

Section 2 – Moving Inland

The Red Lady of Paviland

The first Mother-Goddess, the Sea, had become the Mother-Goddess Earth as the people moved away from the tropical seas into the interiors of the continents. *Homo sapiens* began colonising Europe 43,000 years ago, and soon after this we find the first physical evidence of Mother-Goddess worship, in carved Goddess figurines. The people who made these objects were sophisticated, cultured and they revered the Mother.¹

A fascinating confirmation of this came when a human fossil was found in 1823 by William Buckland, in a cave in Gower, in Wales. It is known as ‘The Red Lady of Paviland’. Although it was originally thought to be much more recent, in 2009 this skeleton was re-dated at 33,000 years old.²

The area around the skeleton and the walls of the cave where it was found were thickly coated with ruddle, a red pigment formed from iron oxide. Ruddle is still used today, but it had special significance in the past: it represented the menstrual blood of the Goddess. We find it used in caves all over Europe; it reaffirms that caves were the womb of the mother.

The Red Lady is even more tantalising. Despite the name, this is a male skeleton and the misidentification occurred because it was found with jewellery made of shells and mammoth-bone. It is unusual to find male human remains with jewellery of this type, and this provokes questions about the culture in which the Red Lady lived. Did men wear such jewellery, or was something else going on?

Alternative expressions of gender are not unusual; the rigid division of society into two strictly observed gender expressions appears to have evolved later, as a function of the patriarchy. In Sumer, in later Middle-Eastern cultures, and today across India, South America and South-East Asia, male-to-female transvestites and transsexuals are very common and frequently have significant religious roles.

For example, in the temples of the Sumerian Inanna, the Phrygian Cybele and other goddesses, young men, scarcely more than boys, worked into a religious passion, castrated themselves in

¹ In the 19th century these were collectively referred to as Venus figurines but now they are simply called prehistoric figurines.

² *Out of Africa: modern human origins special feature: isotopic evidence for the diets of European Neanderthals and early modern humans*. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A. 106 (38): 16034–9. September 2009.

order to serve the Goddess as priestesses. This tradition is maintained today in the Indian subcontinent by transwomen known as hijra. As a result of the influence of Western notions implanted by the British, they are today seen as very low in the prevalent caste system but are nevertheless accepted, because they are believed to have been ‘touched by the Goddess’.³ Once, however, they were a powerful caste of priestesses. They still perform an important role at weddings and other formal ceremonies, and frequently sell blessings from the Goddess to make a living.

In Thailand, where their presence has been noted by Western observers for centuries, transwomen are often known as sao (or phuying) praphet song, ‘second type woman’. Other similar expressions are widely found across Asia, especially where Goddess culture or traditions of domestic matriarchy are strongest, for example in the Philippines. In the Native American nations, there are what Europeans coming into contact with them called *berdache*, but who called themselves ‘two-spirited’, suggesting that they had both male and female consciousness.⁴ These also often had shamanistic or healing roles within their tribe. Amongst the Zo’é and other hunter-gatherers there are traditions of ritual transvestism, where men dress as and behave like women for periods of time.⁵

Elsewhere in pre-Columbian America, transgender was widespread and was described by the conquistadors. In Peru, Pizarro’s troops encountered transgender priestesses and described how they were present in each of the temples. Other writers noted the phenomenon in Mexico, Florida, the West Indies and across South America.⁶

This phenomenon is both widespread and has very ancient and deep roots; it would be surprising if it did not appear in the Palaeolithic. Was the Red Lady, perhaps, a transsexual shaman who died as a result of taking powerful drugs that would allow her to go into the spirit-world? Even, possibly, from her ritual castration? We have other examples from Europe of natal women, identified as shamans, being buried in similar manners, which tends to support this.

³ Or by God.

⁴ *Berdache* is pejorative. According to Merriam-Webster, ‘American French, alteration of French *berdache* catamite, from Italian dialect (southern Italy) *bardascio*, from Arabic *bardaj* slave, from Persian *bardag* prisoner, from Middle Persian *vartaK*. It was not used by the Indians.

⁵ Transsexual refers to an individual whose understanding of their own gender is not the same as the one that would be assumed as a result of their birth genitalia; they live their whole lives in the gender they believe themselves to be. Transvestites dress in the clothes of the opposite gender for periods of time for a variety of reasons, cultural, personal, social and sexual, but always retain an understanding that their own gender conforms to their birth sex.

⁶ Das Wilhelm, Amara. *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity, And Intersex Conditions Through Hinduism*. Xlibris Corp. 2010.