrates into the very heart of the temple, the holy of holies. This signalled the moment at which the year began.

Henges – circles of stones, posts or trees – are not mere calendars or observatories, where highly-trained individuals could pronounce the moment the sun's journey changed course. They were temples for the propitiation of the Goddess, where people would gather to entreat her to release the sun from the darkness of her womb and allow the cycle of life to continue. Without that, time itself would stop; spring would not come; the world would not green, and the people would die. It was as simple and as terrifying as that. The ongoing progress of time was within the gift of the Goddess; only she could allow the sun to be resurrected. Without that resurrection, everything would die, not just for a period as it does every winter, but forever.

The crowds who gathered at sacred places across the world at the winter solstice were not there to entreat a distant and powerless, dead and pale sun to get up from his deathbed, but to beg the Goddess to release him and allow time and life to continue. The year is the Goddess; in Spring she is young and fertile, in Summer bounteous, but her third phase is the Crone, who washes the bodies of the dead in preparation for burial. In a cyclical conception, life comes out of the Goddess' womb and, at the point of death, there returns, to await the moment of rebirth; and that moment is for her to decide.

Astrotheology, which was the origin of astrology and eventually astronomy, developed as a means both to predict the seasonal progression of the year and to explain the movements of the sun, moon and stars. The celestial bodies were considered to move on a 'firmament', which was envisioned as a solid dome above the Earth, and were under the control of the Earth, personified as the Goddess. This mythological relationship is a reflection of the sociological relationship between women and men in the cultures that invented it.