

Section 4 – The Sacred Marriage

Of Boys, Bulls and Kings

In many cultures, another substitute for the actual sacrifice of human males was the sacrifice of animals, notably bulls. Bulls play a hugely important part in world mythology, albeit one that is frequently overlooked or misunderstood. They are a central motif in Goddess culture.

In the Sumerian myth *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*, the goddess Inanna intentionally enters the Underworld, which is the realm of Ereshkigal, her alter-ego and the dark goddess. Her ostensible reason for this visit is to bring news that Ereshkigal's husband, the Bull of Heaven, has died and Inanna wishes to pay respect.¹ In the myth, Inanna herself dies and is reborn from Ereshkigal. The reference to the Bull is often seen as mysterious but, in fact, the explanation is simple.

Ereshkigal is the Goddess Earth in her dark aspect. She is night, darkness, death and the power of creation. When she was given a consort, he had to express all the potency of male sexuality. Both bulls and male goats became identified with this but in two different ways. The goat became satyrs and similar mythical beings, more mischievous and tricky than dangerous. The bull, however, came to represent not only male sexuality but male physical power and later, aggression.

The Bull was adopted to give the Goddess a consort who could match her own sexual potency. Bulls express masculinity in a more profound way than any other domesticated animal, even stallions, because of their sheer size. The bulls that were used as the original models were even more impressive than the largest seen today. They were aurochs, *Bos primigenius*. These now-extinct beasts stood two metres tall at the shoulder and could weigh 1000 kilogrammes (one tonne). They had huge, spreading horns up to a metre from point to point and were famous for their violent and aggressive temperaments.² Aurochs naturally ranged across Europe and Asia and they were domesticated in various cultures independently.

In Mesopotamia this domestication occurred around 6,000 BCE.³ This fits the timeline of the beginnings of settled culture in Mesopotamia, so the metaphor of the aurochs bull was available

¹ The Bull of Heaven in Sumerian mythology is under the control of An, who is the Sky-father and consort of Ki, the Goddess Earth. The bull is a physical aspect of the deity.

² <http://www.lhnet.org/aurochs/> retrieved 03/12/2014

³ *Ibid.*

to represent the seminal force of masculine sexuality. The Goddess, at least once she had devolved from the original transcendent singularity, was the quintessential, ultimate expression of women's sexuality, fertility and reproduction. It followed that her consort should be as powerful a totem of masculinity, and the aurochs bull was ideal.

Because bulls represent the quintessential power of male virility, they could be sacrificed in the place of a human male, to assure the Goddess' annual regeneration.

Helen Benigni observes:

'The Goddess embodies the form of an omnipresent force of Nature, even in her bride aspect. Although her later associations with deities in the Iron Age in Greece, such as her name as Eileithyia, Britomartis, and Ariadne, are presented in maiden form, this does not take away from the fact that the bride aspect of the Mother Goddess of the Bronze Age was in fact a maiden about to join forces *through the sacred marriage with the male in the form of a bull to regenerate the cycle of the moon and the sun.*⁴ (our emphasis.)

This suggests that the practice of sacrificing a human boy was supplanted by that of an aurochs bull, and this latter certainly continued for millennia. In northern Europe, for example, young men were ritually killed and their bodies placed in bogs that were sacred to the Goddess, and aurochs skeletons have also been found there.⁵

Although the origins, in the sacrifice of bulls to ensure the annual regeneration of the Goddess and the continued passage of time, are all but forgotten, the ritualised killing of bulls persists to this day in many cultures, notably those surrounding the Mediterranean, as in Spain and France.

⁴ Benigni, Helen. *The Goddess and the Bull: A Study in Minoan-Mycenaean Mythology*. University Press of America. 2007.

⁵ Iping-Petterson, M.A. *Human Sacrifice in Iron Age Northern Europe: The Culture of Bog People*. (Doctoral Thesis) University of Leiden. 2011.