

Section 2 – Moving Inland

The Goddess of the Cave

A man projects into the world, as he hurls his spear and also his semen. His natural affinity is with the sun, by which he sees his prey, and to see the sun, you have to go outside. A woman takes all within her. Her sex is internal, darkness and mystery, Camille Paglia's 'fecund and fertile swamp of creation', while a man's is external, obvious and exposed.¹

The limestone caves of France go deep into the ground, a kilometre or more into the dark; and what marvels are found there! Stalactites and stalagmites, the fascination of speleologists, sparkle like heavenly pillars. For the first woman exploring deep into these places in the dancing light of the burning torch she held, it must have been like nothing she could ever have imagined, the work of something far greater than she. The woman was clever with her hands; she knew how to make things, and she was observant; she knew how things grew. But this stone was like no stone she had ever seen, it grew more like a tree or the roots of a tree. She could not know that these incredible formations occur because limestone is very slightly soluble in water, and that rain trickling through cracks in the rock brought tiny amounts of calcium carbonate here, and deposited them. But she would have known what bone was since she used it every day, and calcium carbonate is bone. It would take very little imagination for the woman to believe that she was deep inside the divine body of the Mother-Goddess.²

In many caves something fascinating has been found: handprints. These are handprints of women, men, and children, made by placing a hand covered in pigment onto the wall of the cave, or by placing the hand on the wall then spraying or daubing pigment around it.³ Was this a form of worship? Or did placing the hand upon the wall of the womb of the Great Mother Goddess confer protection upon the person who did so, as if that person would be watched over as long as the print remained? If so, they were blessed, for their prints are still there. Or was it a rite of initiation into the tribe, like the Confirmation ceremony still performed by Christians, where a young person restates the promise to the religion that was made when she or he was baptised as a baby? We can only wonder.

¹ Paglia, C. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. Vintage 1992.

² Caves with mouths in the shape of vulvae have been found, with the area around the entrance and inside painted with ruddle or ochre, to depict the menstrual blood of the Goddess. That these were places of cultic significance is incontestable.

³ Spraying could be accomplished through the mouth or a hollowed bone.

Many caves also contain images of animals, of men with weapons, and of beings that are part human, part animal. These were the first male deities, deities of the hunt. They were ancestor animals, whose spirits had to be supplicated to forgive us for killing them. They were the precursors of later anthropomorphic male deities like Pan or Cernunnos, or wild men like the Sumerian Enkidu. Their realm was the woods and forests, the broad grassy plains. They lived with the beasts and often mated with them, and they were frequently beast-like or even part beast. Some were of the forest itself, like the Green Men of European folklore.

None of these, however, was a creation deity. That role was reserved for the Goddess.